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INTERVIEW

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# Still Standing, Still Fighting, Still Strong…

## An Interview with Bezubaanon ki Zubaan, Feminist Pioneer, Publisher, and Scholar, Urvashi Butalia

**Sharon Pillai and Saumya Varghese**

[NOTE: The following interview was conducted via email. Questions were sent to Professor Butalia, and she responded to them in writing. This interview focuses broadly on Professor Butalia's career as a publisher, her publications as a scholar and researcher, and her thoughts on feminism. No funding was received to conduct or publish this Interview.]

*SP & SV: You are most celebrated today as a publisher, although you are also a very well-known author, scholar, activist, and more. You were a student of Literature from Delhi University in the early 70s and acquired a second Master's in South Asian Studies from the University of London. Why did you choose publishing over other possible career choices, especially, say, academia? One would imagine a career in academics would have been the 'natural' choice.*

UB: You're right, in many ways, academics would have been a 'natural' choice for me. It was also the expected choice. My teachers were sure that was what I would do. My mother was a

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teacher all her life. So, it was expected that I would head that way. But by the time I was done with my Master's at DU, I was deep into feminist politics and the women's movement. And much though I absolutely loved studying literature, the limitations of doing Spenser and Milton while living in Jangpura and facing sexual harassment every day on the bus and being involved in feminist politics, were all too clear to me. I kept asking what the literature we were doing had to do with the life I was living. At some point, after I finished my BA actually, I tried to move for my Master's to what I then thought was a more "relevant" subject, Sociology. But mercifully, DU rules did not allow for that at the time, and I ended up staying with literature. But because I felt English literature was so disconnected from our realities, I was absolutely sure that it was something I did not want to do. So teaching, the expected choice, was out. My father was a journalist, and that was a very attractive option, but I did not go that way either! There were hardly any women in journalism, and it seemed to me that there was nothing pulling me there. So, I was hanging about in a state of indecision when publishing happened to me. In many ways, I did not choose publishing; I fell into it by accident, and fell irrevocably in love with it, and I think perhaps it chose me (I know that sounds a bit precious, but I don't mean it like that).

So, what actually happened was this: Alongside my MA, I was studying French at the Alliance Francaise in Delhi. In my class was a woman called Shehnaz Cardmaster, Sherry, for short. We were chatting one evening, and I told her about my limbo state. She asked me if I wanted to do some freelance work in her office—she worked for the Oxford University Press—for a few months and earn some money while I was thinking. I jumped at the chance. I went to see her bosses—an Englishman called Charles Lewis, who later became a great friend, another Englishman called Adrian Bullock (who later became my boss), and a kind, lovely Indian gentleman called Santosh Mukerji. They explained what I would be doing—it was a wonderfully inglorious thing, and I cannot tell you how much I loved it! At the time, technology was not what it is today; neither was authorship of textbooks for schools as well-developed. We were barely two decades from Independence. So, at the OUP, they were doing a quick fix for Indian schools and adapting English textbooks for our schools. What that meant was replacing 'foreign' names with 'Indian' ones, and I was employed as someone called a paster upper. I had to replace names like John and Mary with Ram and Sita (not very imaginative!). And so, I was given these large sheets of paper with Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, Sita, Sita, Sita, Sita—hundreds of Rams and hundreds of Sitas printed on the sheet. I had to take a blade (I borrowed my father's shaving blade) and a steel ruler, and carefully cut Ram and paste it right over John, and do the same for Sita and Mary. The glue I used to paste was called rubber solution, and it could be bought from cycle shops, so I became very familiar with bicycle shops. I remember there was one near Plaza cinema and I used to turn up there regularly to buy rubber solution. They were initially quite suspicious. I think they thought I was glue sniffing or something! Anyway, I was employed to do this, and there was an artist who was employed alongside me to colour blue eyes black and blonde hair black and to cut off the tops of double-decker buses to turn them into single-decker buses.

Who would not fall in love with this instantly?! I fell badly from the word go. At the end of four months of pasting up, the OUP offered me a job as assistant to the production manager. We'll train you, they said, and they did. I learnt all about printing, and fonts, and types and

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paper and letterpress, and monotype, and linotype, and so on, and so on. I became familiar with printing presses; the smell of printing ink became like a familiar friend, and I got used to feeling and smelling and doing, the making of books! It is a high that remains with me to this day.

So, this is how I came into publishing, and publishing is where I have stayed all my life.

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*SP & SV: Not long after you joined the publishing world, you revolutionised the publishing space in India and this region, more broadly speaking, when you co-founded Kali for Women with Ritu Menon. Tell us a little more about why and how that enterprise came to fruition. How hard was it to set up a feminist press in the early 80s in India? Were there any doubts in the early years about the viability of Kali for Women?*

UB: Interestingly, there were moments when the lure of academics still beckoned. In 1982, I got a Fulbright fellowship to travel to the USA to do a PhD—I was heading to Hawaii. By this time, the dream of setting up a feminist publishing house had taken hold of me, but I was 30, and I had a fellowship to go abroad. Who says no to that! So, I was on my way to Hawaii, and I stopped in London for some time before that. During this time, I visited a publishing house I admired, Zed Press (later Zed Books). The editors there said if you're planning to set up a publishing house, why are you going to Hawaii? Do you know how to swim and surf? If you don't, it's no use going there. I took that advice to heart, abandoned Hawaii, and worked two years with Zed, during which time I plotted and planned the setting up of what became Kali. In 1984, I came back to India to set it up. Sometime around October of 1983, Ritu Menon, whom I knew because she was also in publishing, got to hear of my plans and wrote to me to ask if I was looking for someone to join up with. We began talking, and that was how Kali came to be founded by both of us.

I think I still have that letter Ritu wrote me when she asked if we could join up. It was so exciting to have someone else be part of that dream. For me, the motivation to set up Kali was absolutely clear. Since the early seventies, I had been involved in the women's movement in India. From our days in the university, where we fought for safe transport, hostel conditions for women, and so on, to the time when we formed our groups and came out on the streets of Delhi to protest dowry deaths, rape, and violence against women, my involvement had only grown. But each time we became more deeply involved in a campaign, I realised how little we knew about the issues we were fighting for. Take dowry, for example: we were campaigning against dowry, but we knew little about its history, where it had come from, how and why it had changed the way it had, how it was linked, if at all, to inheritance laws. Was it only Hindu? Middle class? Urban? And, so on. And when we looked around for material that could help us understand something about dowry, there was nothing. No books, no essays. I think there were two small books at the time, a pamphlet-type thing by MN Srinivas and a book by Stanley Tambiah, if I remember correctly. After scouring the shelves for books, I asked my bosses at the OUP why we did not publish books about women. They were surprised at my question. Women, they said, do they write? Read? Are their issues even

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serious?! I thought, here are these kind and wonderful men, and if they feel like this, then what hope is there? So, here is where my political beliefs as a feminist and my professional life as a publishing person stopped being two parallel tracks and came together as one. I decided I would do this myself. It took some years for the idea to travel out of my head and heart, and to become a reality, but in the end it did.

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*SP & SV: While it is true to say Kali for Women revolutionised the publishing space in India, it also did much more. It revolutionised our knowledge practices in fundamental and consequential ways; it influenced national and state-level policy making and legislation; it recast the nature of our public consciousness and informed our public conversations. However, almost 20 years after its establishment, both you and Ritu Menon decided to go your separate ways, choosing to set up two different imprints to publish under. Looking back, how would you assess the successes of Kali for Women? What do you see as its lasting legacy? And, to what would you attribute its eventual demise?*

UB: These are not easy questions to answer. I am not sure if we revolutionised the publishing space or knowledge practices, but yes, that is what we set out to do. Publishing at the time was an almost entirely male world; they called it the 'gentleman's profession'—referring as much to gender as to class. So, for two women to set up a publishing house, a feminist one, that too with no funding, was a recipe for disaster. You know, traditionally, when you set up a new publishing house, you can be sure that you will run at a loss for at least four or five years before you start breaking even, and during those years, it is your sponsors, people who believe in you, who provide the funding to keep you going. We never ever had a sponsor. Sometimes, when I look back on those 40-odd years since we began, we never had an investor, and yet we managed to stay afloat. Yes, we ran losses, yes, we broke even in some years, and even turned a profit in others, but to me, the most important thing is, there was no sugar daddy or sugar mommy keeping us afloat.

But yes, we set out to change the way knowledge was understood, and to bring respect to ordinary lives and experiences which were never considered knowledge. We set out to make women's voices heard and inform public conversations, and I like to think that we had some modest success in this, although our readers are better judges of that than we are. And yes, Ritu and I chose to go our separate ways after nearly two decades of working together. Sometimes you have to recognise the writing on the wall. And often when you do, you realise it has been staring at you all the time. Ritu and I are very different people, and it took us 19 years to realise that. While we worked together well in some ways (for example, we never actually differed on a book we wanted to publish), there were others in which we were at odds with each other, and we hampered each other's progress and creativity. When we parted—and make no mistake, the parting was painful and tragic—we also discovered, as one does once the tragedy is over, that the parting freed us. We now had two publishing houses instead of one. Clearly, the market was big enough to accommodate us and more.

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And I guess this is what we can have said to have 'achieved'—to have opened the door that led us, and other publishers, to the world of women's writing. Even if we have to shut shop tomorrow, I like to think that this could be our lasting legacy.

To what would I attribute Kali's demise? I've tried to answer this above; it's never easy to find a single reason, but it could be just as simple as not being able to work together any more—when that happens with men, it is seen as 'normal', but when it happens with women, there is something exceptional, and worrying about it. For us, it was recognising the truth and working with it, not to let the legacy die (so the demise was a demise, but if I can be a little extra, phoenix-like, two publishers emerged out of that demise!)

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*SP & SV: You moved on to set up Zubaan. How was the vision behind Zubaan different from the vision behind Kali for Women? It's been 20 odd years since Zubaan was established. What does stocktaking throw up for you? The website describes Zubaan as an "independent feminist publishing house" which aims "always to be pioneering, cutting-edge, progressive and inclusive". In what salient ways does Zubaan manage to be all those things? What have been some of the challenges of establishing and running an 'independent feminist publishing house'?*

UB: Zubaan is very much a child of Kali. We always say that Kali is our parent organisation, but we no longer call ourselves 'an imprint of Kali' as we did earlier. This is because this was the legal commitment we made when Ritu and I parted ways. We were allowed to use Kali's name only for a year. The assumption being that by then, we would be able to stand on our own feet. Like all children, you have something of your parent in you and something of your own. We follow Kali's tradition and the standards set by it. But we also expanded, for example, doing children's books. We also changed, for example, focusing more and more on marginalised voices and marginalised regions. In Kali, we did a lot of translation work, but from Indian languages to English. In Zubaan, we also moved into collaborations with other publishers in the Indian languages, working to get our books out into those languages. We began as Kali did, a not-for-profit publisher. Then, some 10–12 years into our existence, we decided to make our publishing a self-sustaining commercial enterprise. Of course, it has never really become profitable, but it somehow manages to pay for itself. We also separated our not-for-profit arm, which became our projects space. Here we do a lot of other work—documenting and archiving the histories of the women's movement in India. You've seen our poster women archive, which we did collaboratively with 161 women's groups in India.

Zubaan also began to focus on marginalised regions. So, we do a lot of publishing in the northeast, and in Kashmir. And we keep a finger on the pulse of the women's movement. It's our task to document whatever we can of the movement. It is in these ways that we hope we have been pioneering—opening up new spaces, seeking out new voices, working with writers from the margins, which means also publishing differently, and working with readers to make them aware of how various and multiple writing can be. We believe this kind of work is crucial.

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You ask what the challenges have been: there are many. Getting our books out to readers is a big challenge. No matter how hard we try, we cannot get the big distributors or online sellers to keep our books alive. Money is a big challenge. We have never had an investor, so there is no sugar daddy or mummy with deep pockets. So, our existence is very, very precarious. So much of our material is quite political, and that brings its own challenges. Recovering money owed to you from the retail outlets that don't really care for small publishers, and oh yes, getting newspapers to give some space to our books. That is really tragic. When was the last time you saw a Zubaan book reviewed in a paper? It's a real struggle.

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*SP & SV: Shifting gears a bit to look at your role as a writer and researcher: you've edited several texts showcasing the creative and critical output of many writers, contributing in the process to growing the corpus of both women's writing and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. It is your first book as an author, however, that we'd like to turn to.* The Other Side of Silence *was a path-breaking treatment of the grisly bloodbath and catastrophic dislocation of people, identity and memory that marked the birth of modern India and Pakistan. You've said that living through the 1984 Sikh riots in Delhi was one of the major reasons why you started looking at Partition with fresh eyes. You've also admitted the 'reluctance' to remember that you encountered when conducting your interviews. Two questions for you. First, why did you think it important to persist in the face of that 'reluctance'? Gade murde kyun ukhadna tha? Why was it important to exhume buried histories and realities, especially when relying heavily on something as unreliable as memory for source material? Often, memories change, and sometimes they clash with the memories of kith and kin who remember the same events differently. How can we make sense of such differing recollections?*

UB: Okay, I'm going to try to give shorter answers, or else I will end up writing a whole book. First, why did I think it important to persist in the face of people's reluctance to speak? So, the reluctance was not across the board. Some people I spoke to were happy to speak; they often wanted to speak. But, also, the reluctance was a complex thing: often people wanted to speak, but, more importantly, they wanted to speak and be listened to. The act of speaking is, after all, incomplete without the act of listening. And all the while they had spoken in their own families, people were uninterested, unwilling to listen to them. I know this from my own family. It wasn't until 1984 happened that I actually started to listen to my parents' stories. And this wasn't only in their own families but also all around, in the public world. We had done our best to wipe out the painful histories of partition, so how could its survivors speak in that vacuum? The thing is, it's a romanticism to think that *gade murde* will go away on their own. Somewhere or the other, they come back. Around the mid-80s, many things happened that made people of my generation curious about partition. And, I think 1984 surfaced those memories for many survivors. Plus, the political atmosphere of polarisation on the lines of religion that started to happen at that time made for a curiosity. So, I did not have to persist. I just had to be there, and be patient, and the conversations happened. I did not force them, and when people were clear they did not want to talk, I let them. As someone interviewing people, you have to be guided by what they want, not what you want.

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*SP & SV: The form of historiography and presentation you chose in* The Other Side of Silence *has continued to win you accolades. It combines critical acuity, curiosity, and resilience with deep sensitivity, unwavering care, a catalogue of compelling caveats, and candidly acknowledged elisions? How much of your method of engagement and presentation would you attribute to a specifically feminist sensibility*?

UB: Pretty much all of it. Everything I brought to that book, to the study that preceded that book, came to me from the lessons I learnt in the women's movement. Women of my generation were lucky to be able to be part of the amazing activism, the street-level activism, of the movement that began in the mid-seventies. One of the most lasting lessons I learnt in the movement was the importance of listening, listening with care, respect, attention, and responsibility. You may hear something that seems really exciting and new, but you need to ask yourself the question: how will making this public, putting it out there, impact the person who has trusted you with their story? Often, the story is not told to you in confidence; the person is aware that you will write it or write about it, but while they may be aware of that, they may not understand how making it public can hurt them. That is a call you have to take. I learnt all this in the movement, which is my home, and from my mother, who was the first feminist I got to know and love. That is why I have never had any hesitation in calling myself a feminist (though I understand that many women do not want to). Feminism is my life. It is what I live and breathe. And I think the lessons I learnt were not personal to me. This is what feminism teaches you—at heart, it is all about respect.

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*SP & SV: Partition's trauma extends beyond those who experienced its violence and derangement to successive generations. Even today, in classrooms, students speak about how their families were wronged. Ashis Nandy has said the legatees and legacies of Partition have "found ways of insidiously entering South Asia's political agenda". Would you agree? Why do you think 'the partition' continues? Is something like the Truth and Reconciliation exercise carried out in South Africa the key to healing festering wounds in this region?*

UB: I think the legacies of partition remain in our lives today, partly because of what is happening politically around us, where the resentment, the hatred, and violence is being played out again. And yes, I do agree with Ashis Nandy when he speaks of the insidiousness of the entry of partition's legacies in our political agenda. I am not sure if a TRC-like structure can help. For that kind of thing, you need humility, which neither of our two countries has. You need to recognise that both 'sides' were complicit, and acknowledge that 'you' killed and looted and 'they' killed and looted. But this is never going to happen in our countries. You need to be willing to talk, and a precursor to that is to speak about partition and its legacies, to teach it, to perform it, and so on. Instead, what do we do? We try to remember its 'horrors', and blame everyone else. I think if our governments and our people had the courage to open

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the borders between India and Pakistan, if people could travel, if they could see that the 'other' is a mirror of themselves, then maybe we can take a step forward.

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*SP & SV: Whether it is* Women of the Hindu Right, Speaking Peace, *or* Breaching the Citadel, *you have repeatedly chronicled and sought to understand the experience of women and violence, as targets and victims caught in the crosshairs of conflict between entities larger than themselves but which claim them, or as agents and perpetrators of violence. Would you think that one reason this is so is because citizenship has remained an unfinished project for women to this day, globally, despite the fact that we are kind of past the heyday of the nation-states? Is it because customarily women are only allowed a mediated path to citizenship via this or that community or grouping, while nation-states normatively posit men as their ideal autonomous citizen? Is this why women's experience has little determining role to play in the local, national and international conduct of war (or of peace)? What are your thoughts on women and citizenship, especially with regard to international and national politics, conflict, violence, and peace? Would you agree with the above reasoning, or do you think we need to look at the issue from other perspectives?*

UB: Hmmm, this is a big question, and I am not sure I can answer it adequately here without writing a whole essay. But yes, to some extent, it is because citizenship has remained an incomplete project where women are concerned, and it is still mediated for them through the family. If you just look at what happened to women post-partition, how they became pawns in the game of nationalism and the birth of a nation—in India and in Pakistan, how their rights were consistently violated and their voices silenced, this becomes very clear. And if you just look at the six or so years following Independence, when you might think that citizenship rights would have been assured, you see what happened with the debate on the Hindu Code Bill. How Indian men went into conservative control mode – even the man who was then our vice president—and sacrificed women's interests; you see that all over again. Then you look at the present day—you recall the Hadiya case, where a 24-year-old woman was told by the court that she had no right to marry without seeking the approval of her father, or no right to convert to another religion. What is this if not infantilising women? And the continuing discourse of *bahu*, *beti*, *behen*, and so on. Where do you hear anyone speaking about women as citizens with RIGHTS? I think the only saving grace is that women themselves have refused to give in to this, and have fought it, successfully in some cases, and not so in others.

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*SP & SV: Subaltern experience is often obscured from mainstream social consciousness and historical record by the protocols and procedures of standard epistemic production, dissemination, and consumption. Having used oral history as often and as effectively as you have in your works, what would you say are its advantages and disadvantages for recording the realities of everyday subaltern life lived out in the midst, at least of institutional indifference and negligence, if not violence?*

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UB: I think the wiping out, or the deliberate obliteration of subaltern histories (I actually don't like that phrase, I would rather speak of the histories of marginalised peoples and communities) is a kind of epistemic violence and injustice and it has taken the feminist movement to come into the field of knowledge and knowledge production to point this out, to question it, to act against it. Women's studies, no matter how reviled it is today as a 'discipline' was a way of crossing the threshold of the home and looking at the experiences within, experiences which were not necessarily countable as much in the public world, but were made up of stories, emotions, connections, indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and more. Oral history, or simply listening to people, or having conversations with them, offers us another way to reach out to these otherwise hidden experiences, and add to the somewhat arid terrain of what we see as so-called 'factual' history. It has the obvious advantages of offering us a deeper picture of experience, but is also dismissed—wrongly, I think—as anecdotal, ephemeral, unreliable, and so on. People often try to compare it with fact, as if what is called fact is a given. Fact, too, is manufactured or selectively put forward. But I also think there is no point in pitting the two against each other—thus far, we had recorded history, based on so-called provable 'facts' and empirical data. Now we have—at least in some cases—the voices of people who lived through that history. And when we put these two methods of research together, rather than in opposition, we have a much more nuanced picture. That is what is important.

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SP & SV: *You were on the Editorial Board of* Manushi *when it was first established. Madhu Kishwar, who co-founded* Manushi*, and who was for a period of time at the forefront of women's rights activism, famously disavowed feminism in her polemical essay "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist'? You have, in different fora, identified yourself as a feminist publisher, feminist writer, feminist scholar with a 50-year track record now in feminist activism. Would it be safe to say you're unconvinced by Madhu Kishwar's trolling of Indian feminism? If so, why is that? Tell us a little bit about how you came to identify as a feminist.*

UB: So, first, a factual correction that is not very well known: *Manushi* was founded by a group of 18 women. Madhu Kishwar was only one of them. As was I. Because we were young and naïve at the time, we left one by one, and she remained, and that allowed her to claim *Manushi* as her own.

Frankly, I am not bothered about any trolling. I mean, who cares if x or y calls themselves a feminist or not? Will feminism, perhaps the most radical questioning of power in our lives, be impacted by one or another person trashing it? Let them. That kind of statement comes out of a kind of hubris. You think you are very important, and you need to make such a declaration. Actually, no one really cares.

When did feminism come to me? I can't really pinpoint this—is there ever a moment when a life-transforming consciousness begins to take root in your mind and heart? Or, more precisely, how can you pinpoint that moment, if at all? My mother was a strong influence in

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my life. She fought for the girls/women in the house and fought for women facing violence when she set up her organisation, called Karmika. So, I think in many ways, and without really knowing it, I grew up feminist. And then, of course, the university in the late sixties and early seventies was a hotbed of political discussions, and we—young women then—were coming into our own, and questioning the way we were treated. So, that was another crucible. And so, it went on.

To me, feminism is what I live and breathe. And I identify myself as that, as I find it enabling. But I do believe very strongly that labels are what you make of them. You own them as a choice you make if you feel comfortable in them. But if you have questions and do not want labels, that is fine, too, for who cares what you call yourself? It's what you do that matters. I understand well, for example, that for many women the label feminist is not comfortable. It carries too many connotations of a kind of strident feminism they want to distance themselves from, or it is a Western idea/concept (note that people do not react similarly to other such Western ideas, such as democracy, nationalism and so on!!). They sometimes believe that feminism destroys marriages (although, as I always say, as if marriage needed feminism to destroy it, it's doing pretty well in self-destructing anyway!)—so, it's okay to be hesitant to own a label. It's really what you do that matters.

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*SP & SV: When one looks at your body of work and your professional life what stands out is how you've lived your feminism; how, in the many discursive and material domains you operate and intervene in, you've persistently attended to and sought to bring to light 'the other side of silence'. You've consistently refused the lure, and the safety, of echo chambers. At Zubaan, you've expanded quality feminist publishing to include a variety of genres, on a variety of subjects, written in a variety of tongues, available in a variety of formats, and published by a variety of people making up the team of Zubaan! What does diversity and difference mean to your praxis of feminism?*

UB: Thank you for saying this. Diversity, difference, variety, questioning power, this means everything to my feminist practice. The only kind of feminism worth having is, to me, a feminism you can live. And really, living a feminist life, to borrow Sarah Ahmed's phrase, is both challenging and rewarding. Here, Zubaan has also taught me a lot, especially my younger colleagues, who have challenged what I see as my feminism at every step and made me rethink and reassess the things we have taken for granted. Working with younger people also exposes you to the ways in which power plays out, even among feminists. Our team at Zubaan is very diverse, and that is because we believe this is the way to go. I have to give the credit for this to my younger colleagues, who worked together to find ways to make the diversity we speak about part of our daily practice. We've tried, in Zubaan, to create a feminist space, a feminist institution that draws on the learnings of feminism and looks at how those can be brought into the workplace. My colleagues have worked to make the team diverse—we come from different parts of India, from different classes and castes. We try to chart out personal development plans for everyone. We know people will leave when better opportunities come up, and when they go, we do our best to ensure that they go with love

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and happiness and remain a part of the greater Zubaan family. All of these are lessons that we have learnt on the ground. One of the most important lessons I learnt in feminist practice was the importance of listening, and we try to bring that into our practice at Zubaan.

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*SP & SV: In a world where technology is radically changing how we produce, process and consume information/material for knowledge and entertainment, when time to read is becoming a luxury and attention spans are rapidly shrinking, when the printed book is becoming increasingly more cumbersome and costly to publish, buy and keep, what do you think the future holds for the publishing industry, more generally? Do you think there'll be a space for an "independent feminist publishing house," such as Zubaan, say, 20 years from now?*

UB: Hmmm, I'm not sure there will be space for an independent feminist publishing house 20 years from now. That kind of thing is difficult to predict. The thing is, all of us thought ebooks would be the way forward, and we were so fearful of print disappearing. It got some knocks, but it has not disappeared. But that is not to say it won't. So, here's the thing: I think, given the way the world is going, and given the way things are going in our country, 20 years from now, there will still be serious issues that relate to women and gender and that need to be addressed, talked about, written about. In that sense, yes, emphatically, there will still be space for such knowledge. And because for most other publishing houses the commitment to gender is not a political belief but another subject to focus on, they may not continue to do it. But an independent feminist publisher (whether us or someone else) will. What shape or form this knowledge will take is another story—it may be digital, it may be visual, it may be audible, and so on.

Frankly, the question about whether we will be around 20 years from now is not a question that bothers me. I think none of us, or none of the institutions we create, or the initiatives we make, are here to stay forever, nor should we expect them to. If Zubaan were to shut down tomorrow, we'd feel the loss, of course, and I think/hope our readers would too, but that will not take away from the fact that we have done our best to do what we set out to do. There's a certain value to that. That has always been my philosophy.

The other thing is that we always need to keep history in mind. If you look at the history of printing, books were first created by hand and were written/calligraphed on animal skin (vellum), cloth, or palm leaf. Previous to that, wisdom and knowledge were carved in stone, on iron plates, or painted in caves, and in tents. Then came the "discovery" of paper as a medium (the Chinese had it long ago, but it came to Europe much later) and initially, there was a lot of suspicion of paper. It was seen as ephemeral, so it was used only for rough drafts. Books continued to be on vellum and palm leaf. But it also became apparent that with vellum, for example, you needed the skins of many animals to make a 300-page book, and that just wasn't feasible. So, enter paper. Now, paper is becoming unsustainable. We don't have enough trees for the wood that is used to make paper, or enough water, and hence the electronic form. This history gives me a lot of comfort. The search for knowledge will not disappear; only the forms in which people seek it out will change.

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This is a long answer to your question. That is my problem; I can't give short answers. My answer should have been, I don't know; I very likely will not be around 20 years from now!

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