

AMMU JOSEPH (born 1953)

Independent journalist, based in Bangalore. Started her career at *Eve's Weekly*, Bombay.

Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy

Laxmi Murthy: It is Friday 12th of October, 2012. I am in Ammu Joseph's house. And Ammu, I would like you to begin with about telling me a bit about your life – where you were personally-professionally as a feminist. I mean we can start with that. When did you begin to identify as a feminist? Or did you identify as a feminist?

Ammu Joseph: Well, I think it took me a while to identify myself as feminist. I don't think it really came into my life when I was in college, because we were in this college, I was in this college in Madras which was rather a cloistered existence. Didn't have much contact with even what was going on in Madras. Anyway Madras was not one of those places where the women's movement was very active in the early 70s. Uh, so it - after that I went to Bombay to do a course in communication and there also I wouldn't say – that was in 74-75, I wouldn't say that uh I was very aware of feminism. And then my first work experience was with a women's magazine called *Eve's Weekly* and it was the beginning of, I mean the beginning of my career. It was just six months before I went to do my course in journalism. And I was really just interviewing, mainly interviewing film stars at that time (laughs)

L When was this? Which year?

A This was 1975, ya 1975 – from the time I finished my course at Sophia – April or something. I did an internship with *Eve's Weekly* and they offered me a job. It was actually before the exam itself I joined. And then in January '76 I left for the US to do my degree in journalism. So it was those six months. And I was taken on as reporter and sub-editor of *Eve's Weekly* and *Star and Style* –like ultimate sort of exploitation. And you know I was doing this and so I did not pay that much attention to *Eve's Weekly* as a women's magazine at that time. I was just doing my thing. And actually it was during my time at Syracuse University doing a degree in journalism that I was exposed to feminist ideas for the first time in an informal way. And in fact I think to my great embarrassment – the interview for the scholarship to go to US – I remember there was a question about are you – do you believe in women's lib or something? And I remember I said something about bra-burning (laughs heartily). At that time I was that ignorant! Laughs

L Laughs

A You know I wanted to assure them that I was not the bra-burning kind and all that and so. In that journalism course they insisted that we had to do courses in other schools. You know, because they said journalism is just – what journalism school teaches is a skill and we need to have other more substantive courses. So one of the courses I chose – what was then Sociology department or something – was something called Sex Roles – Sex Role something. And that was really the first time that I – you know we had this book- which I still have Joe Freeman's book – which really opened my

eyes to this whole thing of sex role socialization. Lot of things fell into place at that time. I must say that I didn't have much incentive to be, you know – feel oppressed or anything because at a personal level my parents were very progressive. We were three daughters. There were no sons. So it was – never felt any kind of disadvantage being a girl

L And your family was from Kerala – both of them?

A Ya, from Kerala, ya -both my parents were from Kerala. And they were pretty trail blazing in their own ways. My mother, you know is not really – had a Masters and was a gold medallist and all that kind of thing. Then she actually worked all her life. Even as a single woman before she got married. She says – later she would say I don't know what my father was thinking of because for her first job she had to – he just saw her off on this train or bus or whatever. But she had to go by four different forms of transport to reach the college where she got this job, you know. He just said goodbye and let her go. And she says I don't know whether it was foolishness or those were more innocent times also may be things were safer. So she, you know, started working as a teacher, a college teacher from the time she graduated and she worked all her life. So that was one thing. And they didn't belong to the same church which in those days was almost as bad as being from a different religion. So...and they didn't practice really sex, you know rigid gender based sex roles at home. Because my father was much more a mother, my mother was much more a father, you know in terms of our relationships. So I had a very unusual family background and therefore I never really felt anything about being a girl. But this course and this book and the teacher and – I don't remember the name but really opened my eyes to a lot of things. And then maybe because of that for a magazine course I chose to do a paper on *Ms* magazine. So, I think I spent a week in New York in the *Ms* magazine office. And interviewing Gloria Steinem and Suzanne Levine and Patricia Carbine and all those, you know big names of...you know feminism coming into journalism in a formal manner. And it was just a fantastic experience because also they were all so open and spend so much time. I think I interviewed Gloria Steinem sitting in the, you know small office – they were just starting out. This was in 1976. So it was very early days. And we were just sitting on the sofa in the lobby because there was not much place anywhere kind of thing. So it was really a very exciting experience. There was this woman, one of my favourite features in *Ms* was this 'Stories for free children' – Lette Kotin Pograbin was I think incharge of it. And this whole thing, you know of making stories available for children without gender stereotypes and reversing stereotypes and things like that. So it was very wonderful magazine I thought. They were making it commercially successful. I mean they started with no ads and they certainly didn't want certain kind of ads, but inspite of all that they managed to make themselves commercially viable. And so that a very exciting sort of introduction to what a women's magazine could be. And so then when I came back to India

L Just to go back to that time – You said reading played an important role in how you began to see social systems and discrimination and things. Was there not a lot of campus activism around then as well, that somewhere touched any chord like the mid-seventies one hears was also a time of lot of politicization?

A Ya. ..There must have been, but I don't really remember participating in anything. I don't know whether certain schools were less active – the journalism school, certainly I don't remember anything happening there. And a lot of my other friends were involved – were in the business school and engineering, architecture and stuff like that – so maybe it was happening a little more in the sociology, history kind of thing. I don't remember any big rallies or any such thing at that time. Maybe it was really early days. And Syracuse was a private university and I think it was reputed to have – full of rich kids and things like that. So maybe it was not as radical as some of the state schools. Ya

L So you came back to India

A I did also do a little internship in New York which was what was it called – it was a Methodist – Global Methodist something or the other and they had a magazine. And in that, you know there was some focus on women. And so that was another little exposure that I had. But its really, I would say the course and other reading – thanks to that. And then this encounter with *Ms* magazine – that also because – *Ms* magazine made a really big impact on me because of my new interest in women's issues. And the fact that I had chosen to be a journalist. And so it came together. When I came back I was offered a job in *Eve's Weekly* and this time as Assistant Editor. And it was kind of a – you know lucky break because we had an editor who was the editor of two magazines – *Eve's Weekly* and *Star and Style* and she was much more interested in *Star and Style*. And so she really didn't mind what we were – what we got up to in *Eve's Weekly* as long as we didn't disturb basic things. There were certain things which till the end we couldn't change. But otherwise it was really a – we had much more of a free hand than I am sure anybody has nowadays, you know in any magazine, so. We did have – I mean I can talk about but that was when I came back and Jyoti Punwani was one of the sub-editors and there was another person called Rattan Kamlani and there were these older people who had been all along – the cookery editor and something- who all led very much more exciting lives than the younger generation – in terms of personal. Their personal lives were much more out of the ordinary and risky (laughs) than ours I think. Uh, but the three, I think it was literally the three of us really got quite I think – it was partly because I came with all these ideas and I was in a position to make decisions and things like that and found these kindred spirits who got equally enthused about it. So, it was quite a heady time. I don't know whether we thought of it as heady at that time, because it was a struggle, you know. We said we can't have this and we have to have that and you know that kind of thing. It was bit of a struggle but it was also the time when the women's movement – I came back in '77 – and very soon after that was when the dowry death phenomenon came to public notice. So I remember writing to – in those days there was no e-mail or anything – so we had to find addresses and write to people in Delhi – which was so far away and didn't have STD or anything. I don't think we were authorized to make long distance calls or anything. I remember actually writing to Urvashi's mother – because she was one of the first, Subhadra Butalia – and she was one of the people who had actually witnessed one of these early dowry deaths. And if I am not mistaken I got Coomi Kapoor to write an article -the one and only time she wrote on a women's issue. Anyway, so it was a time – there were the three of us who were interested and we had a certain amount of freedom because of the circumstances of our Editor's pre-occupations. But it was also really a time when there was a churning happening in the country. And very soon after the dowry death thing came the rape –

Mathura rape case and the agitation about that. And the whole women's movement taking off in a big way after that. So, we in a way sort of rode the crest because we were very involved with all that, specially with the anti-rape thing because it really was – it began in Bombay as a public agitation. And so we definitely were part of the Forum Against Rape. And in fact it was Jyoti and me and Gauri Salve who went to book Cama Hall for the first ever public meeting on rape in the country. It was – we went in our lunch time – we spent, you know our own money. We didn't have much of it. Our salaries were like below one thousand rupees in those days. But we pooled in that money and did that. We were very much part of the movement. We didn't see that as a contradiction in terms of our journalistic careers either. And that also brought us into contact with a lot of, you know, scholars and activists and things like that. And somehow we managed to persuade them also to contribute to *Eve's Weekly*, so. I think there were many firsts. A lot of people don't know about. The first article on marital rape appeared in *Eve's Weekly*. The first article on custodial rape – we had a special issue on rape. So that in the middle of the campaign we had a whole special issue on rape. Unfortunately, the cover is of (laughs) of a passive smiling woman – who didn't seem to have anything – any concern in life. Many people I think didn't realize how much the inside had changed. So we got rid of sexist humour, which was really tough because both those writers – male writers – 'Madam I am Adam' and what was the other one, anyway – both of them were friends of the editor. It was quite tough to get them dislodged, but we insisted we just couldn't have that. Then we tried to have a feminist humour column. Manjula Padmanabhan did some really funny ones! But she being who she is – she couldn't, you know keep it up on a regular basis, so we couldn't continue that. But, you know we had women sport. Had feminist reviews of Bollywood. And ya – some of the things which we couldn't change were the cover, things like knitting, fashion. I personally didn't think cooking was necessarily – I mean the recipe pages were contradictory to what we were trying to do because I said it is part of women's lives also and so we tried to make it aswe even had a special issue on 'I hate cook-book'. And so it was really exciting because – we had popular mechanics, you know we use gadgets and don't understand anything about them. So we got somebody to, you know actually talk about what goes into a mixie and what is in a toaster. You know how does it work and things like that. So it was a variety of things that we did. And at the same time also our idea was that it should be a window to the larger world, because a lot of the women probably only read *Eve's Weekly* as their thing.

L What was the circulation?

A Am not sure. I can't remember at all. I think it was lower than *Femina* because of the *Times of India* thing, but it was, I would – *Eve's Weekly* is actually the older magazine but the clout of the *Times of India* made *Femina* the largest selling – I don't remember

L Did your interventions in terms of trying to change content have any impact on circulation or were you told that it did?

A No, we were not told that it had gone down or anything, but neither had we been told that it had gone up. The Ad department – the marketing and ad department got a bit annoyed with us because occasionally – about blatantly sexist ads – we would

complain. We cannot have this! And, you know we'd see it at a very late stage because it's only when – then it would be very inconvenient to have to take it out. But, we couldn't do it for most of the passively sexist things. But if it was really impossible to accept we – so they didn't like that. Once when – there was supposed to be a kind of ad campaign for *Eve's Weekly* – the person who was heading that creative team said – You know what you have is a schizophrenic magazine (laughs).

L (joins in laughter)

A Because we had all this radical stuff – I mean there was – I think Jyoti wrote an article which really got a lot of hate mail also because I think she wrote about Ram and Sita – questioning the Ram and Sita thing from a feminist perspective. And we really got a lot of angry mail. Must have been the beginning of the Hindu revival or whatever. Ya, one of my first articles was – 'Was Jesus Christ a Liberated Man'. And, but we also interviewed –uh – politicians. For example I remember going -Jyoti and I interviewed L.K. Advani – basically to give their views on things. Also because we felt that others many women who read women's magazines don't read anything about politics – are not aware of what's going on. Around election time – in fact I got Kalpana to write a piece on women and politics. So we tried to, you know sort of bring in things that are not specifically about women – because we believed that a women's magazine could act as a window to the world for women who were not otherwise exposed to or choose not to be exposed to other things, so that was. Another series that we had, which I think was really good and I think needs to be revived is this whole thing of questioning marriage rituals, sides of marriage and in different religions, different traditions and things like that. Talking about how some of them are very much based on gender hierarchies etc. So there were lots of those things which now I hear from many people. We also tried to change the short story. And in fact Shashi Deshpande often talks about how she – about the interactions we have had – where I didn't know – I was young and she was younger and not as well known as she is now – so she used to write short stories for us. That is something which we remember from those days, but anyway. So I think there were lots of – now I hear from a lot of people that they used to read *Eve's Weekly* in those days – they enjoyed it etc. but at that time – it was really – we didn't have enough feedback because our letters to the editor were also of a different type. It was not response to stuff in magazines – it was really shorter articles- people, you know wanted to express themselves on various things. The editor used to give prizes and all that. That wasn't so much feedback. So we were really operating in the dark to a great extent but you know, we I guess were young and enthusiastic and thought we were changing the world and so (laughs) didn't bother us too much. But what did bother us was that many people didn't realize how much it had changed, so, you know and even. That was when *Manushi* also came out and we thought it was great! And we even gave publicity and we all subscribed and everything. But then when *Manushi* had one or two articles about women's magazines – it was so ill-informed and so you know based on this whole conspiracy theory – you know – about how some sort of capitalists were sitting there and using these women's magazines to keep women down and things like that. I just felt that's – first of all that there isn't any such thing. I mean in our experience there wasn't any such thing. Nobody could be bothered what we did. It seemed so unimportant to them as long as we didn't interfere with ads – advertising. Uh so there was no conspiracy that we could detect. And also you know it was not giving enough – any kind of recognition to

women who were working in those magazines and trying to change things. So if you don't even recognize that some change has happened – then I am sorry – we don't take your criticism too seriously, you know. So that was kind of disquieting. And, you know even other progressive journalist friends of ours who would – I remember when Jyoti finally left – she was looking for free-lance assignments – one of our close male journalist friends asked her – what have you been doing all these years? And she said would you please and this is what I have been doing – because she also wrote a lot. So there was lot – there was quite a volume of writing that she had done. But it was as if it hadn't happened because it was in a women's magazine and who reads women's magazines. So that was the only thing that used to irritate us. But I think because we were so much part of the women's movement in Bombay – many of the activists – many of the activists and scholars who were part of the movement did recognize that changes were happening and they were willing to write. Which was a great thing. It definitely improved the quality of what was appearing in the magazine.

L Was there that kind of synchronization, you know like now activist groups seek media exposure and publicity and meet journalists and ask them to write about issues or was it assumed you were part of the movement and you are going to be writing about it anyway? Was there not that kind of separation?

A At that time nobody was asking us to write anything. In fact we were asking them to write things, at least as far as our – *Eve's Weekly* was concerned. I think there was a certain – about other media and in fact during one of the early autonomous meetings – I think the first two were in Bombay. I think it was in the , I think it was in the second one we actually, by then we had a Women and Media group in Bombay and we actually put together a session for journalists and activists to talk about this issue. Because there was a kind of – by then – there was some tension – activists and scholars were thinking that journalists were preying on their work and writing about it. And so you know, even though it is credited and everything. They felt that in a way it was and vice versa – there were a lot of misunderstandings and all that – this by '85. I think the first meeting was in 1980 and the next one was in '85. At the time of the 1980 one – there was no such thing because really – I think there was a kind of distrust of the media and the media found it very difficult to include voices from the movement because there was no one spokesperson. And you couldn't get anybody to say that Yes, I'll speak for the movement in those days. Now of course there are people who should not be speaking for the movement (laughs) also speaking for the movement, but on those days everything had to be by committee. You know there was no hierarchy and so it was impossible to get somebody to give a statement which could be seen as a kind of representative of the women's movement kind of thing. At that time that was the frustration of many journalists. But as far as we were – *Eve's Weekly* was concerned – we were really seeking people out to write. So there was something happening – we would actually contact somebody – ask somebody. Even this custodial rape one – it was N.K. Singh in Madhya Pradesh who wrote for us. So, because he had reported something. So then we wrote to him and said can you write a feature on it. So it was very active thing. We were not just sitting. I find that, I actually find it very difficult to stomach the idea that people have to go and tell journalists that please do this and that. Because that is the job of the journalist – to you know see what needs to be covered and cover it, so. Nowadays this whole business of hiring PR agencies to make sure that you get press coverage – I just

think it's an abomination. So, I think we were just doing our jobs by, you know seeing what needed to be – what we wanted to cover in the magazine and then find who could write it, ask them and get it.

L Would you also attend meetings of women's organizations?

A Ya

L So at that time there wasn't this tension that you might write about the internal workings or ..something of that kind?

A No, I guess not. Because I went to every meeting. I mean I was very much part of the Forum, so it was like, you know years and years of saying are we a movement or are we an organization (laughs) all that I have sat through so (laughs) so many years later you are still discussing the same thing. But ya, I mean – there were stories that came out of all those interactions. I mean Flavia's cyclostyled story about her marriage. At one of those meetings she gave it to me to read. Literally, I mean 10 or 12 pages of cyclostyled sheets and I took it home and I just read it through the night. I couldn't stop reading it, you know and then I asked her and we published an excerpt. Again, that was the first. That was the first time anything about domestic violence had appeared in press. So that way, you know, it is with permission. Ya, but may be because we were not in a newspaper, I don't know why but nobody really felt that we might be moles sitting there (laughs) who might spill beans. I think journalism in those days was also – it was after the emergency and so I guess it had become different but there was a lot of trust.

L There wasn't I mean on the converse side there wasn't any hostility or contempt that you were actually going for activist meetings?

A From journalists?

L From journalists, co-workers or bosses?

A Uh first of all we were a women's magazine. If we had been working in a newspaper there would have been more of it. And there weren't that many guys around – you know those hardened journalist types. So I guess we didn't get – may be I think as the so-called journalistic fraternity didn't even consider anybody who worked in a women's magazine as true-blue journalists. So, it was that kind of hierarchy between any features magazines and newspapers and all that. So I guess we weren't important enough for them to bother about.

L Was Pamela Philipose there at that time?

A No! Later, after I left *Eve's Weekly*, there was Laxmi Narayan, then Pam, no Shola and then Pam. So Pam came in few years after I left.

L What led to your leaving? Was it . .

AI actually told – I told the Editor that I would like to continue – she asked me what my plans were? So I said – I would like to continue working, but I don't want to be in the office full day. And so I feel I know what I need to do – I have been doing it for

four years. So I know what it takes – so I know that I can do it if I come into the office a few hours every day and you know take stuff home to do and stuff. Of course in those days there were no computers and e-mail, but still I knew that it could be done. So, she said – I think she was quite open to it but then the management felt it would be setting a precedent and so they said no. So I said then well, I am resigning. And she said, oh and you are the one who always said that women should have options and you know, keep up their careers and all that. So I said Ya, I mean, you are not leaving me with an option. I offered you a working solution and that is not working, so I quit. Because I really didn't want to – get home and have somebody say – Oh, today your baby turned on the stomach and all that. And took her first step or said her first word or – that was something I didn't. But then I taught journalism part-time.

L Did you ever want to be part of a newspaper?

A I was eventually, as an editor of Sunday magazine. So, I am really a features person. And also I have great respect because I think a lot of people think features means something light. I don't think that's necessarily, I don't think that is borne out by evidence across the world, but in India somehow features have come to be associated with frothy unh nonsense. And certain kinds of things – travel this and that. I mean even travel can be very interesting writing, but I mean that you can have political features and you know whatever. That's somehow not . I think now again slowly making its way back into. So, no I have never craved to be part of a newspaper because I didn't believe that they were doing something more important than what I was doing.

L One question I had about, you know, after you came back from studying and took up this job – that was the time when the women's movement was sort of in the ascendant in India by then- late seventies. This whole slogan of personal is political – you know one's personal life is politicized and vice versa – did you find its reflection of that in your own experience?

A You mean in personal life or generally?

L No, that this slogan had any kind of – I mean did it resonate with you? Did you feel that it made sense and that it reflected your own reality?

A Ya, to a great extent, because I mean for me it was not a major, except may be in this choice of, you know of not working full time with a baby, otherwise I felt there wasn't much other contradiction between what I was, I mean the kind of person I was and the choices I was making and my political views. So there wasn't much contradiction. But this I think is something which a lot of people would question, you know, leaving full time work when the only answer is – I mean the only reason was a baby and not because one didn't have – I mean one could have afforded help, and there are many people who cant, but I think one could have afforded help, but I made a very deliberate choice. And I think again that's a choice that people should be able to do. And if the system doesn't create an environment where you can balance both, then you have to make a choice. If you have the freedom, I mean if you have sort of privilege to be in a position where you can make that choice.

L So, at that time did you feel you were like opting out of a professional -kind of space for a temporary time and you'll get back or did you see it as a shift now in the way you were going to be working?

A Uh, No. I didn't see it as a permanent shift. I saw it as a break. ..but as I went along because I was equally active in terms of I was teaching and I found that very interesting and I was doing some freelance writing. So I didn't feel out of it in that way, except in terms of climbing the ladder or something and Eve's Weekly there wasn't very much higher to climb. So one would have to switch jobs. So, I mean I did go back to full time work for sometime also. But I think the fact that those three years when I found that it was possible to be fairly active and fulfilled intellectually and professionally even without a full time job – I think it must have been a formative kind of period because, you know after that –after again going back for a few years – I have opted for this very long –long number of years when I have not had I have not been working full time anywhere. So, I think I realized the possibility of that at that time during those three years that I did that.

L A lot of people feel that the early years of the movement were patterned around a certain kind of activism and a certain kind of activist who would be, you know, free from family responsibilities, always available, mobile, you know completely centring her life around the movement. And therefore there was no space for people, who had children, say small children or responsibilities for the aged at home or anything which required them to give a certain amount of time away from the movement. Was that your experience as well, I mean the kind of activism you saw around you?

A No, because there were a lot of women who had children. And you know I – and they used to because Bombay is the way it is, you know the meetings are in one place, you are working somewhere else, child somewhere else – so I think some of them used to bring the children to – pick them up from wherever they were for child care and bring them to meeting. And that actually in a way sort of made me sort of not go to a lot of the meetings. See how tired those children were, you know, so I used to say I am not going to do that. That's something I decided that I was not going to do – that I am not going to go to all these meetings dragging my child along. I mean I don't judge the people who do it because it was a time when they were very important to the movement, but it was just not very fair to the children. Again it is a failure of infrastructure that was available to those women that they had to do that. I am sure they also didn't want to tire their children out so much. But there were quite a few people with children. Some – many of them – quite a lot of them were married. Some of those husbands were very much part of the movement in many ways. Very supportive with all our meetings – Amar Jesani and people like that were all there and lending their sort of labour and things to making all the events. So it wasn't a – I think Bombay was a in that way not such a separatist kind of – I never felt that.

L At that time do you remember –your memories of the time as well as in hindsight – what was mainstream media image of a feminist activist was?

A A you know-it's also borne out in our study of media coverage of those years in "Whose news", for example the Bombay press and how it responded to the whole

campaign against rape which was very active in Bombay. It was very positive. It was you know extremely positive. They were edits and edit page articles and all that articulating all that we were trying to say through the campaign. So I think there were lot of sympathizers. Progressive journalists who were in positions where they could do that kind of thing. And they did it – male journalists. So, I don't remember too much, may be I am just shutting out unpleasant thoughts (laughs). But I don't think, at the most I think may be – ignoring would be one thing, but I don't remember any lampooning or stereotyping.

L So when in your memory did this sort of shift happen where feminists and feminism started almost being caricatured – you know not quite – I mean by people who didn't even understand a lot of stereotypes – this whole bra burning business and all of that – do you remember when that happened in the media?

A Look, there was – there was a certain amount of sexism in general – I mean the third edit in *Times of India* was always you know making all those sexist jokes and things like that. That was always the humorous column and somehow humour seemed to involve making fun of women. So that kind of sexism was there I guess. But direct attacks on feminists and the movement – I first became conscious of that kind of thing only in the '90s I think. May be because in the early days – the issues that were taken up – were really issues how can you joke about it. I mean dowry death, rape to the extent that you know that the Roop Kanwar issue and the Shahbano issue were not, I mean except for a – were not seen just as women's issues because they had all these other connotations and became politically very volatile and things like that -so those were not. But you know all of those issues were – none of those issues were as controversial from the gender point of view. You know, this whole thing of an old woman not being able to live on 500 rupees a month. The same thing as the burning of a girl just because her husband had died. Those were not very controversial issues except in terms of the communal part of it but in terms of, you know women and what you thought of – whats happening to women in those issues – I think there was not that much controversy. I came across that kind of – the one thing which stands out in my head is the feminazi thing which Swapan Dasgupta wrote this edit page article in which the headline had this 'feminazi' thing.

L When was that?

A I think ..

L Mid 90s

A Mid 90s – it was around the population

L Women's conference

A No, it was I think the population conference and the controversy over...I think it was really the population issue – maybe we can find out. But I remember that being one of the first openly hostile kind of pieces in media. Uh, of course even as I said there were third edits and humour columns which were very offensive in many ways but they were not necessarily directed at the movement and feminists I think.

L At what point do you remember again this disassociation of some women in particular from feminism? You know where the idea of women's rights and feminism started to diverge and there were a whole crop of women – not just young women but even middle aged saying I am not a feminist. That seems to be taking place over just about 15-20 years. Do you remember again in popular perception through the media when this began to happen? (47.35)

A Well, I mean even in the late 70s and early 80s there were obviously many women who did not identify with the movement, didn't consider themselves feminist, knew nothing about it etc and did have this thing of the women's libber stereotype and all but ..don't, you know I think one of the things which we did find because we studied that whole period in whose news and I think one of the things which we have said in our introduction or somewhere in the book is the kind of you know, blatantly sexist and hostile to the women's movement kind of stuff which you saw in many western and specially tabloid journalism in the UK and US etc – we didn't find in India. And I think one of the reasons we thought of it was that there was this kind of liberal consensus which probably came, you know from the independence movement and things like that. The kind of – it was you know, it was a time when the nation was still quite young and there was a certain kind of feeling that there was this nation building going on and all that kind of thing. So I think there was a – journalists did feel to some extent part of that whole enterprise and you know sort of social change and getting rid of social evils and you know all that kind of stuff. So I think on the whole at least in the English press, which is what I was familiar with, there was that kind of liberal consensus. For the most part, people were pretty on the whole pretty progressive about these kinds of issues. They may have had differences on economic issues – political issues. But that was also a time before both the whole right wing upsurge, you know in many ways. This so-called religious fundamentalism and revivalism, even caste identity and

L Which you would place in what period?

A I think, I mean if one had to track it to something with the women's – you know something that came out of the women's movement - I think the Shah Bano case and thereafter, so I suppose late '80s onwards and then steadily worse and worse I think. So I think that was – I think that has had – played a huge role in this – in many aspects of life in India. This whole – the role that religion or so called, you know, politics, politics and religion, the mixing of politics and religion I think has had a huge impact on so many aspects – on what people think about anything. And .and the same thing with politics and caste, so I think the late '70s and early '80s that had not happened. I think for that – to that extent I think the women's movement was not opposed as ferociously as it was actually in the West.

L Ammu to talk about your book 'Whose News' – could you take me through what lead to it? I mean obviously there is a whole journey before you set out to research and write it. Could you go back to that time up to when the book happened?

A In fact it was in the mid-'80s maybe that a few of us joined this get together – women journalists came together to set up this thing called the Women's Media Group

in Bombay. Again, mainly to look at sexism in the media and respond to it. Also inform our selves about certain things which we didn't know that much about, say market research and impact on how advertising was going and the impact of that on perceptions of women, portrayal of women etc., so came together I think in the mid '80s. And so mainly we were writing letters to the editors protest against this and that and getting people to speak to us about. That was the first - that was the time when women as consumers were becoming a subject of interest- so there were huge surveys on the 'new woman' and all that. So we actually got people who had done those surveys to come and tell us about it. So that we could understand what was behind this. Because they even had - one of them had different types of women-about ten different types of women - this was for marketing purposes. But we thought it was interesting that somebody- these were the only people who were studying women. And though for different reasons - so we interacted with them and things like that. So I think our group together with Vimochana was the one which - how did poor Simi Grewal out of her women's magazine now show on TV and things like that. In the process we got more - Kalpana and I got much more interested in this whole idea of women and media and felt that there really isn't - except for these market research people - nobody else seems to be paying much attention. And of course the actual women's studies people were not interested in the media, and so it fell to us to do something about it. Anyway, we sort of felt we would do something and I think we sent off a proposal and there was some interest and we were given a go-ahead. And I went on a fellowship to Cambridge and sort of tested it out with a pilot. Everyone is supposed to do something while I was in Cambridge - so I did a study - not only on gender - I looked at race, gender and sexuality in the British media around three flash points that had happened around that time. So that was - we had thought that could be an approach - you know looking at when there was peak interest in something and how the media covered it. So I did that thing and came back. And then we started on the study. We had a clearer idea about how we should go about it. So it really came out of our work as journalists and brewing interest in how media represent women and things like that. And some of that sort of so mini-activism, I would say that we did at the Women and Media group. And so that was lead to it. You know we didn't know any - neither of us were researchers - we didn't have training in anything, but we did do it very systematically and according to our own ideas of what, you know how it would and it worked I think. And we were quite flattered and amused too having reviews saying that it is a very novel methodology and all that. So we invented a methodology but we didn't think of it as a methodology.

L And your next book - how did that come about?

A That was 'Making News' - women in journalism. That was -actually it came to me from Media Foundation. They wanted someone to write profiles of 'Chameli Devi Award' winners. So I looked at all that and I said it didn't sound very interesting, so I said you know can we expand it a bit. They were open and they managed to raise a little bit of funds from here and there - really small amount. And so that is how it happened. And that again was I rode on various things - if I happened to go somewhere for something - I would just interview people - things like that. So that's how I managed to interview over 200 women. But and then - had an annexure with all the Chameli Devi award winners. So to some extent. Now I think they brought out something where the Chameli Devi award winners have actually written and there is a separate book for that.

But I think that was – it was there idea to have something on women journalists but it became a bigger project then they had envisaged.

L The '80s also were a time of increasing funding for women's issues – a lot of NGOs getting set up drawing a lot of funds for anyone doing anything on women's rights, gender and so on – did you find any reflection of this on the media?

A Was it the '80s- I thought it was the '90s?

L Mid-80s onwards. After the Nairobi conference – I think that was when a lot of – I mean more of the activist groups actually became NGOs and set up offices and started raising money – more project oriented rather than you know issue and activism oriented. So did you see any of this reflected in the media in terms of you know more fellowships for example or more junkets or funded trips?

A Ya, I definitely saw this emergence of fellowships and things like that but more in the '90s than in the '80s. I mean in the 80s I didn't see any sign of any money actually. Maybe a lot of the money was concentrated in Delhi, because I don't remember coming across NGO type groups in Bombay who were part of the movement, you know sort of. There were obviously more NGOs doing other work but not

L A spin off kind off – like a lot of NGOs produced reports and documents and newsletters and journalists would be hired as consultants to, you know, it became actually a source of income and employment for a lot of free-lancers specially who couldn't meet ends meet on the measly amounts you get for writing, so – I guess it was in the 90s as well.

A Ya, it was very much there in the '90s but I didn't see it, because it would have come in very useful for me (laughs) if I had seen a possibility that way because I didn't see that much that kind of thing in the '80s over there. And after that in Bangalore also to some extent – I think in Bangalore – not in the women's thing but I did some work for two NGOs and their publications but that was really in the '90s, so.

L Do you remember any particular anecdote – we'll end in five minutes – do you remember any significant anecdote in your early working life –like when you were telling me about *Eve's Weekly* – where you and the team tried to change certain things and managed some things and didn't manage others – so at that time do you remember any particular significant event where you got your way or you didn't get your way?

A As I said the humour column was one of our big struggles and the cover was another major struggle which we did not succeed in. The humour column we succeeded. The cover we did occasionally managed to get a different kind of cover but for the most part that was something that

L What about the name – none of you all reacted

A I mean of course we reacted

L laughs

A It's so irritating and often spelt "Weakly" and all that

L laughs

A laughs so but you know we got the – I mean it was redesigned when we were there and so we tried to get the logo changed so that it is a little more contemporary but I think with a registered magazine it is very difficult to change the name so that we didn't even get into but it was a – there was this big ad – there was an ad for you know – I don't even remember the product – I am very bad at associating ads with products but there was these – two legs – beautiful shapely legs of a woman and whatever copy or something in the middle. And all of us said no this is not possible – you have to – you know you can't publish this and we went to the editor. I don't know whether to our faces or we heard about it but definitely the ad manager said that because we don't have such nice legs

A&L laugh

L That's a nice note to end on. Would you like to add anything more?

A Hm Well this is really about the 70s and 80s right, not later, so well I suppose I could say something about the teaching because I think that was another place where I tried I mean from an early – I went on later to do to actually teachgender but at that time also I felt that journalists need to you know, journalism students need to recognize that we they are not the average person and we all come from very privileged sections of society and therefore we need to really see the – you know things from another perspective otherwise we won't be doing our jobs, so I used to get people working with various in different with the urban poor or with certainly from the women's movement and from other such things to come and talk to the students about their work and the kind of people they work with and what are the problems and things like that – in an effort to impress on journalists the thing that we can't see it from our point of view alone. That we have to recognize where we are situated in this society and to recognize it as quite privileged and therefore, you know. Say you were covering slum demolitions – you must know they are not just unsightly whatever, but you need to so that time I used to get some of the activists from the women's movement to talk to the students and they were all female students. I think that's something which has stayed me always because just yesterday – this is not part of the interview but this idea that I come across even now with journalism students, specially because we have this 'aam aadmi' concept and the common man concept has just taken off in such a way in recent times, that you know when they keep saying but the common man – the common man and I would say who do you mean by the common man and they would say people like us. You know it is such an effort to try and help people realize that if you are in this journalism course paying 2-3 lacs for the course then you are not the common man. You know I mean this feeling that the middle class is the common man is something which has grown but you know it was – it wasn't such a – such a marked trend at that time but I felt this was something journalists really need to be sensitive to – to recognize their place in society and therefore the fact you have to look at other perspectives.

L That's an interesting point. And I think it's growing. It's the post '90s and liberalization this kind of gap

A Now it is terrible – with this –with this anti-corruption movement thing. Yesterday, I saw this woman sitting on TV obviously in an affluent home with a lahariya(?) saree and this and that and they were talking about mango people versus banana republic or whatever and and she was saying I am the aam admi, I am the mango people and I said –laughs they really – that movement in a way has taken it to another level. This whole idea that urban upper middle class people are the aam admi with access to television I mean media and be spokespersons and all that – they are the aam admi.

L Before we end, I just wanted to ask, I remember you mentioning in another context that you have copies of the Eve's Weekly- every copy- would you have the first one by any chance?

A The very first one that I had any influence over?

L Ya, the ones where you said it was the first time there was a story on marital rape.

A Should have, should have – because it's all bound so I'll have to look through

L Pretty interesting to maybe scan

A ya, ya

L and share it

A Also as proof –laughs

L laughs

A Between me and Jyoti we have the only last surviving copies of the *Eve's Weekly* in the world probably, so.

L No, I think we should tap that archive – since it is not online

A ya

L it almost like it doesn't exist

A ya

L Outside of Delhi nothing exists. Outside of Google nothing exists!

A ya. And also because many people in the movement would read *Manushi* and not the women's magazines and so the critiques which appeared in *Manushi* – which we found, you know not at all valid in many ways, though we completely sympathize with the need to critique the women's magazines and to, you know sort of unpack it and dissect it and all that and see what's wrong and what needs to be changed –we completely – we were totally in sympathy with that – because that's what we were doing on a daily basis but we just found that they were so – they just didn't -they were lazy, they were lazy critiques. It is very easy to say this, that and the other without really speaking to the people about what was behind this or that. They could have done a little

more of that and made it much better. So a lot of people were exposed to that and again it was like – I mean it was stereotyping of women's magazines actually what was happening. And I was guilty of it also because I remember as a student – when I was in Sophia doing the same course which I was teaching later – I did some – I did my ya – whatever they called it in those days dissertation or something was on women's magazines I think. I remember interviewing Dina Vakil who was then Assistant Editor of *Femina* and her getting quite annoyed with me- the line of questioning

L laughs

A laughs where you know I was racing because she was also I think

L you'll eat your words

A laughs Again she must have, I also must have just gone with my prejudices and based my whole thing on that, so I think it would be nice actually to. Some people have been saying that actually because – it's really you have the stuff and the rest of it I mean literally we typed all of it. So between Jyoti and I we should be having all the significant things.

L Ok, we'll end here. Thanks a lot.

A Thank you!

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