

URVASHI BUTALIA

THE ACTIVISM OF KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Before co-founding India's first feminist publishing house in 1984, I had spent a good ten years in street-level activism. The women's movement, at the time picking up momentum across India, resonated with our slogans and songs. Every few days, we were out on the streets, posters and banners held aloft, protesting against one or other form of discrimination towards women. We blackened and tore down sexist hoardings on roads, we prepared delegations to lobby with officers of the State, we performed street plays on violence against women, beating our drums and singing our songs, and we filed cases in court. Those days, we were high on the euphoria of our feminist battles and, as we planned, talked, shared our stories, we discovered sisterhood and solidarity.

It was out of this involvement that the idea of setting up a feminist publishing house grew. The issues we were facing were complex – systemic inequality, economic disempowerment, cultural stereotyping and so much more – and we knew little or nothing about them. A feminist publishing house could support the movement with the one thing we lacked (and which was perhaps the most powerful ›weapon‹ with which to fight patriarchy): knowledge. Through discussions among friends and fellow feminists, the idea took shape. Everyone agreed that even as we were taking up multiple issues – violence against women, sexual assault, invasive and unsafe contraception, public access, economic marginalization, caste discrimination, religious fundamentalism and so forth – we knew little about their histories or indeed why they had taken the shape they did. Kali for Women, the first feminist publishing house in India, grew out of this need and directly in response to the women's movement. Activists in the movement saw it as their voice and as a platform for articulating what they were grappling with.

In the initial few years, as we felt our way into the world of knowledge creation and production, I was miraculously able to continue with the activism of the street. If direct action was not possible, we worked to provide support, print pamphlets, help edit speeches and writings. Gradually, though, the publishing expanded and the heat and dust of the street began to seem like a distant place. It was no longer the shot in the arm that energized our days. Instead, the excitement came from the discovery of women's voices in writing, from the ways in which ideas transformed into books, the ways in which words began to form on the page.

And yet, it was hard to escape the feeling that something was missing. Sitting in the comfortable environment of an office space, with a table, a chair, a telephone, a manuscript and a cup of coffee, it seemed as if the activist world had been left far behind. Many questions followed. Had I taken the easy way out? Could I continue to call myself an activist? How could I define this work? Was publishing not an elite activity? Was I not speaking only to those who could read, who lived in the metros, who could afford to buy books? Did books make a difference at all? In the early days, these questions were very pointed. Kali for Women was city-based, we published in English, the writers we published were (mostly) upper class, educated, elite, upper caste. Our street-level activism, by contrast, was much more diverse, we dealt with issues of caste, class, the rural-urban divide, wealth, and poverty in our daily work. But here, in the books we published, those issues were also talked about, but not in the voices of the poor and marginalized. Instead, it was elite scholars and writers who represented them. Were we not therefore recreating the distance between the researcher and the researched, one of the most resilient of hierarchies in the world of knowledge? Surely, if we were to see our publishing as truly feminist, we needed to go beyond our chosen language, our location, our class and caste privilege.

As we grappled with these questions, one afternoon, something happened, which, for me, marked one of the key turning points in our journey. It was a sunny winter day in Delhi when a group of women walked into our office. Four of them were urban activists whom we knew; the others were village women from the state of Rajasthan in northern India. They brought us a book they – the village women – had created in a series of workshops in the village. The book focused on women's bodies, looking at the changes the body went through from birth right up to old age. They told us wonderful stories about creating the book, and since it dealt with the body, they had drawn the naked body, male and female, to show all the organs. But when they shared the first draft of the book in the village, people came up with a criticism. »How can you call your book realistic,« they interjected, »when you never see naked people in the village?«

The women went back to the drawing board, rethought the design of the book, and came up with an ingenious solution: they drew their figures fully dressed or seemingly fully dressed, for their clothes were actually drawn onto small flaps that could be lifted up and you could see the body underneath.

As feminist publishers based in the Global South, issues of access, reach, class, who can read, how far do our books reach – these are critical to our practice. And yet, by their very nature, writing and publishing are limited to those who are educated and have money to spend. Our dream was to reach out further beyond the borders of the city and the language to poor women in dif-

ferent parts of India. Here was a book that feminist publishers dreamt about and we instantly agreed to publish the book. But the women were not done with us yet: they had two conditions to which we had to agree: first, we should never sell a copy to a village woman at a profit; second, the cover of the book should list all the names of the 75 women who had created its knowledge and content collectively. We agreed to both conditions.

This collective creation of knowledge, the exercise of respecting the community and taking it back to them, the subversion of the received wisdom that authorship was only ever singular, or at the most could take in two or three people – all of this meant that, even for dyed-in-the-wool feminists like us, there was a great deal of unlearning what we had imbibed and it forced us to question – and later, reform – the activity we had undertaken.

In time, other similar lessons informed all our practices. We realized – and worked on – the different ways in which activism could become an integral part of the world of publishing. Steadily, our list began to grow more diverse. A focus on voices from the margins meant defining what we meant by ›margins‹. For us, they came to include caste, class, location, region, language, religion and more.

This also included thinking of *writing* differently. It did not always mean that someone was sitting in that very important space Virginia Woolf had identified for us women – a room of one's own. Instead, it could be what women, what others on the margins, trans people, Dalits, did as part of their daily struggle to live, to be respected, simply to survive. We took inspiration from our ancestors. One of the most inspirational stories was that of a 14-year-old low caste girl, Muktabai Salve, who did not have access to education because at the time (in the mid-nineteenth century) it was reserved for the upper castes. When she managed to study in a school set up by a non-elite couple, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, she wrote a brief essay, entitled *On the Grief of the Mangs and Mahars* and addressed to those in power, the Brahmans, who had monopolized education and, thus, knowledge. This searing critique of the monopolization of knowledge by the powerful shone like a light in our history and inspired us, as did much of the other work by our foremothers.

If an awareness of margins and social and political exclusions informed our publishing practice, we could not let it remain just at that level. As we looked into the future, we understood better what we had always known. That what we were engaged in was the enterprise of building a feminist institution, one that focused on knowledge and questioned power. This necessarily meant addressing more than just the content of our books. It led us to look at our hiring practices, create a diverse workforce, and open up the power of curating knowledge to

those on the margins. None of this is easy and we do not claim to have succeeded, but we do know that it is something we will continue to work towards.

When your publishing practice is deeply political, as is ours, and when you work with writers who are neither necessarily privileged nor ›trained‹ writers, the relationships you build with authors are also different, the ideas you build into books are more diverse, often more experimental, and not always commercially successful. This lack of ›sustainability‹ is often believed to be the fate of independent publishers. Commercial success has never been our motivation, but that does not mean that we are not concerned about survival. Like all such enterprises, we have had good years, not-so-good years, and some outright bad ones. But forty years down the line, we are here, and if we fold up, we know that we will have gone down fighting and doing our best. For us, that is sufficient.

Four decades ago, when we began, we expected that things would be difficult, that we would face opposition and skepticism. What we did not expect was how difficult it would be to convince women that what they had to say was worth saying, worth publishing. At the time, we would often use the following phrase: our publishing is like a development activity, which helps women develop the confidence to speak out and to write. Today, I look at it differently. Today, it is our authors from the margins who work with us and encourage us to listen to their unique voices. This is us, they say, this is how we write, and the challenge they throw at us is whether we will have the courage and the political will to publish them.

Today, the absence of street-level activism is no longer a concern. We know that when we feel the need to, we will head out to the streets and be there, as we did in recent demonstrations on new and discriminatory laws on citizenship. But we know, too, that what we do sitting at our desks with our cups of coffee, that, too, is a kind of activism, that of creating, curating and disseminating feminist knowledge.