Why did you write this book? What do you hope to achieve with its publication?

Surviving the 90s and the dismantling of working class communities and self-reliant economies was no ordinary feat...it still seems so unreal. Yes, resistance has grown too, even organized resistance. But as someone who has dreamt and lived for a more equal society, I had to take a few steps closer to the reality of ordinary people with ordinary dreams. It is my class of people who became the direct beneficiaries of the economic changes that swept across the country and the globe with the consolidation of capital. But the sinking feeling that the ground is giving way under one's feet as displacement and dispossession of the majority became rampant became a quiet and continuous torment within oneself. I had also begun to feel wary of my own voice - too hoarse for my own ears - that of a conscientious objector in meetings and conferences - pointing out again and again...but what about the ordinary woman...the industrial workers...the peasantry.

Being immersed in middle class activism for years, I was struggling against some barriers that seemed formidable at that time. I wanted to step out a bit and explore for myself. It seemed so certain that it is now or never - while choosing sides. I only had some experience as a feminist in the autonomous women's movement and even more limited experience with working class groups in Delhi. I told myself that at least I could write. Not only about ordinary women but also our own vexed questions - old and new - in the era of such tumultuous changes. And I pushed myself to look at this point of transition through what I was equipped best with - feminist lens. Let me tell you from the Introduction about why I wrote this book.

Primarily, the intent of this book is to draw political and humanitarian attention to the aftermath of peasant suicides, particularly the coping strategies of women who are already marginalized in a deeply traditional and patriarchal society. As an urgent political task, I attempt to make the picture that meets the eye more complete. Women's voices, and some broad data from the overall analysis, will speak to readers of the crisis from my precise point of entry into this region and the endless saga of its toiling class.
Perhaps the shocking figure of 77% Indians living on less than Rs. 20 per day makes for a truth not easy to bear. Perhaps empathy is a less difficult response than defeat for those of us who seek to build a different society. Perhaps persistent questioning has certain tenacity, and it was this that helped in finally taking me closer to a reality that is only a few hours away from the national capital in a geographical and spatial sense.

Why did you write this book? (contd/-)

Secondly, the dead end that widowhood signifies in this feudal-patriarchal society needs to be interrogated – especially, in this context, through the instances of widows running fatherless families. The growing number of “widows” in the Punjab is determined by processes that demand our attention – be it the political, economy or cultural practices. What do these women have to say about their changed circumstances? Can we shift the lens to view the woman as survivor, even as she holds on to the fragile threads of existence despite colossal losses? More fervently then ever she holds on to her dreams of a future for herself and her children. What colour or hue will this future be, what shape?

Finally, the impetus to begin documenting lives in this agrarian milieu came from a deep need to understand the deep distress and the fragmentation of the individual self in poverty experienced by the peasant community, especially after having toiled hard to make Punjab the bread basket of the country. The subjective reality of dispossession and the related psychological stress for entire communities need to be documented to reveal the extent of destruction capitalism brings in its pursuit.

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What do I achieve with its publication? I am yet to see. One of the first few responses that came in echoed what I was hoping to fulfill as a task – that of bringing class and gender closer. I do hope to outline how complex these questions have become. I hope this book helps us bridge some yawning gaps in feminist practice and feminist politics. And more than that, I hope to be able to appeal to the left to take feminist analysis more seriously.

Some look at women as a constituency alone while others do not go beyond viewing women as recipients of systemic violence and injustice. What is more needed is a method of analysis that can inform political practice of left and democratic organizations, parties and mass movements. And that involves looking at social reality through the eyes of women, children and the sick and disabled too.

Now I also have to go beyond the English readership. I have to manage to bring this book to the Punjabi and Hindi readership in India. The response from the English readership is significant, albeit in a limited way. One has to take these findings to people whom it most matters, to people who live it each day.

Kindly share with us a detailed overview of your book?

The Introduction states the purpose and motivation behind this research to analyze the impact of suicides of male peasants in the context of the current agrarian crisis; explains the choice of Punjab as research area to reveal the myths of agricultural prosperity associated with the green revolution; and outlines the methodology used in terms of both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Chapter One: An Outline of the Crisis in Punjab contextualizes the study against the backdrop of the green revolution in Punjab and today’s increasing indebtedness among the peasantry with a focus on small and marginal peasants and landless agricultural labor too. It provides a profile of the deceased peasants and provides data related to peasant suicide in terms of indebtedness and land alienation by comparing with recent studies in the Punjab.

Chapter Two: Dynamics of Women’s Labour discusses the availability of options for women to engage in agriculture and agriculture-related work. It outlines separately the plight of Jat Sikh women who are restrained from wage labor due to caste norms even when there is no land; the nonavailability of work for landless dalit women; and the involvement of all women across age and caste engaged in household and livestock labor and fodder collection, nursing the children and the elderly, irrespective of the recognition of such heavy chores as labor.

Chapter Three: Dowry in Dire Times highlights the increased hardships borne by women in fulfilling the patriarchal compulsions of dowry and marriage ceremonies for their children and how indebtedness increases in the aftermath of suicides due to such social and cultural practices. This contributes to the deepening of patriarchal stranglehold.

Chapter Four: Ill Health in an Ailing Economy looks at the increasing incidence of cancer caused by chemical pesticides, costly health care and mental depression in this situation. It links indebtedness with health care expenses incurred and further traces the roots of ill health to social factors.

Chapter Five: Fragmentation of the Family interrogates the institution of family and its lived reality where the overlapping of social and traditional norms is complicated in a growing moneyed economy. It looks at problems of domestic violence prior to suicide, abandonment of the elderly, and the bleak future that lies ahead of the youth of Punjab with the failure of agriculture.

Chapter Six: Taking Decisions, Voicing Expectations takes stock of women’s changing roles in decision making processes in the absence of male spouses; the support structure available; the conflicts within the family and outside in this scenario; and finally the expectations they have of the government and other agencies.
I sometimes doubt whether Those Who Did Not Die can be called “my work” too. It is an outcome of many searching questions and self-criticism that gradually built up inside me as I grew up in feminist activism and began working closely with working class groups in Delhi. Caste and class barriers make it impossible for women to take one step forward; feminist consciousness alone does not suffice.

Could you give the readers a glimpse of your life and work?

I am a women’s rights activist and was part of a feminist collective in New Delhi called Saheli Women’s Resource Centre for over twenty years. There is not much that I can call “my work” since I have spent the major part in group work or team work. In Saheli and other small collectives like Workers’ Solidarity and Kashipur Solidarity Group, Saheli provided an amazingly deep canvas as we saw women’s issues related so inextricably to the struggles of dalits, adivasis, workers, lesbians and many other socially marginalized groups. One learnt while being on one’s feet all the time.

Another significant involvement had been with a Delhi-based coalition called Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch that came into being in late 1996 – when the Supreme Court passed an order against “hazardous and polluting industries” in response to the petition filed by the Magsaysay award winner MC Mehta. What ensued was a green vs red debate as thousands of workers were thrown out of employment.

There has been a mass exodus of migrant worker families and demolition of countless slums in the bid of “beautification” of the city. That was the beginning of a search as I came into close interaction with the impact of factory closures and slum demolitions on working class families and how women bear the brunt of renewed hardships. There were so many of us at it.

Therefore I sometimes doubt whether Those Who Did Not Die can be called “my work” too. It is an outcome of many searching questions and self-criticism that gradually built up inside me as I grew up in feminist activism and began working closely with working class groups in Delhi. Caste and class barriers make it impossible for women to take one step forward; feminist consciousness alone does not suffice. The obstacles before ordinary women are multiplying today.

Since student years I have been actively involved in social issues and became part of the autonomous women’s movement in the mid-80s. Yes, I have been working largely in nonfunded autonomous collectives; autonomous referring to the political space outside the purview of any political party or the institutionalized NGO structure. That was a conscious political decision. And I hope it remains so.

Since I used to nourish the dream of being a full time political worker for years, I picked up professional experience in more recent years only. That happened as I felt the need for a sustained income to hold my body and soul together!

What are you working on now?

There was no way in which I could resort to NGOS though I had all the skills to do so. Can never see any price tag put to the labour based on deep commitment and dreams of a brave new world. So I had to work doubly hard like many others around me. I started providing editing services as well as training programs in language and writing skills in IT companies. It was not easy, then or now, irrespective of the fact that I am passionate about language too. But editing is an enabling skill as you put yourself out to refine someone else’s work. Also, it meant working closely with people, which is my main source of energy and sustenance.

If I can calibrate my life and commitments a bit more, I wish to write on the impact of the neoliberal agenda as it operates in India in areas other than that of the agrarian crisis. Like the urban poor or women fighting for their land and natural resources in the face of deepening capitalist assault. They face constant state repression too. These women struggling across the country do not figure in the mainstream women’s movement, feminist literature or certainly not in left literature. I hope I can write more in this vein.

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