

Neera Desai (1925-2009): Pioneer of Women's Studies in India

Thursday 16 July 2009, by [PATEL Vibhuti](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2009).

The front runner of Women's Studies in India and the creator of a model women's studies centre that combined the ethos of women's studies and women's movement at the SNDT University, Mumbai, Neera Desai passed away on 25 June.

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Neera Desai was born in 1925 to a middle class Gujarati family that ardently supported the freedom movement. As a schoolgirl, along with Mandakini (later on Kunnikal Narayan) and Usha Mehta (who started an underground radio for the freedom movement called, "Voice of India") she actively worked for the Monkey Brigade formed by Mahatma Gandhi. Later on, as a college student at the time of the Quit India movement in 1942, Neeraben, as she came to be known, was arrested several times. She completed her postgraduation studies immediately after India gained independence (she had turned to Socialist ideas by then) and her doctoral thesis in Sociology touched economic, anthropological and historical dimensions of women's role in India. This interdisciplinary work was published in a book called *Woman in Modern India* in 1952. It was welcomed by critics as a seminal contribution

that provided historical understanding on the status of Indian women from the Vedic period to the early years of independent India. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in the foreword to this book, labelled her analysis as “feminist”. What she observed in the early 1950s was validated by the women’s rights movement in the 1970s onwards. She was much ahead of her time.

Desai joined the SNDT Women’s University in the late 1950s and served on several decisionmaking bodies as professor and head of the postgraduate department of sociology, as founder director of the Post Graduate Studies and Research Centre for Women’s Studies and the Centre for Rural Development till she retired in 1984. She also offered her valuable services several times as officiating vice chancellor during 197084.

At SNDT, she will always be remembered as a very warm, kind and empathetic individual, who was humble even when she was at the peak of her career.

Her research on the Bhakti movement of the 12th century and the social reform movement of the 19th century inspired many young scholars to examine the liberative aspects of their writings, debates, poetry, symbolisms and varied art forms. Desai played a crucial role in the *Towards Equality Report* of 1974; the *Shram Shakti Report* of 1988 and the *National Perspective Plan for Women*, 19882000.

She coauthored a book, *Women and Society in India* (1988) with Maithreyi Krishnaraj that helped institutionalise women’s studies in academia by providing a benchmark for curriculum development and textbook writing for teaching women’s studies courses in sociology, economics, political science, languages and foundation course. She collaborated with Usha Thakkar to bring out another popular

book *Women in Indian Society* published by the National Book Trust, India, New Delhi on the occasion of Women's Empowerment Year, 2001.

During the 1990s, she took up the task of preparing the profiles of 100 feminists from western India by using the qualitative method of research. It took her 17 years to complete this stupendous work and as a result, a solid volume emerged in the form of *Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives* which was published by Sound and Picture Archives for Research On Women (SPARROW) in 2007. Her research and writings in English and Gujarati reflect a deep concern for issues related to gender and power, and an effort to understand the social constructions of feminist ideology. She collaborated with young scholars to produce training manuals for poor rural women and women's studies series in Gujarati. She was a friend, philosopher and guide for Veena Poonacha (director, Research Centre for Women's Studies) and Divya Pande of SPARROW who are currently making important contributions to women's studies. Neeraben always admired the commitment of C S Lakshmi (director, SPARROW) to feminism and her writings in Tamil.

Solidarity with Social Movements

Neera Desai always looked upon herself as a fellow traveller of all progressive, secular, democratic and people's movements. She always walked the talk and lent her support for campaigns to release political prisoners and to oppose draconian laws that repressed the democratic rights. She supported the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Kashtakari Sangathana and women's rights groups in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Delhi, Vadodara, Valsad, and Ahmedabad. She loved the songs of the revolutionary poetsinger Gaddar and never missed an opportunity to attend a public meeting where he would be singing

whether in Surat or in Mumbai. In academic meetings or conferences if anyone tried to trivialise any of the concerns of any people's movement, an otherwise polite Neeraben would stand up and make a sharp rebuttal. One never heard her grumble about facilities or ask for comforts when she attended workshops of women's rights groups held in spartan surroundings and on shoestring budgets. Wherever she was, she would attend 8 March (International Women's Day) rallies held by the united front of women's organisations without fail.

Activists from the movements for rights of women, tribals, dalits, and the working class could always look forward to a warm welcome, gracious smiles, food and moral support from her.

Institution Builder

The Research Unit on Women's Studies (that she set up in 1974) became the model and inspiration for other such centres and the University Grants Commission considered it a model to be emulated. In 1990, she supported the efforts to establish SPARROW and was one of the mainstays of the India Centre for Human Rights and Law in Mumbai, and the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS, Delhi). She was closely associated with feminist groups such as Vacha (Mumbai), Astitva (Valsad) and Sahiyar (Vadodara). During the 1990s, she was on the advisory board of the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (Mumbai) in its formative years.

Desai was one of the founding members of the Indian Association for Women's Studies, the Gujarat Association of Women's Studies and the Maharashtra Association of Women's Studies. In 1981, under her leadership, the first national conference on women's studies was organised that set the tone by networking among academicians, researchers, teachers,

students, administrators, policymakers and political activists for women's causes. Everyone was touched by her simplicity, hard work and spirit of voluntarism. Those who had the opportunity to work with her closely found that she was a source of immense knowledge, warmth, understanding, depth, guidance and dependability. She bonded very well with Veena Mazumdar, Kumud Sharma and Latika Sarkar from CWDS.

Mary John, director of the CWDS says, *"Isn't it interesting that she is one of the very few women of her generation who openly called herself a feminist (way back in 1952) and also made it the theme of her reflections - there is an early article in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies and her book of interviews that came out very recently."*

Neeraben occupied a unique position in institutional and individual memory because she did not only build institutions; she also built feminists and women's studies scholars.

'The Personal Is Political'

In Vadodara, I used to attend a study circle conducted by A R Desai on Marxism in the early 1970s, during the Diwali and summer vacations and was introduced to his wife, Neera in 1972. We invited her to our students' organisation Study and Struggle Alliance. She spoke to us about the Committee on the Status of Women in India of which she was one of the members. When *Towards Equality Report* came out in 1974, she conducted the study circle on the findings of the report. Till then the younger generation of women's activists had read the writings of only western feminists such as Eveleen Reed, Mary Alice Waters, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan and Simon de Beauvoir. She was happy that I had translated several essays of Reed's book *Problems of Women's Liberation* into Gujarati.

When life became difficult for me in Vadodara due to my marriage with my comrade who happened to be a Muslim R Desai suggested that I should move to Mumbai. I boarded the train to Mumbai with him and came to his house. Both Neeraben and their son Mihir welcomed me, introduced me to Mumbai, guided me, drew maps to negotiate the different suburbs of Mumbai and explained the intricacies of the suburban railway system. I stayed with them for a week and emerged as a wellinformed Mumbaikar.

Neeraben's house was my second home in times of illhealth, ups and downs in life and for emotional support. The intellectually and politically charged environment, the family's interest in music, art, poetry, songs, vegetarian cuisine, and tolerance towards ideological differences served as a tonic for a young political activist like me.

It was in 1979, when I went to see her with Madhu Kishwar, armed with the first issue of *Manushi*, she confronted us sharply. In the reading list published therein, we had mentioned Altekar, M N Srinivas and all those who had published books on women but her book *Women in Modern India* was not mentioned due to our ignorance about it. We had an animated debate on "Women's Question" and "Trends in Feminism". She gave us a copy of her book. After reading it, my relationship with her took an 180 degree turn. From a sympathiser of the left movement, she became a fellow feminist.

Our most productive years were during the 1980s. We worked together for an alternate country report: *Response from Women's Movement for the End of the Decade Conference in Nairobi, 1985*, the *Indian Women: Change and Challenge*, status report for the Indian Council of Social Science Research, *Critical Evaluation of Women's Studies Researches in the*

Post Independence Period (1988), the Gujarati version of the *Shramshakti Report* (1989) the publication of the feminist quarterly in Gujarati (1988-2002) and case studies for *Feminism in Western India* sponsored by the CWDS (Delhi).

Neeraben as Mentor

She taught the younger generation of Indian feminists to get out of abstractions and generalisations and to examine our own reality and evolve the intellectual tools rooted in our society. She also convinced many women activists like Anuradha Shanbag, Flavia, Lata P M, Kalpana Kannabiran, Sonal Shukla, Trupti Shah, Shiraz Balsara and me that for an effective women's movement, we needed strong analytical skills and must orient our energies towards women's studies. To construct knowledge on women with women's sensitivities, sensibilities and women's prism, we needed five arms - *panch mahabhootas* - teaching, training, documentation, research and action. Young women activists and researchers named her the "mother of women's studies" as she was always available to four generations of women with her wisdom, intellect, information, advice and vast experience. What we liked was the relationship of mutual respect; she never preached. With her there was a rapport based on equality.

The bonding with her enjoyed by the younger generation of feminists is expressed aptly by Kalpana Kannabiran,

"In Neeraben's passing away we in the women's movement and in women's studies have lost a mentor, a generous and caring teacher and a friend and confidante who shared her time and ideas willingly, and offered unstinting support - personal, professional and political to entire generations of activists/scholars. Several of us, especially those of us who began our journey in women's studies

in India in the very early 1980s benefited enormously from her presence, her generosity and her guidance over two decades. At a time when women's studies was struggling for recognition, she gently prodded young scholars along, teaching them and helping them build the courage and resolve to commit themselves to this field - and she succeeded through the art of persuasion which was her greatest strength. But of course she had already long long before walked that path, virtually alone, convinced that women's studies had a political role to fulfil in the postindependence academic scene in India. The two of them - Prof A R and Neeraben were together and individually visionaries of women's liberation in independent India."

Last Days

On 3 April 2008, Neeraben along with five outstanding women who have contributed immensely to Women's Studies in India was felicitated by the Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The centre had also prepared panels on each of them, capturing rare pictures profiling the women's contribution and milestones in their lives. She had health problems and looked pale but, as always, she spoke with stoic conviction on theoretical issues, research methodologies and epistemological challenges faced by women's studies in the 21st century.

The last six months were painful for her due to the cancer spreading all over her body. But whenever we visited her she never discussed her discomfort, showing us instead her translations of feminist writings from different parts of India into Gujarati, discussing novels, films, poems and music. She would converse on a wide range of issues from identity politics to the film *Parzania* made by her nephew, Rahul Dholakia. She shared a beautiful intellectual and emotional relationship with

her son, Mihir Desai, a human rights activist lawyer and his feminist companion, Sandhya Gokhale.

A fitting tribute to Neera Desai, who was among those nominated for the “1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize”, would be to take women’s studies to newer heights in terms of its epistemological growth and construction of a new body of knowledge for strengthening transformatory processes for better quality of life not only for women but for all humanity. She always said that the women’s liberation cannot come about without liberation of humankind and vice versa. Neeraben, we will always celebrate your spirit!

P.S.

* From Economic & Political Weekly EPW July 11, 2009 vol XLIV no 28 11 (Commentary).

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