

---

## Book Reviews

Social Change

50(4) 618–626, 2020

© CSD 2020

Reprints and permissions:

[in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india](http://in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india)

DOI: 10.1177/0049085720958766

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sch](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/sch)



VASANTH KANNABIRAN, *Taken at the Flood: A Memoir of a Political Life*. Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2020, vi + pp., 174, ₹375, ISBN 978-93-85606-26-7 (*Paperback*).

Typically, the memoirs of Indian feminists and women's rights activists have succeeded in vividly capturing and analysing the role of the pioneers—those who challenged the status quo—in the women's movement in a whole host of books such as those by Neera Desai (2006), Vina Mazumdar (2008) and feminist author-publisher, Ritu Menon (2011). Feminist policymaker and founder of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, Mazumdar (2008) in her autobiography outlined in detail her active involvement in both the development of women's studies in India and the women's movement. The edited volume by feminist scholar Devaki Jain and alliance-builder Pam Rajput (2003), *Narratives from the Women's Studies Family: Recreating Knowledge* profiled the travails as well as the pathbreaking contributions of women's studies centres in academic institutions and in autonomous centres and their role in the women's rights movement. This particular memoir of Vasanth Kannabiran, a feminist, activist and scholar who has made groundbreaking contributions to the women's rights movement gives us a front row seat to an inspiring, lifelong journey contouring one person's commitment to fight for equality and justice and the difference it can make. The volume is an invaluable addition to a rich legacy as it captures the personal life of a feminist and her response to unfolding political processes.

The book begins with the proceedings of the Mukhtadar Commission Inquiry looking into the famous Rameeza Bee gang rape case of 1978 in Hyderabad and Kannabiran's complete disenchantment with the misogynist response which she says was a 'systemic, deliberate, serial rape' (p. 1). Activists who have been campaigning against sexual violence will agree with the author that things have not changed from the Mathura rape case (1972) to the gang rape of Jyoti Singh (2012), and the daily sexual assaults on dalit, tribal and Muslim women continue unabated. Through her lively accounts Kannabiran brings to her readers personal memories of the progressive movements in India starting from the 1970s and the challenges faced by social movements which represented the interests of the urban and rural people living in poverty, forest dwellers, dalits and tribal communities, informal sector workers, populations displaced by mega-projects against a background marked by cultural nationalism, majoritarianism and sectarian vested interests—all escalated by the hegemonic presence of neoliberalism.

---

Vasanth Kannabiran entered into public life during the volatile years of the Emergency, 1975–1977. That period was marked by detention without trial for a large number of political activists, news censorship, telephone tapping, interception of letters, trespassing into private premises without legal sanction and constitutional amendments that curtailed basic rights to life and freedom in the name of national security and violation of civil liberties. The author, like hundreds and thousands of others during the post-Emergency period, simply joined in the fight: she addressed massive rallies to protest against the anti-democratic acts of the government, playing a pivotal role in shaping public opinion to safeguard Indian democracy. When the Emergency was lifted in 1977, horror stories of custodial violence and barbaric acts of torture in the police custody and prisons started appearing in mainstream newspapers. Bright young men and women opted for investigative journalism as a career. Newly formed civil liberties and democratic rights groups started publishing their own newsletters and journals in English, Hindi and several regional languages. Along with her husband, the legendary human rights activist, K. G. Kannabiran (KGK), Kannabiran too became active in the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) in Hyderabad.

During the 1980s, those who were concerned only about democracy in a formal sense confined themselves to ‘civil liberties movements’, while others like Kannabiran became involved with organisations, working tirelessly against repression of workers, the people living in poverty, peasants, dalits, women, tribal people and actively supporting truly ‘democratic rights movements’. For instance, the nationwide anti-rape movement in 1980 saw a phase of coordinated activism. It brought Kannabiran closer to newly formed feminist organisations in Chennai, Bengaluru, Goa, Mumbai and Delhi as well as rural women’s liberation movements in small towns, peri-urban places and in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Fluent in Tamil, Kannada and Telugu, she easily established a rapport with women from all socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At the same time, she was equally at ease with women’s studies scholars and participated in conferences like the Indian Association for Women’s Studies.

Along with her daughter, feminist-activist and scholar Kalpana, Kannabiran established the Asmita Resource Centre for Women that provided intense training, mobilising both men and women to propagate ideas of equality, justice and resistance against oppression and exploitation, violence and domination. Throughout the book, Kannabiran details the empowering work of Asmita in various gender campaigns. One of them was the anti-arrack movement spearheaded by toiling poor women who, unknowingly, in this struggle reiterated the feminist’s clarion call—‘The personal is the political’: that is, there is a connection between the personal experiences of rural and urban women of Andhra Pradesh and the socio-political structures that provided the material basis for subordination, subjugation and brutalisation of women.

There were many other engagements. The author recalls fondly the memories of her involvement in the formation of the National Alliance of Women’s Organisations, a collective of more than 1,500 organisations and individuals working across India to attain gender justice and gender equality. Her association with the rural outreach

and documentation projects involved her in the training of numerous women elected representatives in the rural and urban local self-government bodies who entered public life because of 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Her commitment made her focus on the needs and demands of HIV+ people; help women who had been displaced by man-made or natural disasters such as the tsunami and raise awareness for the need to bring in inclusive policies for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community.

Of the left-of-centre persuasion, nevertheless, Kannabiran in her book is candid. The public intellectual in her does not mince words in critiquing the gender perspective of the Left which she feels has not completely addressed questions of inequality, discrimination and diversity in every sphere of a woman's work. The author's life experiences convince us that the day-to-day struggles against gender-based discrimination and violence demand immediate action; gender concerns cannot be postponed. As she rightly says: 'There's no women's liberation without a revolution for the liberation of humankind from this exploitative social order and there is no revolution can be successful without the active contribution of women.'

Assorted writings and publications have also emerged from her multifaceted activities. Along with K. Lalita, Rama Malkote, Uma Maheshwari, Susie Tharu and Veena Shatrugna, Kannabiran also made a pioneering contribution for documenting the oral history of women activists of the Telangana movement. Zed Books, UK published the research report of this collective in a book titled, *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle*. Her other books include, *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India* co-authored with her daughter and published by Kali for Women in 2003. Along with Olga, who goes only by her first name, and Kalpana she co-authored several publications in Telugu: one an anthology of feminist writings, another on political theory so that the students of women's studies as well as interested readers could access the latest ideological discourses. A popular columnist in English and Telugu newspapers, she has used the gender lens in all her articles and brought out a secular-humanist perspective to understand unfolding issues.

The creative side of Kannabiran is more than evident. Staged in women's gatherings and feminist drama festivals, she has produced a number of plays on mythological characters such as Menaka, Shakuntala, Ahalya and Gandhari, unpacking the concept of *agni pariksha* (trial by fire) by Sita by bringing out sharply the double standards of sexual morality, making a scathing indictment on patriarchal control over women's sexuality, fertility and labour. In her play, *Rajsinha*, she focussed on property and women being treated as property. The author, as the reader learns, is also proud of her oratory skills and justifiably so.

Vasanth Kannabiran's indefatigable work has not gone unrecognised. Her efforts at peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building in Hyderabad at the time of raging communal riots show us the courage of her conviction. She became front-and-centre in the minds of many women. She was one of the 1,000 women proposed for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize by the international feminist movement.

This memoir by Kannabiran is invaluable for all those who want to learn about a feminist-activist who believes that women's needs and concerns need to be

addressed and women's voices need to be both heard and valued that there cannot be peace without justice. Hence it behoves all to strive for the larger concerns of social-economic-environmental-distributive-gender justice by combining a feminist vision and praxis at all levels.

## References

- Desai, N. (Ed). (2006). *Feminism as experience*. SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women).
- Jain, D., & Rajput, P. (Ed). (2003). *Narratives from the women's studies family: Recreating knowledge*. SAGE Publications.
- Mazumdar, V. (2008). *Memories of a rolling stone*. Zubaan.
- Menon, R. (Ed). (2011). *Making a difference: Memoirs from the women's movement in India*. Women Unlimited.

**Vibhuti Patel**

TISS, Mumbai, India  
vibhuti.np@gmail.com

WENDY DONIGER, *Beyond Dharma, Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2018, 226 pp. + xiv., ₹599. ISBN 978-93-87693-21-0 (*Paperback*).

DOI: 10.1177/0049085720964279

Wendy Doniger is a distinguished Indologist who was in the public eye in 2014 for a lawsuit against her book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* which was subsequently withdrawn from the Indian market by the local publisher. However, 20 months later it has returned; this time released by a new publisher. The same publisher has now published her latest title, *Beyond Dharma, Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics*, an eminently readable book that looks at currents of dissent in the Indian tradition.

Those who examine a tradition (or a body of thought) from the outside might get the impression of homogeneity and consensus, but an insider's perspective might make one aware of the presence of counter currents, rejoinders, antitheses and subversion of dominant discourses. Also delving deeper one finds dialectics of differential thoughts—prevailing paradigms and their critics sometimes enter into a sort of rapprochement, establishing an uneasy calm, a truce which is ephemeral with one school of dissent replacing the other. The dynamism of this intellectual thought is all-pervasive which Doniger's book substantiates persuasively in this volume.

Generally in an Indological work, time is a frozen asset. An attempt to examine contemporary India, her institutions and thoughts against the backdrop of insights gathered from a study of the vast corpus of ancient literature is difficult to make. The periodisation of Indian history into ancient, mediaeval and modern classifications often gives the impression that these are iron-clad categories and specialisation in one period precluding one from delving into another. This view