



Meena Kandasamy

11/17/18

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CTM: Today we're talking to Meena Kandasamy. Welcome, Meena.

MK: Thank you for having me.

CTM: It's wonderful to meet you. It's really wonderful to meet you. And this is New York City, and today's the 17th of November.

LEC: 2018.

CTM: 2018, that's right. 2018. So Meena, we really want to begin by asking you to talk a little bit about what brought you to the kind of writing and activism that you've been involved with from a very young age in fact, in India, right? So however you want to tell the stories...

MK: Thank you for this kind of question that lets me talk. I was born in '84... as a Tamil woman. And I want to specifically single this out when we talk about India, because I think the Tamil case is a very different case. The Indian army was occupying the Tamil-speaking parts of Sri Lanka in the early 80s, and it caused a big backlash within the Tamil community. Because our army was doing the worst kind of atrocities, and as Tamil people, we were supporting the liberation struggle in the neighboring island. So if you were growing up in the early 80s... my parents were by default involved in the Tamil struggle. They were sympathizers of the movement; they used to host refugee students at home. There was this continuous atmosphere - right at a very young age - of a house being a public space. In one sense, we actually saw how all of this played out, because I'm too young to remember about, let's say, early 80s, but I really remember for instance when Rajiv Gandhi got assassinated in 1991. Tamil people - at least a section of them who were pro-militant - were obviously sure that it was a strategic mistake but they knew where it was coming from. They knew where the struggle was taking them. I think all of this was

Feminist Freedom Warriors

Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in conversation with
Meena Kandasamy

obviously very important to articulate, to question what “Indian” is? Stuff like that. So early militancy, and also the fact that Tamil militants also used women, and there was the idea of women suicide bomber, the female fighter. All of that also was quite empowering in a sense because when you’re Tamil, you’re living in like, “Oh, there’s all of these things that are required of Tamil people”, Tamil girls especially. They call them, “*Accham, madam, naanam*”, which is like, “She should be shameful, she should be shy, she should be modest” and stuff like this. On the other hand, you have Tamil women with AK-47s... [*Laughter*] So obviously you get a different inspirational standard. I think this was quite interesting in the early shaping of identity, essentially knowing that you are an outsider even in the culture that you belong to or subscribe to, which is the larger Indian identity.

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And the second thing is because both my parents happened to be academics, and my mom and father moved from the, let’s say, more politically progressive space of Madras University... my mom started teaching at the IIT campus, and she was one of the very few ‘backward-caste’ women working within the sciences. Which we know is largely, largely male-dominated but also a certain type of male, which would be the Brahmin male, which in the Indian hierarchy is the highest caste. So when you’re not one of ‘them’ in terms of caste or in terms of gender, therefore you really face ‘up front’ all of this discrimination about who is intelligent, who is not. She started at the time articulating or fighting for the rights of the reservation policy, which is more like what you would call in this country “affirmative action” or “positive discrimination”. These struggles were taking up my mom’s time and energy, because she filed litigation I think in the mid-90s, and finally, after 20 years, she won her case. But it was a long legal struggle. And I remember as a 12-year old, accompanying my father to meet these lawyers, because my mother was teaching. She was the breadwinner for the family, so I and my father would be deputed to do the legal case. My father was Tamil; he’s a first-generation learner to go into university. He comes from a nomadic tribe, and their traditional occupation is doing witch-doctoring and faith-healing, and on the side ... even the caste name is a slur word that means “beggar”, because they also used to subsist by begging. So he obviously comes from this very marginalized caste; he doesn’t speak English. So I used to be the one communicating.

It’s another thing about India, where even if we have so much cultural heritage of languages, all of our legal procedures still take place in the colonial language. At a very young age, I was really aware of what was going on about caste things, what it means to be in the academy, about what my mom was fighting for, which was recognition. Today, there’s so much talk about Dalit representation, representation of students, and all of these campuses are becoming hotbeds of campus politics. But I remember in the early 2000s, [my mom] took a student from the Dalit community,

and he happened to be the first Dalit student to enter the department of mathematics at IIT. That's how even after independence - sixty, fifty years - there were such bastions that did not allow inclusion, did not allow the marginalized people to just enter. So this was the struggle.

So I knew when I finished school, and this was a conscious decision for me, I would not enter the academia, because I saw that this system was killing the two people whom I loved the most. One was my father; the other was my mother. All of their energies were just going into fighting it. And I thought as much as that struggle is very important, because of course it is important, I thought it was not the basic problem of society. The basic problem was that caste existed as a system, that caste was in people's minds, telling somebody that they're superior, or somebody else that they're inferior. Until you work on this, you can only make progressive, small changes. I just wanted to work on the caste system itself and try to ... this was also the time Dalit politics was getting intensified, so this is what drew me into, as you say, a kind of activism very early, like, after I finished school.

LEC: And what was that exactly?

MK: So one of the things was in my last year around school, there was this international conference, the World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban in 2001. It was an interesting time because a lot of Dalit groups from India were going. Everybody wanted to prepare pamphlets and stuff like that, because a friend of a friend asked me, "Oh, you should write a pamphlet on the education system!" So I started working with a few NGO groups. And around that time, there was an NGO called the Dalit Media Network, and they were saying, "Oh, we look to launch an English language magazine on Dalit issues, so would you come and work with us?" I had no qualifications; I could just write English and I was just out of school, but I was willing to work and willing to devote my time to them. So I was quite happy with what I was capable of bringing.

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MK: And also, it was around the time I started working for this organization... because they were running for about 10 years - until that point - a Tamil magazine, which was documenting Dalit atrocities, which was talking about Dalit things on the field, about state repression, about Dalit missionaries. So they were bringing in all of these questions, and they thought it's important to branch out and to get something done in English. Because of course, as much as we [Dalits] are really proud Tamil people, Dalit is a pan-Indian phenomenon, so we had to really address other people. So yeah, that's when I started working for them, about 2002. And naturally, there are limits to working within NGOs, I realized that quite early-on. I mean, I think when you are young, you may not truly be mature enough, but also the immaturity and the

fact that you want to act quickly also makes you really very intuitive, and so you know things are not working or are not working the way you think they should be. So I was gravitating more towards political movements because I realized the NGO structure would challenge some things but up to a point, not beyond a point. We were printing all the magazines, but we were not filling the forms to send them out? So it was all a question of funding, a question of sponsorship, a question of how political you could be, and it was also the year of the Gujarat Riots in 2002. But also the funding for the NGO came from the DanChurchAid, which is a Danish church organization. So we could not even forefront the issue of Muslims, because it was post-9/11, so there was huge Islamophobia, and our funders were not happy. So you have all of this playing out. You're living in a country where this almost-genocidal killing of Muslims on the one hand, and on the other hand, you're representing Dalit people, and on the other hand, a foreign Christian donor has issues with it. And then you're like, "Oh, we're caught inside somebody else's problem," so you want to do something much more autonomous instead of being a tool for someone.

And that's when I got involved with the Dalit Panthers, and again, when I got involved, it was quite interesting. Because I was really drawn to their politics, and part of me was thinking, "There's so much interesting things being said, but all of this is still being said in Tamil. How does it reach people like me who were primarily English language users?" Which is why I became a translator.

CTM: So you did a lot of translation in the Dalit Panthers?

MK: Yes. It is quite interesting because I did two books of translation to begin with, which was the works of the Dalit Panthers, largely essays and speeches. At the time, the kind of Dalit literature, it was still beginning to get published - so I was in a sense lucky to come at the time - so you had Stree-Samya which was located in Kolkata, they were publishing Kancha Illaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, there was some Dalit autobiographies getting published, Bama's *Karukku* was published around the same time, as Sivakami's work was published. So when this work was getting published, we also could have the opportunity to say, "Okay, Dalit people are all creating literature, but they're also creating political commentary, and what they say is not just about Dalit lives, it's also about Palestinian lives. They're talking about Kashmir, they're talking about issues around the world, seeing how all these other frameworks like imperialism or American domination, all of this, is affecting everyday life." So it was quite interesting to get engaged with this and to get it published.

And also when I had worked in the NGO but as well when I was with the Dalit Panthers, I met a lot of feminist Dalit women like Ruth Manorama. I had to interview her for the magazine, and she was really outspoken. She was bringing this entire Dalit perspective into the Indian feminist movement, and I was still at the stage where I was reading a lot and learning a lot, but I learnt from her what it means to talk about

feminism from the margins. Because she was clearly telling me that in a large Indian feminist meeting, she becomes the person who has to talk about Dalit rights and they would ghettoize her. She's like, "Oh, but they would not let me talk about global warming or nuclearization or something, so I become the token person." She was very aware of how everything was acting. As much as one has to push Dalit issues, she was sure it was denying her the opportunity to be a face of the larger feminism movement. There was this marginalization. So I was learning a lot I think, and that's where it led me. But even at that point, I hadn't started writing any of my own work, because I was working. But when you're on the field and you're seeing things... and not everything can be translated, not everything can be written like a news report. There are things I was writing very personally for myself, because these were things... at 17, 18... still, so emotional, isn't it? So I was writing poetry but not showing it to anyone, because it was so much of anger and not knowing what to do.

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And also what I was consuming! Because you know, you're reading the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton as a young person; at the same time, you're doing this. So how do you bring these two worlds together? I think my own writing started as a result of some of this, so that's how it eventually worked, yeah.

LEC: That's exciting, yeah? That's exciting, because that's a deeply-grounded education with the kind of reading and translating and learning the theorization and praxis at the same time. Everything happening, and you're so young, and you're really active in this movement.

MK: Yeah, but... thank you, but I also think that when you're young, you don't think as much?

CTM: No, I know. You push forward and you don't think about the consequences. You take risks!

MK: You just give it your all, and I think I was lucky that it happened at the time? Because now I'm the mother of a child, expecting another. Would I be willing to just throw everything and just... You don't have the comfort. I really think when you're young, you can invest yourself so much, and you have so much more to give.

CTM: Right.

LEC: And you're not processing at the same time.

MK: Yeah.

LEC: The problems have been... involving any kind of social movement work, you're just *doing*, and there's an excitement that's driving you. And that's what I meant.

MK: Yeah, and you learn later. You take your life lessons later, much later.

CTM: And so you think your entry into feminism was through the Panthers and then through Manorama and people like that?

MK: I think... No, entry into feminism was-

CTM: Or was it more personal?

MK: I think it was a combination of many things. One was within the Tamil nationalist framework. Even the Dalit Panthers, for instance, in Tamil Nadu are hugely supportive of the Liberation Tigers. So on the one hand, what does it mean to be a Tamil woman? And what does it mean to fight for your people? This was a different paradigm we were talking about. Now you have the idea of the woman militant, or the woman who fights for her people, something really inspirational for a lot of us. Because we were also not processing violence as violence, but violence as counter-violence, counter-hegemonic violence, as violence against the state, which is violent against all of this. So on the one hand, I think this really made us not necessarily feminist but at least a belief in the fact that women could change the lives of the very powerful. People are going to listen to them, and why was all of this happening? Because the Indian army had raped about so many, many, many thousands of women in the northeast, and this was so much anger, just rejecting the idea of India.

So I think some of it came from that, some of it came from the Dalit movement also. Because we would witness firsthand the consequences of, let's say, caste into women marrying Dalit men and the way in which they would get killed, there would be honor killings. I personally come from an inter-caste background; my mother belongs to a Shudhra, 'backward' caste, and my father belongs to this nomadic tribe. You know what it is to negotiate this kind of space? If you're the child of an inter-caste couple, obviously your parents don't have any caste affiliations after they go into this space. So what does it mean to be the child of such a union? You understand it's such a caste-turbulent society, so how do your parents teach you to pass? Pass as what? Under what circumstances? It becomes part of your everyday. But also seeing my mother fight against this institution, or seeing the fact that she was the breadwinner in my family... you're drawn to it, this strong woman character. And then you're reading literature, and obviously Kamala Das speaks to you, because she's writing about the body, and Sexton speaks to you, and then you read Toni Morrison, she speaks to you. I was reading a lot of very powerful women writers on the one hand, and of course

being in a very masculine space, which is the Tamil Nationalist or Dalit liberation thing. And yeah, you're trying to process these two worlds at the same time.

LEC: That's incredible. Tell us about your work over the last couple decades. We can't say too many, because you are very young... [Laughter]. And how you see that work in the context of larger struggles today.

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MK: Some of my poetry, at least the early poetry, was a lot about the issues of caste. And that was in the collection called *Touch*. I was writing a lot of these angry poems. And you know, people said, "All teenagers write poetry." But for me, what I wrote first was not love poetry. That came much, much later. Because I was still trying to find a place to put my anger and to come to terms with what was going on. At some point also, I was very inspired with trying to - this is where my second book comes from, which is *Ms. Militancy* - to try to take the myths of Hindu religion and Tamil mythology and put them in a feminist framework. I think there was a very consciously feminist work that I was doing, and I think this happened in about 2008, 2009. I think I would call that my early feminist work, because I was literally trying to find some origin myths or popular myths in the epic of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata but also within the Tamil culture, the story of Kannagi, who thinks her husband is unfairly killed by the king, so she goes and confronts the king. Then she plucks her breast and throws it at the city of Madurai and curses the whole kingdom to burn. She's literally a very central figurehead of Tamil identity, and for me, everybody says she's such a great wife, because she burned the city for her husband. But I think she's a very great militant because she fights against the state. So how do you look at a state? Do you look at her as the wife? Or do you look at her as a fighter? So it was very cultural. For me, at least, my first feminist work that was only on the question of women and what it means to be Tamil and Hindu and Dalit and all of this. Caught in a lot of these cross-webs of identity at once. So that's my poetry book.

And I think when I was working with the Dalit Panthers... but also the fact that my father comes from this village in Tanjore, which is the 'Rice Bowl' of India, where all of the rice cultivation takes place. He comes from a landless family, and he grew up in an orphanage. Constantly, you'd hear these stories of what the feudal landlords were doing and how people were fighting against it, how the communists were fighting for it, and that's when I heard the first story of Kilvenmani. And I wrote about it in my first fictional novel, where the landless laborers of a small village - and all of the laborers are Dalit - are fighting for higher wages. And the higher wages are not even anything exorbitant. They are being paid five cups of rice, and they are asking for the sixth cup, the sixth measure of rice. And then the landlord says, "But how dare you ask for more? How dare you question us? How dare you go on strike? How dare you mobilize under the red flag?"

So on Christmas Day, 1968, 44 people in this village are burnt to death. Then the village fights for justice. But years later, in 1980, early 1970s, the High Court gives a judgement that these landlords were gentlemen landlords, that they owned a car, that they owned a lot of land. It's impossible to think that these landlords could have killed the people, and so none of the landlords go to jail. So it comes back to the people to fight for themselves. It comes back to the community, more so the Naxalite movement to make interventions and to seek the people's justice. For me, the story is very resonant because of where my father is from, but also because it shows that the system is going to go in the way of the powerful. It is not going to be there for the people who are asking for the bare minimum for survival, so that was what the first novel was about.

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And then I wrote a second novel, which ideally should never have been written because ideally this kind of thing should never happen. Which is, 'a woman gets beaten up, gets into a bad marriage'. But it happened to me, and it's quite interesting to think about it because if anybody asks me and told me about stories of women who get beaten up or stories of women in the kitchen, I'd have been like, "Oh, that's such a boring kitchen-set drama", you know? [*Laughter.*] I would have been so dismissive with myself because for me, I grew up around strong women, so just to understand that ... and I would have thought, "Oh, but it belongs to some other person's story." But the idea is that arrogance, this idea that it cannot happen to you, can be shattered like that. [*Snaps fingers.*] Because we make one error of judgement, we happen to trust the wrong person, you know? And then you are the victim you thought you'd never be. For me, it became like a wake-up call to write about it. You know, once you're a writer, you're also making a lot of choices politically, because you're thinking, "Only male writers are writing politics." And women, we're always being forced to write about the domestic sphere, the interior sphere, only our own feelings. So you just want to be like a woman but you want to go out there and write about politics or take up the big questions. Then you realize, this domestic sphere, which you think is feminine, is also a 'where' that can actually break you. And I knew that I had to write about the politics of violence here, because this is the same violence that's there on the street.

CTM: And the state power...

LEC: All the connections, politically ...

CTM: ... are really key.

MK: So that's how the second book came about. That's where I am now. I've written more than that. [*Laughs*].

CTM: How have people responded to some of the work and some of the writing? What's your sense?

MK: I think it's quite interesting, because you know I write in English, and it's also a very strange place to be in India, to write in English. Because when my poetry book, for instance, the first book *Touch*, got translated into Malayalam. The BJP was burning copies of it, and the Congress was also burning copies of it. And you had Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala basically say that I should not enter Kerala because I had insulted Gandhi. The minute the same book gets into the vernacular or the regional language, the political reaction to it is much more... I don't know. Morbid? But also close to the skin, because when your book is burnt, you do personally feel very violated. I think that would never happen just within an English context... or at least, just as I had thought that I can never be beaten by a man, this was another one of my naïve assumptions, that this kind of thing cannot happen in the English-speaking world. Because you assume that we are all sophisticated or that there's this level of tolerance or elitism that's gonna prevent this from happening.

So obviously then the reaction when it gets translated into 22 languages is one thing, but I did learn the hard way that English-speaking doesn't save you, you know? I happened to be at the University of Hyderabad; I was a visiting faculty there. And they had a beef festival. I just took part in it. All of us just went to get a plate of biryani, you know? The ABVP, the right-wing organization's student wing, was throwing stones, and then the police came, and they were putting tear gas. And then all of us who were participating in the festival to just eat beef, as we were trying to fight against Brahmanical imposition of food... we were packed into a police van and escorted safely out of campus. So I was one of those people who just left campus, along with the other students. I went home and I tweeted about it, saying that I was at this festival, and there had been stone-throwing, there had been tear gas, we'd been escorted into these police vans. And then these tweets started... all tweets in English! And they were saying, "Bloody bitch, she should be gang raped and telecasted live." They were saying there should be a *fatwa*. There were even U.S.-based academics who were right-wing supporters saying, "Get the carbolic acid ready." Then you realize there is literally nothing -

LEC: The violence.

MK: But then sometimes you think... are they saying it just to make you scared? Or do they really mean it? And the longer I have thought about it, I sometimes do think they really mean it. It's not something to just scare you away.

CTM: The cost of our words and the impact of them ... it's incredible.

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MK: It's not really what you anticipate.

CTM: And then on the other hand, there are those who'd read it and be completely empowered by it, which of course, you hear less of that than you hear of the right-wing response, probably.

MK: Yes. I think one of the things with the right wing also is how you're constantly having to navigate and respond to them more than you have to respond to others being supportive. Some of it just erodes at what you stand for. Or all of the accusations that they come up with ... so if you support the eating of beef, they're like, "Oh, she's a commie. She's a Naxal." Or they'll say, "Oh, she has a deal with McDonalds." So only in India you can be somebody who has a deal with McDonalds, and ... [*Laughter.*]

CTM: A deal with McDonalds and be a Naxal at the same ... [*Laughs.*]

MK: A commie-Naxal, yeah. Or they'll say, "This is a Pakistani plot. She's a *jihadi*." At the same time, they'll say, "She's sponsored by the Vatican."

[*Laughter.*]

LEC: The whole gambit!

MK: Yeah, the whole gambit. Literally, the conspiracy theories are just thrown at you.

CTM: Wow, okay. I think I'm just really curious about the kinds of interactions you've had with Indian feminist movements and projects. Just what are the spaces that you feel that ...

MK: Are feminist?

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: And if you've had support.

CTM: And if you've had support.

LEC: If you've found support in those feminist spaces.

CTM: Any feminist movements? Circles?

MK: I think I'm still in a place where I wouldn't know to call what a "movement", what is not a movement. But for instance, I think that individually I've been helped by a lot of women. Especially in India, we really had this culture of looking out for each other, especially senior feminists who really cheer your work, support you and help you grow to get to where you are. I don't think it would have been possible in any other framework, because one of the big selling points of patriarchy is to portray

women rivalry and shit like that? But I have seen the opposite of that. So when I was 18 or 17, and I submitted this book to Samya... my first publisher is Mandira Sen, who is Kolkata-based and feminist. And then I was constantly supported by and I still look up to Urvashi Butalia who runs Zubaan still very powerful. She published my first short story in Zubaan. But she was always espousing and supporting my work and also supporting the work of lot of Dalit writers. And I think the publishing industry in India is largely female-headed as well, so they wouldn't necessarily all call themselves feminist, but I know the publishers who always acquired my work and put it into print have been feminist.

I've also worked with Dalit publication or anti-caste publication like Navayana, who is run by Anand, this man, but has very feminist orientations. And I was a good friend of Sharmila Rege at the University of Pune, but she was articulating a lot about Dalit feminism and the need for putting that within academic discourse. So I like her work and I look up to her. In that sense, I felt very embraced by this. But also the fact that changes are also happening in a very micro-level. Because the number of women who put your book on the syllabus to teach, they've never met you before. They don't know anything; they just want to teach your text to their students. And I think this kind of thing - even if it's not marketing, it's not the way the publishing industry would reach to people - this small way ... young students are reading your work and responding to it. I think it's really phenomenal. I felt very welcome.

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For instance, when I got into this problem with the beef festival, I had the Network of Women in Media gave a statement in my support, and I felt like, "Yeah, I'm not alone." In that sense, there has been huge, huge levels of support. At the same time, it would be very naive if I say people don't have differences with you. So for instance, I remember being at some meeting and talking about violence and stuff, and some senior feminist would come and say, "Oh, but all of this is financial and it has economic basis," and ... [*Laughs*] not necessarily... Sometimes you have this theoretical difficulty. For instance, I would engage with people who are on the far-left, and I would have some disagreements, because the people on the far-left, they have a tendency to -

LEC: Hide the truth.

MK: Yeah, to not highlight feminist issues. So for instance, in Kerala, I was working with this group called the Sthree Kootayama, a women's collective that tries to have very left-wing orientation. But of course, the men are not going to accept that easily. The party hierarchy is going to ask, "She's a bourgeois feminist", are going to talk about this. So we have to reframe this and say, "No, no, feminism is everyone's issue. It's a working-class woman's issue. It's not like feminists are some entitled group of

people.” So having to constantly also navigate and to justify feminism ... and the need for feminism to justify itself is ... and it doesn’t happen only in India, it happens here, internationally. Women are talking about their rights, and it’s really constant, the way in which they have to say, “Oh, no, we are not bourgeois feminists.” The constant way in which the way you say ‘feminist’ becomes a petit bourgeois project. And then you have to tell them it involves everybody; it involves every aspect of your life. So yeah, I have had to deal with this kind of difference as well.

CTM: So do you have an idea of what it would take to sort of really build bridges between these different constituencies? Because we live in such different dangerous times, both in India and here, actually. We always talk about how parallel some of that is happening in Modi’s India is to Trump’s U.S. And that in the U.S., we could actually learn a lot from Modi’s India and from how people have responded to it, right? So the times when we are all called upon to both be very explicit in the politics that we have but also to really figure out how to build bridges and coalitions across a whole bunch...

LEC: Strategies... come up with strategies.

CTM: And come up with strategies.

MK: I think these are questions that one has to constantly think about because as much as you’re right and you’re producing this, it’s also like, what’s the direction you’re taking? I recently was responding to #MeToo and what was going on, and I think that when we say #MeToo - and there’s this whole lot of this, you know, women coming up with names and stuff like that - the left, how does it respond to it? Do they look at it as petty bourgeois feminism? Or do they look at it as a working-class thing? So until the strike at McDonald’s happened, and women workers were walking out, they could not realize it was literally all of the women who were talking about it. They really thought that, okay, they could restrain it to a middle-class phenomena, but it was not a middle-class phenomena. And then I was like—I want to take issues with the left, for instance because... on the one hand, they sneer at protests like #MeToo or universally where women participate by saying, “Oh, it’s a petty bourgeois woman’s concern.” On the other hand, the problem is that they never recognize when women are leading workers’ struggles.

LEC: That’s right. That’s right.

MK: They just skim over it! For instance, you had these huge protests in Bangalore couple of years ago, in which women garment workers went to the streets, brought the city to the stand-still, and got rights for all employees in India, in which the employer could not take away their provident fund, their savings for their lifetime, their pension benefits, all of this. And then they don’t say, “Oh, look at the female

militancy we have in the trade union!” Look at the amount in the unorganized workforce; they don’t look at female leadership there.

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Or for instance, Kerala is the bastion of trade union, male trade union movements, but the tree planters of Munnar decided to form their own organization. They called it the Pembalai Orimai and they were fighting for rights, because traditional trade unions were leaving them out. Nobody talks about this female leadership.

CTM: So familiar, huh?

MK: And it’s the same thing again for instance in Kerala. For hundreds of days, women held the protest called “the sitting protest”, because retail workers who were working in all of Kerala, were not allowed to sit during work hours. They had to stand there. Literally, there would be no provision for chairs. And in a situation like this, they led this protest and they won. The Labor Act actually made changes, saying workers can take toilet breaks, they should be allowed to sit. And this was a victory for everybody! But nobody talks about it when we are taking the lead. When women are taking the lead, they are not given credit by the trade unions, and when middle-class women are talking, they’re shutting them down. So where are you? Where are you on the question of women? I think to call up the left and say ...

CTM: You are actually reproducing patriarchy and misogyny and everything else! [Laughter.] It’s not that nobody on the left are not.

MK: In a very red, Lenin version, but it’s still that. And the second question that I want to come to is the question of neoliberalism. Because specifically for instance - especially because I’m from India - I’m following the news, and you see Anil Ambani and the way in which privatization is now a defensive sector. And he’s having all these arms deals going on. And you see another guy, who’s supported Modi, who’s basically his primary funder: Adani. And Adani’s interest is no longer just coal mines in India. He’s going to get the biggest loan the Indian nation has ever given to open coal mines in Australia, and that’s trapping on indigenous peoples, right? But also you know that now capital is not just Indian rich people. These capitalists are playing everywhere. Like, who is Indian? It’s not Indian money. What decision he makes there, what capitalism of Adani and Ambani... it’s global, isn’t it?

And I think our response to this capitalism has to be in that sense international as well, you know? We cannot not wake up to it. And then you realize there are especially Indian feminists ... what are we doing about these capitalists? How much are we fighting capitalism? Because on the one hand, it’s easy to ‘hashtag’ feminism, but also to actually call out these kind of people - because they have enormous power, especially enormous power in terms of silencing other people - we have to stop the

co-optation of feminism by these market forces. For instance, Vedanta, which is based in London but run by an Indian man again, was listed in London Stock Exchange until recently. And they're doing all these horrible coal mining projects, metal mining projects, in Orissa, in India's Red Corridor, Mao's Corridor. People are fighting against that. But Vedanta is very keen to talk about how disempowering women is... they want to use Priyanka Chopra as a bold ambassador too, you know? Or Tata, for instance. How does Tata pay its women plantation workers? And the same Tata, which has one-page advertisement on Jaagore, Waken. "Oh, women have to vote. Now you're empowered. Use your vote wisely."

CTM: And they fund scholarships for women in U.S. universities. I mean, it's ...

MK: So the whole idea of how they want to give a very feminist face to their work, and on the other hand, they have the most exploitative trade practices towards women and other people. I think we have to say to these people, "Oh, you have no right to be feminist." It's not our business to say who is feminist or not feminist, but I think that's like... what is feminist? And I think a feminist must stand for anti-capitalism, openly, because otherwise you run the risk of being co-opted yourself. Just if you leave that unsaid, I think you can be swallowed by these things. So in that sense I see parallels to both here and to Modi's India, because how much are we celebrating the skills and work-types of feminism? 'Ivanka Trump'-type of feminism. [*Laughter.*] Not calling out the capitalism, not saying, "No, cut this out. You are not a feminist," if it's just about ... And I think it's a very interesting place to be in. Because neoliberalism is not only money, it's also changing the way of our thinking. So we have to go back to language, we have to go back to exposing all of this.

[00:43:32]

LEC: Exposing is right. Because as I listen to you, there are two things that are very striking to me. Also because so many of us have been longtime leftists, activists, everything on the left. One, is the failings of the left, globally now. The left continues to fail to recognize that everywhere, its average worker is a woman of color. A working-class woman of color. It's the reason unions have failed in this country, you know? Because the racism inside of the unions, they were never willing to look at...

CTM: And they would always assume the worker was a male. A white male.

LEC: So the worker was white, blue-collar, male. That's been the racist kind of ...

CTM: Which is an interesting thing, to ask the same question in India.

LEC: In India, yeah. So this is what I'm saying, listening to you, I'm doing this thinking in my mind, and saying, "Okay, who is that worker in India?" So that's one, why the left has failed the workers in India. And the other is the feminist thinking.

What is that? And who are the feminists who are not ... I mean, many of them are 'leftists', right? Especially in India. Which I like and respect a lot, the feminist movement and its history. But those, in many cases, too haven't looked at the other side and the challenges of patriarchy that are absolutely necessary, so that we could come to some kind of sharing and understanding of what the left needs to do in terms of gender. In India, in terms of caste and class, in terms of gender, caste, and class. And that's why I think, Chandra, we talk all the time about the solidarities we can build and cross-border linkages, and those are the some of the obstacles.

CTM: Yeah. Because you have to have some fundamental agreements around feminist being antiracist, anticapitalist, antiimperialist.

MK: Anti-caste.

CTM: Caste! So if you don't have that, then it becomes ...

LEC: You have to have shared principles. Core principles that you really understand, that you work out from there. And that's missing. Here and there.

MK: I think one of the things, when it comes to this issue of trade unions, is again very interesting for me, because my partner at the moment is a Trotskyist who works full-time for his organization, and this is something that goes back and forth. We discuss a lot about it. I think that as much as the left believes that change has to happen through trade unions or only the working class's advance, capitalist countries can actually provide a counter to the kind of capitalism that we see today... I also think that we have to have a broader thinking about what's working-class? Because you cannot put everybody within trade union structures, and I was giving him a statistic: 120 million workers, and this is the most conservative estimate, of Indian workers are migrant laborers. So they migrate within India, working in India, and they're not able to form trade unions, because the nature of their job is so seasonal, so dependent. And this is, like, twice the population of Britain.

LEC: You're on the move all the time.

MK: On the move all the time, and the most precarious working circumstances. You can't say, "Oh, but they should unionize." Yes, well and good, but insofar it happens, or until it is going to happen, what is our opinion? Everybody is not within a union structure, you know? The more they're putting people on zero-hour contracts, the more they're putting people to work from home, so your home is also your workplace, and the more they're reducing first to a business enterprise, because that's what neoliberalism is trying to do ... then to believe there's going to be another overarching organizational structure that's going to lead us into our liberty? I don't think that I would be that confident about it. And I think we have to address the other massive thing as well. Another thing is that you really feel that the left is also

shamelessly populist? They don't want to talk about black women or brown women, because that's going to alienate a section of people. And I think it's very interesting, because they're still saying this about women. They cannot say this about race, now. They can't say, "Oh, if you talk about race, the white worker is going to get angry." They may think it, but they won't say it.

[00:48:24]

LEC: And they don't see that position as inherently racist.

MK: Yeah! And the same thing for gender, they're like, "Oh, but if you organize for these kinds of rights, what is going to happen?" The idea that things have to go through trade union structures but also imagine talking about issues of female reproductive rights. You're not gonna take that through trade union structures! Sometimes [women] could work with their husband in the factory and belong to the same trade union, but they're not going to talk about their reproductive positions in front of the patriarch of the family. So they don't think through all of these ... and just having this blind belief in overarching trade union structure -

CTM: Because if you think about the typical worker who joins trade union, if he's still always thinking in terms of male experience, then you're not going to ever think about domestic life, reproductive stuff, body stuff. That is very different. So what other forms, thinking about trade unions?

MK: Organizationally, we have to look for a larger base of approaching people and also making themselves heard. One of the things that trade union couldn't have achieved what #MeToo achieved was, shareholders got afraid. Or sometimes had to act, because it was dealing with things like reputation and backlash. And the present self has always been not sympathetic at all to trade unions. So I'm just thinking these have to be larger questions. And on the question of the trade union again in India, because you asked this question, the trade unions for a long time were campaigning not to include Dalit workers. Or like, I come from Chennai, where you had the first Madras Labor Union found in 1918, the year after the Russian revolution, so you look at it like, "Oh, we're so progressive!" But on the other hand, we have the first strike in 1921 that shut down the entire city, because there's a lot of solidarity strikes, but the incident that sparked the strike was that a Binny Mills—the Carnatic Mills—worker was not allowed a toilet break. He had to relieve himself on the shop factory floor, and he was asked to clean it up by his manager. And he said, "The job of cleaning up shit is a Dalit's job, and I'm being asked to do the job for Dalit."

This was the first reason for a larger union formation, so this of course led to a strike. But the idea within it, the idea that it's some people's job to do this job and not mine... but also the idea that then the strike went on for a long time but Dalit workers

started to go back to work. Because they could not support themselves during a time of strike. So the trade unions actually attacked the homes of Dalits and set fire to them, saying that “you are scab workers”. So how does trade union look at the questions of caste? This has been there since the time of Ambedkar. Ambedkar himself was saying if you are not recognizing Dalit people, then they are not going to support you in your strike. So you have to allow them to join not only this department but all the other, better-paid departments in the weaving, the textile mills and other stuff. So they’d had trade union boards that were largely casteist, which is also why Dalit workers in India often formed their own trade unions. Which also leads to all kinds of “divide and rule”, all of these inherent tensions that are possible in a situation like this.

So yeah, especially coming from India... also I think the Western idea of the trade union - especially in the U.K. I come across this a lot - they’re like, “Oh, they’re rail workers.” But the rail workers are one union, or you have bakers, but they’re all one union. But in India, you literally have every political party running its own trade union. So if there are railway workers, there will be railway workers who are affiliated with the BJP, railway workers affiliated with the Marxists, the railway workers affiliated to the far-left, railway workers affiliated to the Dalit Panthers, yeah? They are not trade union bodies.

LEC: They are more associations ... than the origins of what trade unions were meant to be.

MK: They were. But they call themselves trade unions. Then there is a strike; they do strike. Sometimes they strike together. But sometimes when political party strikes, then their trade union stops working, but the other trade unions continue working. Which causes all of these fault-lines of division, you know? You cannot go to a country with a billion people and tell them, “Oh, you cannot all fall into one trade union, you just want one trade union for all workers.”

LEC: Because it should be the same work in the sector.

MK: In the sector! No, nobody is going to this, because there is the reason why they were formed, because obviously they had differences. They formed separate trade unions, and these are questions people have to answer. Just because they live in a very streamlined capitalist country, the U.K. for instance, you can’t just impose their structure on what exists on the ground for us. So if people are speaking up against the idea of the monolith of the trade union, then that’s something else to be challenged. I think, yeah, these are places where the left has failed both in terms of gender but also in terms of caste. Because for a long, long time, they wouldn’t recognize ... it’s also not a question of mere representation, isn’t it? You only have two women members in the Communist party, they’re Marxist. And how many Dalits? A third of the

membership is Dalit, but the leadership among the Dalits in the Marxist party is zero. How do you say, “Oh, we work for you, I believe you. But maybe you can elect one of us?”

[00:54:34]

CTM: Do you think that has shifted at all in the Indian feminist movements? Or no?

MK: No, as I said, I don’t think I’m equipped enough to comment on feminist movements, because I’m not sure what their sources of funding are, what the systems of organization are. But I could talk about the Marxists, for instance. The Marxists still claim, for instance, that a struggle like Kizhenvanmani where 44 people died, all of them Dalit, they would still claim it’s a class struggle. They would still claim it does not have a caste aspect.

LEC: This is what is wrong with the left. This is what is wrong with the left.

CTM: But you’re talking about the Indian feminist left.

MK: The Indian Marxist left.

LEC: Marxist left, yeah.

MK: I think this kind of non-recognition of the fact that something affects a group of people, these people are being militant, so why don’t you claim the fact that these are Dalit workers who died? These workers are militant. Because you are very well-paid to say Dalit workers are ‘scab’ workers, when you can pick one example of history where you can say, “Oh, they actually went to work when we were striking.” On the other hand, why don’t you also pick up and say, “Dalit workers are the most militant workers. Look, they gave up their lives in Kizhenvanmani.”

LEC: Caste.

MK: No, they wouldn’t. Caste.

LEC: It’s like how race works here in the U.S.

MK: I think that in that sense, there’s a huge failing. At the same time, we have to understand that as much as we can afford all of these structures, it’s still through stopping the machinery of capitalism that we can teach the lessons. So one still has to go fight with the same people again and again.

LEC: Because they’re the best that there is. And because they have that long history of organizing. One of the things that we on the left tend to overlook is that at the end of the day, especially in the last few decades, unions and stuff are really capitalist bureaucracies. And that’s a fundamental problem. They’re capitalist bureaucracies. So the thing that they can’t see, that you just pointed out in India, they don’t want to

see caste and how they are doing the multi-levels of segregation along caste. At the same time, they're preaching uniformity and struggle together and mobilization. So it's a counteractive kind of process that they engaged in, and that's on one level, and that's really disturbing, because we see something similar here. And the other is they don't, it seems to me, understand how mobile labor is, right? In terms of the action itself and the workers, like in India, they are constantly on the move. The majority, yeah? I mean, capital is moving rapidly. So they best organize in a way that they can make the same moves. *[Black screen starts 00:57:46.]* You have the migrants; who's going to organize them? Organizing strategies must change to fit the current marketplace. Those are major failings, I think, of the left.

[00:58:02]

[Black screen ends 00:58:03.]

CTM: So as I'm listening to you talk especially about the failings of the left in terms of caste and gender, I'm thinking that there are really - in India, especially - these profound parallels in the way caste and gender discrimination and structures function, and that they are very embodied structures. They really are. They function in terms of embodiment and intimacy. They function in terms of the connections between the intimate and the public. And that is not something that the more traditional or more doctrinaire left has ever been able to really think in terms of...

LEC: Never looked at, never addressed it, never deconstructed. That work is necessary.

CTM: It seems like this could be a really important space.

MK: I think the body is really fundamentally important to understanding not just violence but the way in which we are handled by capitalisms. Ableist bodies are preferred, brown and black women's bodies are preferred when they want to give themselves a progressive face.

LEC: Or when we need cheap labor.

MK: Yeah, cheap labor. Obviously, there's a good placement of this. But I also think that the origin of caste is so much to do with the absolute regulation of the human body and what you're allowed to do with it, who you're allowed to sleep with, who you're allowed to love, who's allowed to touch you, where you're allowed to enter.

CTM: Where you can eat, where you can't eat.

MK: So you have this temple entry hope, temples opening up for women, but men have not allowed women to go into the temple. Because it's going to pollute them, it's going to pollute the gods. All this discourse around the body. And it's the same

thing in the end, as much with how capitalism looks at these cheap bodies, laboring for it, and laboring without benefits. But also very cleverly shifting the care of the body back to us so we don't have any healthcare, we have to do self-care.

CTM: Privatizing everything.

MK: Privatizing everything. For instance, I know that in the U.S., there's not maternity leave and stuff like that. Once again, a woman has to manage it.

LEC: We have twelve weeks, but it's without pay.

MK: So it just gets off-loaded back into women.

LEC: [inaudible]

MK: Yeah. Or to the most marginalized sections of people. I think all of this makes you look at especially the women's body as a very central metaphor or a central organizing principle. Because you look at what they're doing with reproductive rights, even justifying violence on the women's body, by saying it's a list of choices that she's making. Like, is she wearing thongs? Then she's asking to be raped. I think this discourse on the body... or the way in which they've taken, for instance, in this country 'student loans' to such a great level that young women are actually coming up to you and saying, "Oh, it's so empowering and liberating and emancipatory to use sex work to pay my loans." The problem is your loans! As much as you can find your emancipation through sex work, great! But if you're doing it for the loans, then maybe you have to ask...

CTM: Why do I have the loan in the first place?

MK: Why do I have the loans? Or, why are the banks profiting off this?

LEC: Why is education a privilege rather than a right?

MK: A commodity, yeah. Why is education something that has to be so expensive and so exorbitant, and it's forcing me to do things that I would otherwise not do or conceive doing? I think these are very important things that one has to grapple with.

CTM: And connections, right? So this is what has been so amazing about this conversation, I think. It is that we made all of these different kinds of connections with different systemic things but really being very clear about the way capitalism and neoliberalism really is the context in which we are all struggling. Even with the rights of the alt-right and all these movements. I don't think you can understand fundamentalisms either in India or here if you don't take on what's happening with corporatization and neoliberalism and global capital and the way it intersects. Money fuels all of this stuff.

LEC: In that sense, there is a uniformity to capitalism that allows this. There is a uniformity to capitalist that brings about this kind of sameness of oppressions.

MK: Look at Victoria's Secret and the statement about "how we don't want fat or trans bodies" or something like that. The same people are the ones who want black incarcerated people to slave there, because they really subsist on prison labor. Where does the exploitation ... they're guilting a lot of people into anorexia, making young women feel ashamed of their bodies. On the other hand, fat-shaming. On the other hand, exploitation actual labor. Any such organization lies at the foreground at absolutely greedy exploitation, isn't it?

CTM: Well, thank you so much.

LEC: Thank you, thank you.

MK: Thank you!

CTM: This was so inspiring actually. We'll be in touch. There's a lot more conversations to be had. I kind of feel that. But thank you for being with us today.

[end video 01:04:04]

Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.