

## Introduction

*'We Were Making History...': The New Edition* was a two-day event held on 27 and 28 March 2026 at Taj Tristar, Secunderabad, to mark the release of the new edition of *We Were Making History...: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (Zubaan Books, 2026). The programme brought together the authors of the book, scholars, readers, filmmakers, and participants to reflect on the histories, methods, and questions that shaped the publication and its continued engagement with the Telangana People's Struggle.

The first day began with the release of the new edition of the book, following a welcome and introduction by Shefali Jha. The volume was released by Janaki Nair, Urvashi Butalia, K. Lalita, Rama Melkote, Susie Tharu, Uma Maheshwari, and Vasanth Kannabiran. This was followed by the session *Making History*, chaired by Uma Bhugubanda, which featured presentations by Janaki Nair on feminist historical method and by Urvashi Butalia on the practice of oral history. The afternoon session, *Mana Charithra/Our History*, chaired by K. Sajaya, brought together presentations by Vimala Morthala, Kaneez Fathima, Gogu Shyamala, and K. Lalita. The day concluded with a screening of *Pani, Pata, Poratam*, introduced by its director, Aditi Maddali, followed by a discussion between Madhumeeta Sinha and the director.

The second day began with *The Readers Panel*, chaired by Vasudha Nagaraj, featuring presentations by Firdaus Soni and Nisha Kumari, along with readings by Mohammed Abdul Aleem from *Bikhri Yaadein (Jamalunnisa)* and by Saleema from *Manaku Teliyani Mana Charithra*. This was followed by *The Authors Panel*, chaired by Janaki Nair, in which K. Lalita, Rama Melkote, Susie Tharu, Uma Maheshwari, and Vasanth Kannabiran reflected on the making of *We Were Making History* and its reprint. The programme concluded with a screening of *Wo Subah Hamin Se Aayegi*, introduced by its director, Uma Chakravarti, followed by a discussion between Urvashi Butalia and Uma Chakravarti, before the concluding remarks and dinner with participants at Anveshi.

The second session, of the first day, *Making History*, had lectures by Historian **Dr. Janaki Nair** and feminist publisher, **Urvashi Butalia**. It was chaired by **Dr. Uma Bhugubanda**, professor at EFL University.

Janaki Nair's lecture, titled, "The Promise of Oral History as Feminist Historical Method", primarily raised the question of historiography in the context of the present time in relation to the relevance of the release of the second edition of the historical text, *We Were Making History*. Nair began the talk by foregrounding the present contexts of genocide, imperial wars and the violence against women and children and the rise of the far right ideology in India within History, pedagogy and popular narratives. She drew attention to the three fold danger – ethical, historiographic and political that confronts the profession of the historian today in India. By drawing on several texts and contexts – including the works of Lata Mani, the renaming of public spaces in India and Partha Chatterjee, and the historiographic versus popular narrativisation of Tipu Sultan in Karnataka, she demonstrated the triple threat to the historical method. However, Nair returned to the cruciality of the oral and archival method captured in *We Were Making History*. She pointed to the ethical, historiographic and political questions that the book addressed in terms of capturing the moments of subjectivity through the diverse voices

within the compilation, the questions of approaching history through proximity / distance, and the allure of communism in creating a moment of change. Nair also highlighted the limitations of caste representation and heteronormative representation within these texts, although the moment of Indian feminism and its communist interrelation was an important time in history which has had long lasting consequences. She drew attention to the living archive that is composed of the interviews conducted by the Stree Shakti Sanghatana members committed in print by the book. In conclusion, she raised the importance of the doing of history in different ways, especially drawing attention to the need for participation in public histories, and a focus on the narratives of the last four decades of Indian post-independence period, which may provide a counter history of India. She ended the lecture by citing Chityala Ayilamma's *May His Belly Burn*, and calling forth the need to highlight oral history's role in the ideals of democracy, tolerance and ideology.

Urvashi Butalia, the publisher and founder of Zubaan delivered the second lecture titled, "A Sense of the Past: Reflecting on the Practice of Oral History" drew attention to the personal reflections drawn from her experiences on the field from 30 years ago, conducting interviews and being part of the dowry death protests in the late 70s in Delhi. She began the lecture by raising the questions of - 1) the absence of women in recorded histories and 2) the politics of representation within these narratives. She drew attention to the marginalisation that women faces in history / region, religion and caste amongst others within India. She briefly provided an overview of the range of texts published by Zubaan over the years including works by Sharmila Rege, Du Saraswati, Uma Chakravarti, and Urmila Pawar. She also highlighted the Zubaan programme that supported the publishing of the book, *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?* She started the main discussion by highlighting her role as a writer writing history. She narrated her experiences as someone who was interrogating the horrific experiences of partition influenced by the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi. She started by locating herself as a Sikh woman and the child of Partition refugees, who was interested in documenting the narratives of partition. Butalia highlighted the importance of listening with respect and care, which the women's movement had imparted. Across 10-12 years, she noticed differences between men and women in terms of the way they countered or addressed traditional historical accounts within their oral narratives. It was difficult to find women who were available to provide one-on-one interviews because they were often surrounded by family members or preoccupied with domestic / other tasks. She highlighted several difficulties within this terrain of navigating encounters with the women who experienced the partition, some of them were the need to find how they could manage ways to listen to women against the cacophony around them, of how to address the need to find numbers to counter numbered narratives, of how to address the highly sensitive subject of the survival of sexual violence, abduction, and the silence around these experiences. The latter was especially crucial because it also highlighted the difficulties of talking about adverse sexual experiences and sexuality in a culture and society that does not want to talk about sex. At this juncture, it became the task of the writer / oral historian to learn to be attuned to the silences, body language, pauses and hesitations within the interviews to capture the weight of that which was not being said.

With respect to the questions of ethical responsibility Butalia described the conflict between protecting the silence of the survivors and the need to present the truth with vulnerability, especially concerning women who faced violence within families, were victims who had to marry their abductors, and be witness to the horrors of partition violence. Butalia pointed out the silence and lack of these narratives of women within nationalist histories. Further, the

complexities of caste against the narrative of Hindu versus Muslim, the complexities of internal violence and the dynamics of goods exchange, especially in narrating how dowries were gathered by sourcing from displaced homes, were elaborated upon. She mentioned incidents of having to confront the responsibility of being sensitive and respectful to differences of caste within these narratives.

Butalia highlighted the way in which the city of Delhi began to transform as the oral narratives told different stories of refuge and migration within the context of the partition and other social moments of strife as something that marks the city. She drew attention to how orality can give a sense of the past, and mentioned several works by women writers, activists and historians which address alternate histories of women's experiences in India, covering the period from the 70s to the 90s. Butalia concluded the talk by describing the stories of Satyarani Chaddha, Shah Jahan Apa, the founders of Shakti Shalini, and the Sparrow archive by CS Lakshmi, as projects founded by the women's movement and shaped by oral histories. Butalia emphasized the process of history that enables these narratives to be told.

After the lectures there were Q/A sessions in which questions pertaining to (mention)

**The third session - *Mana Charithra/Our History* was chaired by K. Sajaya. It had reflections from** Vimala Morthala, Kaneez Fathima, Gogu Shyamala, K. Lalita surrounding the role of women in the Telangana People's Struggle and the book, *We Were Making History*.

**K. SAJAYA highlighted the** challenges of accepting the politics of gender within movements or outside movements still remain while there is a more ready acceptance of women's contribution to larger political movements not driven by women

**VIMALA MORTHALA began by describing** women's own understanding of their experience within the communist struggle, their colloquial style of describing their experiences, their imagination of what their future beholds - all these aspects which have been brought from the past into the present through this book. She highlighted that as long as marginalised identities were expressing themselves, one was learning about history in layers and not simply in binaries

Morthala recounted how Stree Shakti Sanghatana's book faced criticism from every nook and corner of the Telugu States but every communist in the country read the book. It led to open discussions, not only about women but also an entire informed discourse on Dalits and Bahujans, even though there were no well-known or clearly articulated perspectives on Dalit-Bahujans yet. When the elite class had still not explored the question of social identities, it was the feminists who were the first to explore the layers of marginalisation and bring discourse on it.

She emphasised how women's movements are not singular movements but varied along the lines of intersectionalities. Yet, one could always find with these the intention to deliberate on a more united front for women. She concluded by asking why we are placing an onus on communists to undertake dissemination of different kinds of discourses? The assumption that they were the only ones capable of doing so is no longer valid. Communists can only have played a part and that too while dealing with their gradual but ongoing surrender to the State,

**GOGU SHYAMALA** began her conversation by stating that if someone from today is attempting to read this book, they would be the fourth generation to be doing so. Shyamala painted a picture of how she was a part of the communist party. She recounted how it was to be inside the party and to tolerate the impact of the book as a different experience because the authors of the book were able to intimidate those who held communist ethics high. She also pointed out how these authors, Brahmin, educated and English-speaking urban women, went on to capture the experience of other women and not of their own - of Dalit and Adivasi women posed a major challenge to the communist party to deal with.

However, Shyamala mentioned how there are no further books on the personal journey of struggles in history - In other words, a document released by a team that would travel far and wide to rural areas and record everything diligently. That kind of pain-staking practice or culture to be rigorous with documentation, despite information and technology today, is no longer there. She highlighted how It is a concern to address today. The book encapsulated sharing, sisterhood and connection. The book is a culture in itself.

Shyamala also drew attention to the paradox of communist politics in how it ignores the question of marriage and gender roles in society. The irony, in fact, is that the authors went about capturing the vulnerability of women in the communist struggle, a place that otherwise boasts about the strength of all and weakness of none. Shyamala concluded by providing this example: during the recent statehood struggle for a separate Telangana, a meeting of mothers had taken place. The purpose was to convince them not to lay down their lives for the sake of the State. And to commemorate the deceased mothers, there was not a single photo taken at the meeting. Even then, to offer a placeholder image representing the meeting and the commemoration, it was this book that was relied upon! - A quote of Chityala Ailama that first appeared in this book was used. Such is the importance of this written piece of history.

**KANEEZ FATHIMA** began by drawing attention to the typification of Muslim women of being oppressed and illiterate as illfounded because it ignores evidence that they excelled alongside men. The earliest women in Islam are known as entrepreneurs, jurists, scholars, artists and even political authorities. Cases in point are Jamalunissa Begum and Razia Begum in Hyderabad. She illustrated how life amongst the Hyderabad Muslims was marked by following and unfollowing of social norms amidst migration. There were communists within Muslims that did not seek or require religious sanctions. The control over pardah and education was moderate. There was political commitment and intellectual engagement.

**K. LALITA**, one of the authors of the book, began her talk by mentioning how the original intention of the book did not imagine or include the criticism of the communist party. She recounted how the authors, who were part of various movements in their own capacities but trooped together after the rape of Razia Begum in Hyderabad, and, as a result, many communists came to join their activism and research.

Regarding the point of capturing feelings and contexts she clarifies that they did not intend to capture the contradictions of the communist narratives or any kind of hypocrisy. The intention simply was to document history from the house's mouth. Record what the women said exactly how they said it. It was to bring to the fore oral tradition. What had inspired us were the

Nicaraguan and Bolivian struggles of women which gave us guidance and material to be inspired from. No other texts existed. We wrote down what they said in their own tongue. We never asked them pointedly of their experience being in the communist party. As they narrated their own experience, they said what they wanted to say about the entirety of their lives.

She mentions the limitation that there was no Dalit consciousness at the time the book was first published. In 2010, one version of the book had been released and in that we had included a section on caste intersectionality. However, she pointed out how women are seen as a community identity, but no one ever sees them or asks them about their personal stories? Many muslims had participated in the communist struggle. But ever since identity politics split movements into varied ones, muslims don't remain visible anymore.

Lailtha also clarified certain contradictions within the communist movement: Does leadership and doing politics make space for personal struggles? No. They say they are custodian of people and they know all of the struggles of the people. Then why don't they address and talk about the struggles itself beyond the rhetorical invocation of it?

She also recounted how: printing presses and compositors would try to proof-read the Telangana Telugu in the book and change most of the words into their textually approved Telugu counterparts. We were stubborn about documenting the language in exactly the same tongue, including repetitions and even gibberish. And so, with the first release of the book, the immediate criticism levelled on Stree Shakti Sanghatana was that the authors and editors have no knowledge of Telugu. That was actually a political criticism. She highlighted how jailed women would write to their relatives, requesting them to send them the book to read, if they already knew how to read and write. She concluded her talk by mentioning how there was no culture of photography then. Only at the end of the interview, without causing any hindrance, she had photographed the women with the camera without instruction. It was all candid.

Documentary: ***Pani, Pata, Poratam*** by Director Aditi Maddali and discussion by Dr. Madhumeeta Sinha.

The film documents the Uyyala songs sung by the women of the Telangana People's Struggle many of whom were forced into bonded labour by the landlords. The film interweaves the communist party's presence, narratives of scuffles with the police, with contextual information provided by Gogu Shyamala who explains the close relationship that the women have with the songs which are transferred intergenerationally and also draws attention to how the Telugu film industry appropriates it. Shyamala's interview provides much-needed context to the caste-class politics that are contained within the culture of singing Uyyala songs, and the significance of its oral narrative form as sung by the women who work in the fields.

After the film screening, Dr. Madhumeeta opened the discussion by asking the director Aditi Maddali what her interest was in these particular songs and their relation to the feminist movement within the Telangana People's Struggle. Maddali highlighted that the need to document the lives of women freedom fighters and their cultural lives, narratives, and traditions

led her to the culture of Uyyala songs, and their relation to the women who were part of the Communist parties fighting against feudal powers during the Telangana People's Movement. The discussion also mentioned the significance of the word "Uyyala," which translates to "cradle" or "swing," indicating that these songs are part of lullabies that working women sing to their babies. Maddali pointed out that these songs were sung only during work and served as a form of camaraderie amongst working women. The political and historical significance of the songs, as well as the current submerging of the villages in which the women had been fighting for their land, were also covered during the discussion.

**The Author's Panel** was chaired by **Dr. Janaki Nair**. It invited reflections from the authors of *We Were Making History* to contextualise their journeys into this historic publication and the socio-political contexts around which the book was conceptualised. **Dr. K. Lalitha** began by charting the history of the movements in the Andhra–Telangana regions. She discussed the anti-vegetable export campaign, the Ramezadi violence, and other social events that gave rise to the initial question of whether the book was to be about a movement or about women's issues. She mentioned several projects around the same time, such as organising people around the JSC, the work of the social anthropologist Maria, and conversations with women in the tribal lace workers' industry, as important steps towards the project. She highlighted several aspects of the Telangana People's Struggle, including the participation of both rural and urban populations, the widespread migration of people abandoning their lands and moving into cities out of fear for their lives, and the violence directed against Muslim households. She also located within this period the emergence of questions about the differences between Andhra culture and Telangana culture. It was at this juncture that the need emerged to document and interview the lives of women involved in the movement beyond those who were already well known, such as Mallu Swarajyam, Kamala Devi, and others.

**Dr. Rama Melkote** reflected on the origins of the project and the reasons that led the members of Stree Shakti Sanghatana to document the Telangana People's Movement. She began by describing her own political background, noting that her father and uncle were nationalists while her brother was aligned with the Left. She recalled that two incidents in 1978 were instrumental in her involvement with the formation of Stree Shakti Sanghatana. One of these was the arrest of her brother because he was a witness to the murder of the Urdu journalist Shoebullah Khan in 1948. She also referred to the Razakar movement, during which many nationalists were displaced to other parts of the city.

She explained that the idea of interviewing women from the Telangana People's Movement and collecting their oral histories was inspired in part by the book *Women in the Third World*. At the same time, the Mulki movement was taking place, and she referred to the experiences of individuals involved in it. These discussions raised methodological questions about oral history. She emphasised that the purpose of oral history was not to determine whether every account was factually verifiable, but to understand what such narratives revealed about lived experience and historical memory. She also reflected on how they approached oral histories by engaging with existing books on women and gender while seeking to understand what women experienced beyond narratives of heroism and political contribution.

She observed that many women in the movement lived with the constant fear that landlords would seize their land. Members of Stree Shakti Sanghatana also recognised their own locations as upper-caste and upper-class women and acknowledged that their experiences differed significantly from those of many women in the movement, who were facing rape, violence, and murder. She argued that there was often a gap between what was publicly articulated about the movement and the realities experienced by women on the ground. Although the Telangana mass movements had achieved much, they also made significant mistakes because women were rarely consulted and their social realities were not adequately taken into account. Instead, political and economic questions often took precedence over gendered experiences. These discussions also raised broader questions about the nature of the state and how it should be understood. She further pointed to political differences at the national level, where Nehru was viewed by some as a lackey of imperialism and where tensions existed between Maoist and Stalinist strands within the Communist movement in Hyderabad. These ideological differences among the leadership contributed both to the dissolution of student movements and to divisions within the Telangana People's Movement. She concluded by observing that the complexities and nuances of the movement have largely been lost to history and are increasingly being misconstrued by contemporary ideological narratives.

**Dr. Uma Maheshwari** described Stree Shakti Sanghatana as a source of redemption from the violence and trauma she had been experiencing. She highlighted the organisation's anti-caste practices and reflected on her role in transcribing the interviews that eventually became part of the book. She also discussed several other projects she worked on with the collective, including projects on folk songs and healing practices.

**Dr. Susie Tharu** concluded by opening up the discussion to questions about the future of the book, particularly how the reprint functions as an intervention in the present. She suggested that the material would also be well suited to formats such as podcasts. Reflecting on the excitement of working on the project, she situated it within the broader intellectual and political ferment of the 1960s, marked by movements in culture, knowledge, and theory. She referred to developments such as the Cultural Revolution in China, student movements across Europe, and the widespread questioning of established systems of knowledge. She also noted that she had grown up in Africa and arrived at Stree Shakti Sanghatana with a different historical perspective, but found herself deeply inspired by the movement. She shared several humorous anecdotes from the interview process before concluding by emphasising the interventionist nature of the project and its continuing relevance.

Documentary: *Woh Subah Hami Se Ayegi* directed by Uma Chakravarti and discussion by Urvashi Bhutalia.

**Uma Chakravarti**, Indian feminist historian and filmmaker, mentions that she has made a total of 10 films, 4 of which were funded, and the rest which are funded by her "pension" under the banner, Pension Projects. In her introduction she explained that she did not want to do a documentary which contains different "heads talking", but to create a compilation of the history of women's documentaries that cover several phases of feminist movements across India. In addition, this method of compiling and editing films was informed by the practice of archiving - significant to her background as a feminist historian.

The film itself begins with shots of *Chhatrabhang* (1976) directed by Nina Shivadasani, which depicts the revolt of lower caste labourers against the Brahmin landlords. The film then cuts to several sections from prominent documentaries that have covered the women's movements of the 70s to the 90s, protesting against dowry deaths, rape and Sati. They included *A Journey Together* (1998), *From the Burning Embers* (1988), *#Shout, Gift of Love* (1983). There are sections also from films such as *All the Books we Made* (2016), and *Unlimited Girls* (2002), films by Urvashi Bhutalia and Ritu Menon the first feminist publishers in India, and Paromita Vohra, prominent feminist filmmaker. The films then cut across to diverse contemporary movements such as the queer and LGBTQIA+ movements, sections from Dalit protest movements, and of women's organisations. Documentaries such as *Dry Days In Dobbagunta* (1996), *Something Like a War* (1991), and *Invoking Justice* (2011) that cover women's initiatives and oppressions in several rural spaces across India. With several other films across queer narratives, the topic of marriage, Muslim women's fight for justice and the narratives of children in military occupied areas, the film offers a picture of women's movements and issues across independent India and archives the range of work in feminist documentary filmmaking.

Post the screening, the discussion was led by **Urvashi Bhutalia** and the audiences asked several questions on the choice of the films, representation and history of women's movements depicted.