

Discovering India Without Columbus

Relearning and Reclaiming Herstory

by Sarita Srivastava



Le cours d'histoire à l'école peuvent ne pas fournir le contexte et l'inspiration nécessaires pour les luttes politiques et personnelles, mais représenter plutôt une source d'oppression. L'histoire de l'oppression et de la résistance peut constituer une importante inspiration pour la force personnelle et collective. Le fait de savoir qu'une grand-mère a milité au sein du mouvement de libération de l'Inde peut constituer un exemple de ce processus de reconquête.

I was born on "Columbus Day," in the U.S.A. The catchy rhyme the teacher taught on my birthday remains in my mind: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." The teacher said, Columbus was really trying to discover India. That's why there were two kinds of Indians...or three. I wasn't any of them—or was I?

For many years, I remembered the "discovery of the new world" by repeating that comforting chant. It feels like betrayal now, remembering how fun it was to have October 12th commemorated in my class. So now it is this story of discovery that represents my anger at the white, male, imperialist versions of history I was taught in school. I am angry not only because I was taught this history, but because I unquestioningly accepted it.

Here, I want to recount a different discovery: the beginning of my effort to reclaim another version of my history. My discovery is beginning with my grandmother, Shanti, and her participation in India's freedom movement in the 30s and 40s. It continues with my work in the environmental and social change movement in Canada. An important part of the discovery has been exploring the connections between our lives, the parallels and differences between her activism and mine. And learning about her strength has been a source of strength to me.

My anger does not end with Columbus Day; my emptiness begins. None of the history I was taught in school feels like "my" history. It doesn't represent or acknowledge my, or my ancestors', experiences—or the experiences of women, or most cultures in the world.

And this ethnocentric, male-centred, and often "forgetful" history does not give me the inspiration I need for my personal and political struggles. Even worse, this version of history becomes oppressive. It reflects negative images of me, my cultural background, my gender. It distances me and other women from the strength of our mothers and sisters of the past. That lack of connection deprives

women of important support, a feeling of pride and solidarity, and inspiration for change. We can gain that support, personally and collectively, by discovering our own histories of resistance. That connection, that strength, is what I have been trying to reclaim.

Yet women's stories, and stories of resistance, are often never recorded, or are lost. And because I am the child of immigrants, much of my family and cultural history has been lost to me, so the rediscovery is especially difficult. My grandmother tells me she has written all about her experiences, her impressions of the freedom movement—but I cannot read her pages of Hindi script.

But then, I've learned that the gathering of stories is an important part of my discovery. Sitting in the kitchen with my grandmother during our few visits, listening, questioning, laughing, learning. Even arguing—across cultures and generations—about racism, classism, patriarchy, tradition, but never in those words. The passion and love I still hear in my grandmother's voice is part of what inspires me. Although we don't really share a language—she speaks better English than I speak Hindi, I understand Hindi better than she understands English—we somehow communicate well. Afterwards, I go to my mother for the difficult translation of all those Hindi words I don't understand, but have tried to record in English script—words that turn out to mean “oppression,” or “freedom.” Caught between two cultures, at home nowhere, learning a small piece of my past gives me a stronger connection to my family, my background, who I am.

Her Story

Just as I am inspired by my grandmother's stories of activism, she says her own inspiration came from reading about the history of British domination and Indian resistance:

In my heart there was a realization, when I read the stories about the revolutionaries, about Ghandi's movement, that the British are oppressing our country, that our people should remove them—it's our country, it's our freedom.

She tells me she began wearing *khaddi*, the homespun cotton that Ghandi advocated in place of British cloth, and decided she should work for the freedom of her people.

In 1930, only 18 years old and recently married, she travelled with her sister-in-law to a conference of the Congress party in Lahore, where a resolution was passed to begin a campaign of non-cooperation. She decided to volunteer, and began her involvement by leafleting, picketing, fundraising, and speaking about British rule and the need to boycott textiles from Manchester and Lancashire.

She went with other women from home to home in and around Delhi and Ludhiana, fundraising or holding neighbourhood women's meetings to explain why the boycott against British textiles had been called. At each home, they began by singing freedom songs, and finished by talking about British rule and the need to end it.

She also spoke at large rallies, and tells me of the one or two that she specially remembers. At one meeting, held after a women's march was brutally broken up by the police, she spoke for one hour. She says, “I wasn't educated, but I had one thing—I spoke loudly, I had a strong voice.” When she tells me about a rally in Delhi which the police tried to break up with their *lathis*, she talks about her fear—and strength—when she was ordered to take the podium:

I was suddenly scared, and said “Sister, what can I do?”, but

my leader said “Just come here.” I don't know how it occurred to me, but I got on at that podium, and I said “Listen, no one is moving, and these lathis cannot harm us.” And the police weren't able to do much. And they couldn't arrest me either.

Reflections and Connections

Like my grandmother, I am also fighting racism in a British colony—but as a minority, in a place where my parents are immigrants, not native. Where she worked side by side with other Indian women, I was lucky to find one woman of colour in my organization to identify with, to struggle with. Ironically, it is that feeling of isolation, that experience as a non-white minority, that has inspired my anti-racist work, and my desire to work for social change.

As an activist in a white, male-dominated environmental movement, I have the feeling that I don't belong. I often find people are surprised that a brown woman would be an activist, or an environmentalist. And I do feel almost alone. An activist in another province described me as the only other non-white environmentalist he had heard of. Outside my organization, I am sometimes simply invisible as an activist (and as a person). My experience is echoed by activist friends of Asian descent who are sometimes mistaken for computer experts.

My grandmother's activism is something I can draw on to counter those feelings of exclusion. Her story helps me feel that I am not a peculiar exception, but that in fact I have strong connections to activism. It has also challenged my own views of Indian women, and therefore my self-perception. It helps me to feel pride, the pride that overcomes the feelings of denial or self-hatred that racism causes. And it has also helped me to deal actively with the racism within my own organization. This year a co-worker and I held our organization's first anti-racist workshop, began an anti-racist committee, and worked to get a commitment to continuing anti-racist workshops and developing a strong affirmative action hiring policy.

My grandmother's story has also helped me reflect on the particular problems of being a female activist in a male-dominated organization. Although I have been told that my grandfather was also a “freedom-fighter,” I feel a special connection to my grandmother as both woman and activist. I wonder how difficult it must have been for her as an activist in a male-dominated movement and society, if she felt as patronized and overshadowed by male activists as I do. She will only say that men and women did the same work, and that some men treated her well, others didn't. But she also says that one reason she cut down on her involvement is that she didn't like the way some men treated her, being too familiar, touching her.

Several years ago I visited relatives in Lucknow, where in 1857, Indian men working as soldiers for the British sparked a rebellion. I had always heard it called the “Mutiny,” and had read

*We gain support,
personally and
collectively,
by discovering our own
histories of resistance.*

in an M.M. Kaye novel about the cruelty of the Indians, the terror and shock of the British. So it was a strange revelation when my aunt told me to visit the monument to the "freedom-fighters" of 1857.

It's the same feeling of rediscovery, of suddenly seeing the world differently, that I find with my grandmother. Positive words and images begin to displace my anger and discomfort at what I learn elsewhere.

My anger does not end with Columbus Day—but my discovery begins.

Thanks to Andrea Imada for her thoughtful comments and support.

Sarita Srivastava has been studying and working for popular education and environmental action. For the past year and a half, she has been an activist and spokesperson for Greenpeace Canada. This fall she is beginning work on a doctoral degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

NUPUR GOGIA

How to Achieve Silence From a Woman of Colour

tongues tied

voices cut

throats slashed

blood drips

and

drips

slow leaking

slowly dying

silence achieved

a scream enters

Nupur Gogia is a brown activist who has been working with women of colour.



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