

GOETHE MEDAL 2017

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY URVASHI BUTALIA

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It is the strangest thing for someone who deals in words, to find herself at a loss for words. I have been thinking about what I would say today, how I would express my gratitude to have been honoured with this prestigious award, named after a writer I admire, given by an institute I am proud to be associated with, and to be sharing the platform with two admirable women from parts of the world other than my own.

History shows us that women are seldom honoured with awards. Most juries almost inevitably and 'naturally' lean towards men. For me, one of the most exciting things about receiving the Goethe Medal is that I am receiving it alongside two other women, strong, independent, wonderful women.

Many years ago, when we set up the first feminist publishing house in India, we had no idea of the wealth of talent, the richness of the stories that we would discover. Over the years, as we have moved between cities, towns, villages in an attempt to capture the voices of the most marginalized of women, of those socially excluded by class, and caste, and region and religion, we have been constantly humbled by the lessons their lives teach us. We have seen it as our commitment, and our privilege, to bring their voices to public attention.

I am delighted that the Goethe award recognizes and honours this work. In doing so, it pays tribute also to the strong and dynamic women's movement in India. It was out of this movement that we grew, it was this movement that nurtured us and sustained us. Our feminist publishing ventures, Kali for Women and Zubaan, were born out of this movement.

Long years ago, the women's movement in India taught me the importance of speaking truth to power, of questioning the ways in which knowledge was created and held by a select few, of upturning these equations and populating the world of knowledge with many voices, many questions.

It was the feminist movement too that taught me that most important of things: to listen. In Zubaan, the publishing house where I work, my wonderful team and I have worked constantly to bring to public attention the voices of marginalized women, those socially excluded by society, those who may not be writers, but who have something important to say, something we should all listen to.

And we have learnt so much from these voices, from the experiences of women on the margins. Today we are the proud publishers of books by village women, by domestic workers, by a lower caste artist, by taxi drivers and more. We may not earn pots of money, but we know we are doing something that is important and necessary.

The kind of work we do is seldom recognized, it is small, it does not enter the realm of high politics. But we are firmly convinced that it is this kind of work that will lay the ground for

change in the world. In the end, when change comes to India, women will be at the helm of it, they will be at the heart of it. This we know from our work with women's writing.

This is why I am truly grateful to the Goethe-Institut for this honour and recognition, grateful to our colleagues, and grateful to the jury for thinking us worthy of it. You know, I often think that I am very lucky. Very few people have the good fortune to be able to combine their political beliefs, their personal values, their professional capabilities, in the way that I have been able to do. Very few people have the good fortune to be able to work with institutions they respect and the Goethe-Institut in India has been a valued and important partner. Very few people have this privilege and have the luxury to be able to love what they do. And when you are honoured for doing what you enjoy and love and believe in, what more can you ask?

Urvashi Butalia