

# GOETHE MEDAL 2017

## LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR

### URVASHI BUTALIA BY CHRISTA WICHTERICH

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I remember my first meeting with Urvashi Butalia in the early 1980s in New Delhi. She told me about a street theatre about dowry murders, which were then making headlines in India. Street theatre is a form that makes the unseen or hidden publicly visible, audible, perceptible. This brings us to a central motivation behind Urvashi's work: to develop tools and strategies showing that the personal is political, and pronounce – and this is especially important for the issue of violence – what is hidden in one's own four walls or in personal or collective memory. As a lecturer in communication and media studies at the university, as a women's rights activist, as a writer and a publisher, she has played a politically significant and indispensable role in India since the 1980s to create alternative and feminist publics beyond the mainstream or, as she says, to build an alternative knowledge base. At the core, it is always about breaking the silence and speaking in order to gain explanations and understanding.

The most important forums for the feminist public initiated by Urvashi were the two publishing houses for women's books, Kali for Women, founded in 1984 with her colleague Ritu Menon, and Zubaan founded in 2003. Urvashi founded Zubaan, which means tongue, voice, to go beyond the Hindu-identified perspective of Kali, Shakti, Lakshmi and address the cultural, social and religious diversity of South Asia beyond India. Both publishing houses consider themselves part of the tremendously vital and diverse Indian women's movements (I use the plural with care) and offer a platform for women's literature, academic works, art and documentaries as stated in Zubaan's self-description: "Books on, for, by and about women in South Asia."

Urvashi has done pioneering publishing work with the courageous publication of the stories of Ismat Chughtai, an Urdu author who wrote about lesbian love in the 1930s, with the illustrations by 70 illiterate women from Rajasthan of the female body where clothing can be folded open, with studies of sexual violence and impunity in conflict and border regions of South Asia, as well as translations of literature from the contested northeastern states of India.

Zubaan's bestseller, Urvashi's translation into English of the life story of Baby Halder, a young woman who was married off at the age of 12, was a mother at 14, who managed to leave her violent husband and hometown and find a new means of living in New Delhi as a domestic worker, reveals what distinguishes Urvashi's work. She does not speak for others, she does not want to represent others, but above all to give a voice to those who stand on the margins of society, the injured and vulnerable who have no say, who have been silenced and who are consciously silent. For years, she meets these same people for interviews, listens to them, gets close to them, for example, a hijra girlfriend, a transsexual she visits once a week when possible.

Breaking the silence, giving people a voice, putting the unspeakable, namely violence, desperation, guilt and trauma into words is what Urvashi did with her 1998 book *The Other Side of Silence*, historical explorations about the division of India and the tearing apart of families, including her own. With the book, aptly entitled "Shared Silence" in German, she began a new chapter in historiography by recording the memories and personal perceptions of those who fled and those who stayed, of relatives and survivors "from the other side." The spoken word, the story told, is the key to history. The narrative of what was experienced and suffered turn the inner to the outside, revealing the connections between victims and perpetrators, selective forgetfulness, loss of memory and silence. Urvashi Butalia must painfully realise that speaking is not always liberating, that memory cannot be made objective, that history is not finished, that there is no simple contrast of silence and speech, and that many tormenting questions remain about how people behave towards their own history.

"What we illuminate is determined by the present," she writes. I have read the narratives of mass migration, flight, death, rape, return and reintegration, also against the backdrop of the current migration events and current processes of political conflicts, division and schisms. They are a model for dealing with history.

Urvashi says of herself, "I am not a historian. History is not my subject." I would like to vehemently disagree. Your reflections on the ethics of historiography and reporting are groundbreaking. I discussed them with students in my seminars on research methods. For your observations make it very clear that you are not only a documentary-maker, but also a bridge builder between languages, past-present-future, between conflicting parties and also between women's and other social movements.

Urvashi often hears comments from people in the West saying that it must very difficult for a woman to be a publisher in India. She replies that it's no piece of cake to run a small feminist publishing house anywhere. She does not need pity. She is unflinching; she is obsessed, in the positive sense, emphatically and full of curiosity, with making the private a political issue using the spoken and written language. In this certainty, I congratulate you for this honour and am happy with you.

Christa Wichterich