

**S2 Ep08: The Power of Listening with Humility and
Prioritizing Intergenerational Leadership with Urvashi
Butalia**



Full Episode Transcript

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Mallika Dutt**

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What is the importance of women's stories? How do you learn the art of listening with humility and respect for storytellers? Join Urvashi Butalia from Zubaan to learn how to publish inclusive stories, practice intergenerational leadership and get on a bicycle before you turn 70.

Welcome to Leadership Moves, a podcast for visionary changemakers ready to shake up and re-envision the world. I'm your host, Mallika Dutt. Join me and my extraordinary guests as we discuss how to generate social change through leadership and the entrepreneurial, non-profit, and philanthropic fields.

Mallika: Hi, Urvashi, it's fantastic to see you. You have been such an integral part of my journey in the women's movement since I was – I don't know – in my 20s. And I still remember how excited I was to discover Kali which is one of the things that you founded way back in the day. And we all had those beautiful posters that Kali had published. And so, I'm having a little bit of a fangirl moment as we have this conversation almost 40 years after I met you.

So, good morning from New York. I know it's evening in India where you are. And welcome to Leadership Moves. I am so happy to be talking with you. Urvashi, I'm going to start off by asking you perhaps the most obvious question and that is why books, why publishing, that's been your heartbeat, your focus, where your attention has been for so many decades? And I wanted to know why that became your passion?

Urvashi: Thanks, Mallika. And let me first say hello to you too. And it's lovely to be talking to you. I too have watched your journey from the young activist into becoming, to put a bit of a joke on it, the head honcho feminist, activist, thinker, builder of institutions and all of that that you are. And I'm delighted to be speaking to you.

Books, well, it's a kind of combination of happenstance, also my professional capabilities and my political involvement which in my life came

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together in a seamless way. I think I was very lucky in that respect. So, it's around the 70s when women of my generation became involved in the women's movement in India. And we felt acutely the lack of knowledge about the complex issues that we were engaged in. It was impossible to figure out why violence was taking the shape it was, where it was coming from, what Kali was all about because there was no literature.

And just at that time I happened to have started a job in a publishing house. And I saw there the importance of books but also the partiality in the books and how the control of knowledge was in the hands of men. Who basically were the gatekeepers of knowledge, and all knowledge was about men and by men. And I just felt that this is so wrong. And that I could bring my professional commitment to the movement to sort of contribute to the movement through publications, through books, the kind of knowledge that we were all seeking.

So, for me it was really that. And that is a love and a commitment that has stayed because even though things have changed in terms of the physical book, but still the importance of knowledge, feminist knowledge does not go away. It's, if anything, more important. So that's I guess my explanation for that.

Mallika: When you say things have changed since the 70s when this was the moment when you made this choice and now we've got the women's movement, the feminist movement around the world. That's really pushed for the recognition and the placing of women's voices in the public arena. When you look at that trajectory what are the changes that you've seen in both the publishing world and also in terms of how women's voices are received since you're so involved and so committed to the dissemination of voices? What are some of the changes that you have witnessed?

Urvashi: I think it's different in different parts of the world. So, I would say for example in the west, in the United States, in the UK, in Europe the kinds of contributions made by feminist publishers were extremely important. But

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over time feminist publishing and knowledge created by feminists has come to be mainstreamed quite a lot. And that's not always a good thing but it's not a bad thing either.

I think for us here in India that has also happened. But there has also been a core of independent publishers who have continued to reach in their political [inaudible] and publish at the edge which I think is very important. I think that the ways in which feminist knowledge has entered curricula and is being taught through courses in women's and gender studies and through so called mainstream courses, that has been a very major change.

So, I, for example, I teach a course at three or four universities, the main one is Ashoka University. And the course is on feminism and the feminist movement in India. And I have 200 students every year. But the amazing thing is half of them are men. And it's very unusual because 30 years ago they wouldn't have touched something like this with a bargepole.

So, in that sense I think people are beginning to take feminist knowledge seriously, but it is still not being given the kind of recognition it deserves. And I think that is because there continues to be a huge resistance to it also across the world, India is no exception to that.

Mallika: And let's say a little bit about Zubaan Books, which is the organization that you founded and lead now. What are the kinds of stories that you're telling? What are the kinds of books that you're publishing? What's a publishing project that you're working on right now that's making you feel excited?

Urvashi: We founded Zubaan in 2003 when Kali the first feminist house was shut down after the two founders, Ritu Menon and myself, we decided to part ways. And we both went on to found our own publishing houses. So, ours was called Zubaan. And in many ways, Zubaan continued Kali's work of publishing books which came out of the movement. But we also

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expanded a lot to keep in touch with the times and the changes that were happening.

And when I spoke about things having changed earlier I should have mentioned this, that we also found that the book, while very important, was not the only means of communication. With the coming of the internet, with a whole range of different ways of sharing knowledge we needed to take account of that. So, in Zubaan, we created two institutions. We started off of course continuing the publishing. But then we split it into two, an NGO and a publishing house. And both are engaged in creating different kinds of knowledge.

But one of the things that became very important to us was to go beyond the first step which Kali had taken, of numbers, that we wanted to increase the numbers of books by women. But now it wasn't only about numbers, it was also unpacking the category, women, and looking at women on the margins, looking at cast, looking at religion, looking at other forms of marginalizations. It wasn't only about women, but it became about the inclusiveness of different genders, bringing in trans people and so on.

And this has become Zubaan's, I think, most challenging project because we have tried to be bibliodiverse in having an inclusive list. But in opening ourselves up for discussions within Zubaan, among our colleagues we have also been challenged by younger colleagues saying, "How can you call yourself a publisher, focusing on marginal and diverse voices if the editorial people in the organization are all upper class, upper cast?" So how can you change that? How can you create a diverse workforce?

How can you actually in a small organization, reserve posts and hold onto that while understanding that you have to put much more effort into actually looking for people on the margins because it's so much easier for upper class people to just jump into available jobs? So that actually is what we are trying to implement now. And I find it very exciting and very challenging

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because of course you come up as an employer, as somebody running an organization, you sometimes think, why can't I just take the easiest option?

The easiest option is the very option that you politically don't want to actually endorse and continue. And so, then you fight with yourself, and argue, and listen. And I have learned over the years to listen to my younger colleagues sometimes reluctantly, sometimes I get really annoyed and think they don't know what it is to run an organization. But then I go away and think about and think it's not personal. I have to listen to it. And for us that is currently the really interesting project. We're all trying to work on it.

We're all trying to actually go with our books and the knowledge we produce to our community of readers and supporters and say to them, "What do you think we should be doing? We've been doing this for so many years, are we doing it right? Did we do something wrong? What more can we do?" So that I think is a really interesting process of opening yourself up to criticism, and improvement, and really living your politics.

Mallika: It feels like a global conversation right now, this intergenerational challenge that so many organizations and leaders are being presented with. And in a way I feel like this really represents how successful our own movements towards justice have been. We demanded this kind of inclusion. We demanded equity. We demanded a transformation of the workspace as feminists, that's been a central part of really the social movements that we've created.

And now we're sort of at the next layer of it, really addressing all the intersectionalities of a feminist identity around cast, class, race, sexual orientation, preference, gender identity, geography, religion. I mean so many things. And I think it's really exciting that as a founder and also as somebody who is turning 70 very soon, tomorrow in fact, in terms of when we're recording this. That you as a leader are stepping into the discomfort of that challenge and saying, "Yes, let's figure it out."

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And in what you just said, you talked about the power of listening. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the book that you wrote, *The Other Side of Silence* and connect what you learned about listening from that work to how you practice listening now?

Urvashi: Yeah, Mallika, I worked on that book, on partition, it's an oral history of partition. And I worked on it for 10 years on and off, doing the research, not really knowing where I was going with it. But one of the things that really became important to me through that process was to learn how to listen to people because the kind of stories I was hearing, and I have to say that the listening is something as you know well, is something that we learned in the women's movement. Because we two as upper class activists in the movement, and you're much younger than I am.

But when we entered one of the first things that we did was to form listening groups, talking groups where we would sit around and talk to each other and tell stories. But we would also make sure that the you and I kind of woman did not always take a microphone and talk. But even so I think we learned that lesson, but I think we are still learning that lesson. Because once you sort of have the confidence to be articulated, so easy for you to jump in and take the mic and take the words so you have to constantly hold yourself back.

When I was doing the work on partition, for example, I came across people who had horrific stories and who in the normal course I would have been horrified to speak to. A man who killed his entire family and who I would have been – I mean I thought, how can I talk to a murderer? And then I thought, let me not be judgmental and let me listen. And when I listened to the stories there was so much more in them that I needed to take account of.

Similarly, listening to women, when I started to explore women's stories I went in with the feminist assumption that many women will have faced sexual violence. I will hear their stories, write about the sexual violence,

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and therefore liberate the story. But nothing could have been further from the truth because when I finally found women who had lived through sexual violence one of the things they did not want to do was to talk about it. And they said, “You can listen to our story but don’t tell it.”

So, for me then it became very important to ask myself this ethical question that what is my responsibility as a researcher to some abstract notion of truth or to the people I’m working with? And I decided it was to the people I was working with. And therefore, listening would mean listening but maintaining silence, and necessary speaking when necessary speaking with responsibility.

I learned many such lessons which helped me a great deal in the challenges that we face as an organization because I do believe that I have learned to listen as a result of that very deep exposure to listening to people who had tales of terrible grief, loss, sorrow to tell. And yet I think one might think that about oneself, but I also know that sometimes I don’t do it well. And sometimes I know that I am doing wrong even as I’m doing it. But you’re in a situation where it’s not easy to pull yourself out of it and then you have to go back to that later.

So, you have to also learn a kind of humility to admit, okay, I was wrong, okay, I got it wrong, and I want to restart this discussion. And I have to say, I don’t always manage to do it. I don’t want to sound heroic, I try. But I’d love to say that, yeah, it’s great, I can do it all the time, but I can’t, none of us can.

Mallika: Well, what you’re pointing to in terms of humility and also just self-awareness. I think that as leaders we often forget the internal work that’s necessary for us to show up. And so, to have the presence with oneself and the relationship with oneself to say, I didn’t get that right, I made a mistake, let me start over. I’m not perfect. Those are all things that we’re learning about ourselves and also learning to hold with a little bit of compassion for one another.

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So, I think that's such an important thing that you just shared with us and what the trajectory of learning to listen can take you to in terms of your own leadership. Where are you now in terms of your own journey? What's top of the mind for you, Urvashi, where are you focusing your energy on as a leader right now?

Urvashi: On many things, Mallika. I mean the fact of my turning 70 brings up a lot of things including mortality that you don't have that much longer to live. And really speaking as a leader or a founder of an organization you owe it to the organization to find a way of setting it on its feet so that it will and can continue because it is robust in so many ways. Of course, that is easier said than done and it doesn't only have to do with mortality, it also has to do with many other things.

I am deeply aware now and I have been for some years that actually the institution, Zubaan, that we collectively set up, it needs to detach itself from me. In many ways I as founder whose entire history in the movement is tied to it, it's almost a disadvantage for the new generation because they can't get rid of that weight, which must not be a weight. And I think in some ways it is like if a funder will come to us, they'll say, "Yeah, Urvashi has this history, and we'd be happy to give you funds."

And every time that happens I cringe because I think, no, that's not what it's about. Okay, I may have this history, but the organization has been built on the labor of so many people who have worked and it would never have managed to get where it has if it hadn't been for their labor. So, in a sense for me it's important to recognize that it is long past the time that it has moved beyond me as it should do. There should be changes and I need to step back, and I have to find a way of doing it.

And I'm talking to my colleagues about it, we are all discussing it. So, one thing is, I think it's a connective thing. One thing is for leaders to recognize that their time has come, and the institution needs them to take a backseat or step out altogether. But it's another thing to be able to create the space

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for new leadership and it's also another thing to expect the young people to give up their lives to live somebody else's dream in a sense, to put it a bit crassly.

And in Zubaan, we have a bunch of really good excellent young people. We are talking but my fear is if they don't want to dedicate even the next four years to Zubaan, who am I to ask them to do so? So then what happens? How do you start the process of finding other people? Because you need people who are invested in the movement. And this has happened to us in the past. We have had really good people ready to take over and then life has taken over and they've had to move to where their parents are or something like that.

So, in a sense you have to deal with all of that. Your own readiness, the organization's need, the needs, and priorities of the people who work in the organization. And if all of that doesn't match up well then you have to start rethinking and finding other people. And I am really afraid, I don't want to have to start rethinking. I want this fantastic group of people that I'm working with to be the ones who will run with Zubaan. And I know they have the capacity and I hope they're willing to. So that's what I hope, I hope that works out.

So let me tell you that because I became ill with COVID like everybody else in the world, and they have banned me from coming to work for the next five days. And they have said to me, "If we can't survive five days without you then we've got a very serious crisis which is worse than COVID." So, I'm not allowed to look into any office thing for at least five days. So actually, the first day I was really agitated and now I'm quite happy. So, I'm thinking, okay, that's great, I'll get another few days.

Mallika: I'm laughing because sometimes it's the spaciousness that has to be created in order to allow for whatever it is that has to emerge to emerge. I mean there is this way in which even the way you've described all the

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questions you're asking and what you desire for Zubaan is still with you very much sort of holding that driver's seat.

And so, this example that you have just shared about needing to step away from the organization for five days is I think has some really deep wisdom in there about creating the spaciousness for things to emerge that maybe are not so controlled by you as the founder and the leader. And I'm laughing also because I went through this transition myself running Breakthrough. I was the founder, the president, the CEO for 17 years.

And what I realized is that so much of our identity is defined by the work that we do in the world. And that in some ways we have replicated some of the old patterns perhaps of patriarchy where that self-definition around work becomes so important, that letting that go creates a crisis of who am I? Who am I if I am not doing this or if I'm not attached to this primary identity that I have in the world?

So, I know for me when I finally left Breakthrough I was so burned out that I just needed a couple of years to rest. I was so exhausted. And I'm really happy to hear about the self-awareness with which you're embarking on this journey of transformation and separation. And I'm wondering, Urvashi, if you've thought about if you're not this involved with Zubaan, what else you might be doing. Is there another dream that's knocking on your door, another book in the making, a desire to travel to the Galapagos Islands? I'd love to hear about what's calling you.

Urvashi: Yeah. Well, I have to say before that, Mallika, that I have always admired the way that you managed to step out of Breakthrough and then what you've done with your life after that. And I think that the timing was also right, 17 years is a long time. But you're young enough to do something else, step into something else. And in a sense, the time to leave an organization is when it's on a high. It's the best time to really go. And I should have done it earlier, although Zubaan is pretty much on a high now.

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What would I do? I'd love to write more. My writing has really taken a backseat. I have been finishing a book for 10 years which still hasn't got finished. I should have done it. There's another one I want to write. I promised myself that I would read all the books that Zubaan has published, even though I know most of them, but I would love to do that. I would love to do more research. And Zubaan's doing lots of really interesting projects. One of them is to build a 100 year history of the women's movement in India in graphic stories.

And I'd love to be involved in maybe researching some of that, in one particular area or something like that. And one of the promises that I made to myself that I would do before I turned 70 was to learn how to ride a bicycle because I missed out on that in the transition from Punjab to Delhi at the age when I should have learned. And so, I did actually, I fulfilled my promise. I have learned how to ride a bicycle. And now what I want to do is get on to it and sort of ride around just to enjoy that. I would love to do a little more of that.

Travel, I don't know. I have traveled a lot. I'd love to go to different places, but I suspect as you grow older you become a burden on people if you're traveling, so I would rather not do that, be independent and hang around. I'm pretty much a homebird. So read, write, walk, cycle, all of that.

Mallika: I just had this vision of you, Urvashi, on your bicycle with your [inaudible] flowing behind you, with this amazing panorama of this big sun in the distance, fields around you with this giant smile on your face. And you cycling away and enjoying nature even as your mind was thinking about whatever, the next book or a part of the 100 year history of the feminist movement. But just the wind in your hair, on your face, the sun on your skin. And it was just such a delicious vision and I hope that for you.

Urvashi: It really does sound like bliss, yeah.

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Mallika: Thank you so much, Urvashi, this was a fantastic conversation and many, many gems, many pieces of wisdom for so many of us who are in these situations of change, transformation, letting go, surrender, curious about what is coming next. All at the time of this great global pandemic which certainly adds its own layer of complexity to everything that we're thinking about. But a very happy birthday to you, Urvashi, may this 71st year that is going to begin around the sun just be full of cycle adventures and beautiful books, and all that your heart desires. Thank you.

Urvashi: Thank you. Thanks, Mallika, that's lovely, thank you.

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