

## Count me in! Conference : 16-18 April 2011

The inaugural day of CREA's count me IN! conference began with a speech filled with hope and ended on a performance about limitless possibility. After months of preparation and planning, almost 300 participants finally converged on the Nepalese city of Kathmandu on April 15, 2011.



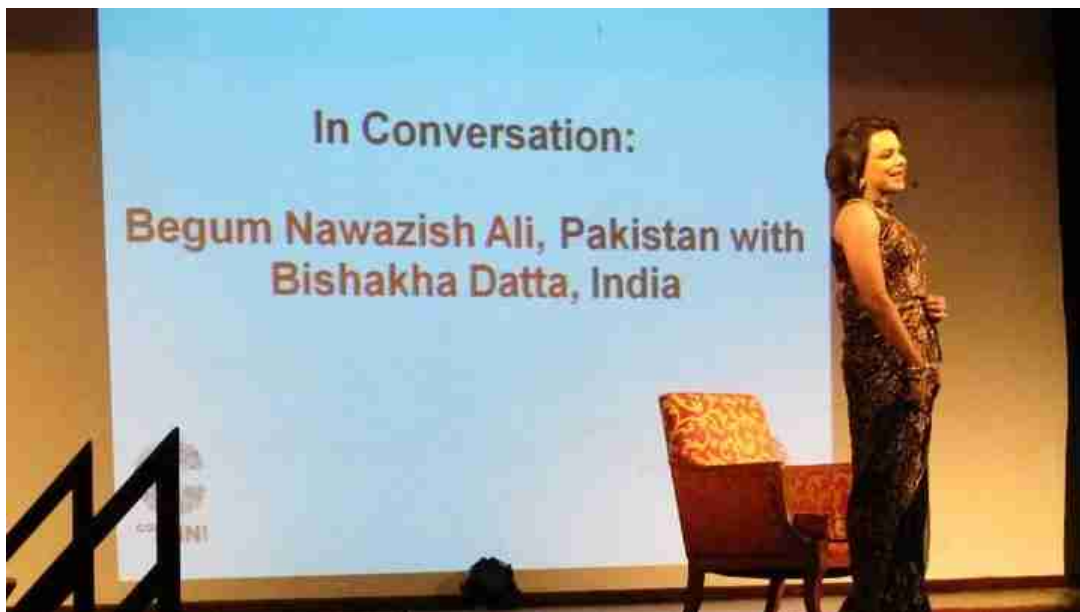
Main Entrance

The next three days were remarkable in various ways; the sheer diversity of people and groups who had made the journey to get to Kathmandu by air, train and in certain cases even by road; the fact that multiple issues were discussed in multiple ways breaking away from the traditional forms of presenting ideas and using more interactive formats in sessions; the vibrant performances, films, and exhibitions punctuating stimulating discussions and adding energy and colour to each day's proceedings; and most of all the fact that for the first time a genuinely representative group of South Asian lesbians, disabled women, trans people and sex workers collected under one roof to share their experiences, research, learning and strategies with each other.

Day one saw Sapana Pradhan Malla, Nepalese lawyer and member of the Nepalese Constituent Assembly, outlining what could be ground breaking changes to the Nepalese constitution. The new draft constitution recognises non-discrimination based on gender, sex, health, pregnancy, marital status and disability as a start. The Nepalese government has also signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and hospitals in Nepal have been instructed to address the reproductive needs of women with disabilities.

However, while the law is indeed a vehicle for change, the culture of impunity or lack of implementation is a challenge and indeed one that is common in South Asia. How much do progressive laws change the daily realities of stigma, violence and discrimination faced by marginalised women?

Bishaka Datta, non-fiction writer and documentary filmmaker, spoke about divisions in the women's movement on issues of morality, sexuality and representation. Certain women are not represented or violence of certain types is accepted/not defined as violence, for instance violence against sex workers. She also urged us to relinquish a binary view of the women's movement-centre and the margins – and instead create an expanded canvas (capable of accommodating diversity in sexualities, identities, abilities and work) within which violence against all women and the rights of all women matter.



Begum Nawazish Ali

Day one also gave us all the opportunity to listen to the famous anchor and TV personality from Pakistan, Begum Nawaazish Ali engaging in a very lively conversation with Datta. Begum's steadfast refusal to pigeonhole her/himself, "Physically I am a man, and mentally I am a woman, and that's my reality", ignited some debate from activists who felt that Begum should claim an identity and fight for a cause.

Ability Unlimited, India's only dance theatre group comprised entirely of dancers with disabilities enthralled us all in the evening, people expressing that they were simultaneously humbled and awed by the sheer physical ability of these performers, using wheelchairs as an extension of their bodies to create magic on stage.



## Ability Unlimited

By the end of day one, questions had been asked, assumptions challenged and ideas planted. Many participants were meeting activists from across South Asia for the first time and one of the many striking aspects as **day two** of the conference began was the camaraderie in evidence as groups usually marginalised in society took centre stage here.

Sunil Babu Pant, the first openly gay member of Parliament in Nepal and retired Chief Justice A. P. Shah of India who authored the critical opinion reading down section 377 in India began the morning with a discussion on legal milestones. Pant pointed out that we have to learn to go beyond our own issues, or at least to frame and locate our struggles within larger ones – within the larger political project of building inclusive, democratic, rights-affirming societies.

Justice Shah looking specifically at the role of the law and how it intersects with religion, morality, health, dignity and culture addressed the idea of public as opposed to constitutional morality. The whole idea of constitutional morality, he suggested is critical within a modern democracy where certain fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution must be upheld-regardless of the fact that these sometimes may be objected to on the grounds of public 'values' or 'morals.' We can't put it better than Justice Shah did when he said, *"why should someone's dignity and ability be judged by his or her sexual preference or profession? Why should someone's fundamental life choices be conditioned by other people's prejudice, ignorance and stigmatisation? Why should public health be compromised by an archaic and pedantic notion of public morality?"*

An inspired group moved on to the breakaway panels where people gathered in specific streams (transgender, disabled, lesbian and sex workers) to provide inspiring testimony and discuss strategies either personal or communal that they use to mobilise and support groups and individuals. The sex workers panel spent some time looking at the way groups are starting to access and utilise public space to contest external representations of their community. VAMP screened a short movie that they had made as a response to a documentary on Devadasis, which they felt had maligned their community and their beliefs. This resulted in the offensive material in the documentary being removed, a victory for this group who would otherwise have found it very difficult to make their objections public.

An interesting idea posited during the queer panel, maybe there are advantages to not being 'counted in'; perhaps sometimes exclusion has pleasures of its own and insisting on being counted has a downside, compelling you to categorise yourself in a specific way and define what you are asking for. A recurring theme at the conference was this idea that maybe the 'boxes' are just not necessary. But do we know how to do without them or how to articulate needs and rights outside of an 'identity politics' space?

Day two ended with an electrifying performance by Marta Carrasco, the award winning contemporary dancer from Spain, whose performance drew us into the solitary life of a woman on the edge, dealing with her own loneliness, dependencies and self and body image and evoking longing, anger, desperation and humour. Her powerful depiction managed to energise the crowd into a standing ovation after an exhausting day!

Arundhati Roy in conversation with Shohini Ghosh held the audience totally mesmerised at the opening session of **Day 3** of Count me In!. She discussed her childhood, her relationship with the iconic Mary Roy, her mother, and her struggles with the Indian government, with candour and humour. She pointed out that many of the current policies disempower and alienate millions of the poorest and most vulnerable in the country. Participants were stirred by her vision of social justice and her willingness to be an object of vilification in India-Roy has no problem being 'hated' by certain constituencies. Her detractors are incidental, those who love her, are those on whose behalf she speaks, *"finding beauty in the saddest places and honing it into a weapon of war"*. One idea of Roy's that found particular quarter with the audience, her oft quoted line from 'The God of Small Things' that refers to *"the love laws, that lay down who should be loved and how and how much."* The not so subtle tyranny of knowing that you cannot help but transgress is something that many participants were all too familiar with. As Shohini Ghosh pointed out towards the end of the conversation, Roy plants ideas in your head *"which you can't unthink now"* and indeed why would you want to?



Arundhati Roy

Roy is not an easy act to follow but excellent breakaway sessions kept participants energised as they divided up to learn about and strategise on many different issues including new forms of media being used for activism and social change; research on violence against marginalised women in south Asia; sexual rights and the women's movement; and the politics of advocacy and service provision.

The brilliant GIMP project from New York (a mixed group of able bodied and



disabled dancers) kept people awake after lunch. GIMP performed an extract from their show, which examines the uncompromising ways we are often identified or defined by our physicality. The dancers followed this with a question and answer session that gave participants very interesting insights into the ways in which the body can be challenged. As one dancer pointed out, sometimes disability is a hidden thing, not so obvious to see, other times it is very visible. The question is not so much what limits us but rather what pushes us forward- and the personal reasons why individuals choose to push themselves in various ways, the joy, liberation and sense of control that it gives them.

The ideas that came up in this session, around bodies and the assumptions made about disabled bodies, resonated strongly with disabled participants. Malini Chib, author of 'One Little Finger', had made the point in her session that disabled women are perceived as sexual infants and treated as totally asexual. Anita Ghai, disability rights activist, had spoken about the "ableist society" that we live in which does not create or allow opportunities for disabled people to improve the quality of their lives. The interaction with members of GIMP reiterated the idea that individuals can positively instigate change for themselves and improve their quality of life if certain structures and facilities are made available.



Outside the Plenary Room

Three days of new ideas, new alliances, new strategies and new hope drew to a close to the resounding music and dance of the Sahodari Foundation's trans choir. Participants were left reflecting on the many questions that had arisen about the nature of counting and exclusion, the strategies discussed, knowledge gleaned and inspiration provided, the solidarity and support developed between

individuals and groups from different countries and the possibilities and opportunities that lie ahead.

Feedback is flooding in! We have compiled a few of the mails below.

“To me, the Count Me in Conference served the purpose of what a conference is meant to do-- provide a platform for new ideas to be sown, germinated or take root; serve as collective acknowledgement of issues and a collective commitment to do something about them; provide an opportunity for activists focused on their own sectors and worlds to think large, out of the box, and develop fresh ideas and new contacts for their work....

And so let's count: A team of whirling dervishes in wheelchairs embracing the divine, a cross-dressing Pakistani TV presenter who challenges social norms with silver screen wit and sarcasm, a paraplegic woman who typed a 50,000 word manuscript with one finger, representatives of a 70,000 member sexworker trade union from Calcutta, a Booker Prize winning author Arundhati Roy speaking about her dissident life (much to the delight of South Asia's disability rights activists), an Indian High Court Judge and the first out gay Nepali MP showing that change is possible through the state if there is a movement pushing for accountability and supporting this leadership and reportedly the first ever gathering of South Asian lesbians in the region.”

(Jessica Horn, Consultant Women's Rights, East Africa)

“We want to say a big thank you to you both for helping Aramanayagam and Buddhika to participate in a truly wonderful conference. It was the first time they flew out of Sri Lanka and also, the first time they participated in an international conference of this nature that dealt with issues of marginalised women and transgendered persons. They told us that they learnt a great deal during their stay in Nepal and that they enjoyed every minute of it. Their understanding and comprehension of the issues of marginalisation of women and transgendered persons broadened considerably by the interactions they had at the conference” (Sagara, Companions on a Journey, Sri Lanka)

“The conference report Nighat sent to us tells how fantastic and successful this conference was. Signing praises for the great arrangements, she informed that how many important and diverse issues were covered at this event. For us, CREA conference provided first ever direct contact and networking opportunities with the communities, whom we have been longing to work with in Pakistan for a long time now.” (Shahzad Ahmad, Country Coordinator, Bytes for all, Pakistan)

All of the conference sessions were recorded and these are currently being edited and digitised. They will be loaded on the CREA website by the end of May and will act as a comprehensive resource.