

Chapter 16

In the Aftermath of Critique: The Journey after *Sangtin Yatra*

Richa Singh and Richa Nagar

When a movement stops asking questions, of itself, of the world, it becomes orthodoxy – an idea that has run out of ideas. It becomes fixed, static, brittle, rather than fluid. Water can resist the most savage of blows, ice shatters. It is only armed with our questions, that we can change history.

Notes from Nowhere 2003: 499

मन में सवाल उठता है कि कैसे हो सकती हैं सारी महिलाएं एक? हजारों किलोमीटर की दूरी चन्द्र घंटों में पूरी करने वाली कुछ महिलाएं, और चन्द्र किलोमीटर की दूरी कई घंटों में पूरी करने वाली महिलाएं, और वे जिन्हें कभी गाँवों में अपने घरों की दहलीज लौंघने का मौका नहीं मिलता, जिनका पूरा जीवन ससुराल और मायके के बीच के रास्ते में बीत जाता है – क्या यह सारी महिलाएं कभी एक हो सकती हैं? यह बहुत बड़ा भेद है और इस भेद के रहते इस भेद को बरकरार रखने वाले लोगों को यह हक नहीं बनता कि वे सब महिलाओं के एक होने की बात कहें। इनके दर्द और अरमान कभी एक नहीं हो सकते। अक्सर उच्च— या मध्यम—वर्गीय महिलाएं यह कहती हैं कि हिंसा तो सभी महिलाओं के साथ है, हाँ, उसके प्रकार अलग—अलग हैं। बिल्कुल सही। लेकिन पेट की भूख, या बीमारी से टूटता शरीर, या कल कहाँ से खायेगें की फ़िक्र, या भारी बारिश में अपने छप्पर को बचाती महिला के कष्ट क्या बिल्कुल अलग नहीं होंगे?

These thoughts, first written in Hindustani¹ by Richa Singh in April 2005, point to a personal and collective turmoil with questions of inequality and the im/possibility of feminists to impose a unified voice. Reflecting on her own recently completed (paid) air-trip for a conference in Mumbai, and her return back to a village in Sitapur on a *thelia*,² Richa Singh wrestles with the question of how there can be 'oneness' among those women who cover the distance of thousands of kilometers in a few hours, those who cover the distance of a few kilometers in several hours, and those who never get an opportunity to step out of the threshold of their homes and whose lives are spent on the paths that connect their *mayaka* to their *sasural*?³ Her gut feeling tells her that people who participate in maintaining these gulfs have no right to claim that all women are equal. No matter what the arguments about all women confronting similar forms of violence—the pains and concerns of a woman who has to think about the hunger of her belly, or a body-breaking illness, or how to feed her family the next day, or how to save her thatched roof from the heavy rains—can never be the same as those of upper and middle-class women desirous of claiming commonality of experience with her.

This turmoil with in/equality and im/possibility of experiential commonality that we attempt to *translate* here has not emerged in isolation. It has emerged from an ongoing journey that began in March 2002 for nine travelers, seven of whom

make a living as village-level NGO workers in the Sitapur District of Uttar Pradesh (Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Shashi Vaish, Shashibala, Surbala, Vibha Bajpayee); the eighth, as a district-level NGO activist in Sitapur (Richa Singh); and the ninth, as a teacher at the University of Minnesota (Richa Nagar). We initially came together to critically reflect on internal processes and politics of NGO-work and the labor of activism, social change, and knowledge production from the perspective and priorities of the village-level NGO workers who undertake the main labor of translating the projects of empowerment on the ground. Confrontations, dialogues and negotiations with multiple inequalities—of social hierarchies, status, education, resources, and language—within the collective and within the structures in which each member of the collective is embedded, have been the primary vehicles to advance this journey.⁴

Here we summarize some of the key segments of this journey, reflecting on the manner in which the collective's investment in the politics of women's development NGOs and the overwhelming response generated by our collaborative book, *Sangtin Yatra* (Anupamlata et. al. 2004), opened spaces for the authors to participate in and critically interrogate new sites of formal knowledge production. Specifically, the collective's agenda in the aftermath of the reception of *Sangtin Yatra* has evolved through encounters and engagements with international solidarity networks and donor agencies, academic publishing; and national curriculum development initiatives. The transnational nature of our alliance has played a vital role in shaping the forms and outcomes of these engagements.

We begin by outlining the significance of *Sangtin Yatra* for our intellectual and political growth as an alliance across borders, and how this essay feeds into that process of growing. The two subsequent sections consider the effects of *Sangtin Yatra*, and the ways that these have inserted the collective into struggles around the politics of knowledge production in new institutional sites. Finally, we reflect on the manner in which the transnational nature of our alliance has enabled our critical engagements with structures and norms of 'professionalism' and 'expertise' locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, as well as the limitations and contradictions that remain buried in these engagements.

Can analytical frameworks travel? Imagining 'relevant' bordercrossings through and beyond *Sangtin Yatra*

संगतिन यात्रा क्या सिर्फ एक पुस्तक है? नहीं, यह तो हम संगतिनों का संविधान है। कुछ भी काम करते हुए—चाहे गाँवों में हों, चाहे किसी बड़े मंच पर—हम सबको यह बराबर याद रहता है कि हमने संगतिन यात्रा में क्या लिखा है। हमें यह अपनी बहुत बड़ी ज़िम्मेदारी लगती है कि हमने जो लिखा है उसी दिशा में आगे बढ़ना है।

In the Awadhi⁵ language, *sangtin* is a term of solidarity, reciprocity, and close companionship among women. The word, *yatra*, in both Awadhi and Hindi, means journey. The name *Sangtin Yatra* captures the essence of our collaboration, while also highlighting the name of the organization Sangtin, in whose name the collective wants to continue the work of combining rigorous research, radical activism and creative writing in the villages of Sitapur. For the

travelers who have become *sangtins* through this journey, *Sangtin Yatra* is not simply a book; it is our constitution. Whether the members of the collective are working in the villages or on a bigger platform, we always recognize that our primary responsibility is to grow in the directions that we have identified for ourselves in *Sangtin Yatra*.

The writing of *Sangtin Yatra* marked a significant moment of creation in our collaboration. We learned to identify the classed, caste, communal and gendered processes that had shaped our differentiated pasts and presents as well as our encounters, investments and embeddedness in structures of privilege and oppression. We recognized how these processes fractured both subjectivities and solidarities, and that the task of imagining transformative politics necessarily implied engaging with and producing uncomfortable dialogues with and about difference within collectives and institutions. In part, these dialogues are targeted at troubling the discursive practices associated with projects of 'poor' women's empowerment, and in part, they seek to imagine new ways of sharing authority, imagining reciprocity, and enacting accountability.

We braid and unbraided the lives and struggles of seven *sangtins* who work as village-level activists – their childhoods and coming of age, their marriages and encounters with motherhood, and their growth as NGO workers and feminists. We challenge the expressions and agendas of donor-sponsored global feminisms that equate impoverished or Dalit rural women's oppression to 'private' practices such as 'veiling' and whose conceptualizations of 'violence against women' refuse to recognize how the poor rural men themselves are excluded from the dominant order of development and patriarchy. We explore how the micropolitics of professionalism and expertise serve to reinforce and reconstitute elitism, casteism and communalism in women's development organizations, albeit in the name of saving the monolithic 'woman-as-victim' – the new globalized, subaltern 'woman' who is the subject of justice (through 'expert' intervention) under international capitalism. Through this process of braiding words, silences, and critiques—spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten—we forge a collective identity as activists, thinkers and writers who are committed to reclaiming the sites of 'empowerment' – politically, economically, and intellectually.⁶

The process that culminated in the writing of *Sangtin Yatra* was intense; it was intoxicating and exhausting, inspiring and challenging, and it allowed us to dream and cry together. Little did we recognize before the public release of *Sangtin Yatra*, however, that the collective articulation of *sangtins'* stories and critiques was the easiest step in a tough journey that had yet to unfold. The warm welcome received by the book in the Hindi media, in the homes and offices of NGO workers, and in the communities of progressive artists and intellectuals was overwhelming. But the wide media attention in the vernacular spaces generated an angry response from a prominent women's NGO and its allies. These responses pushed the collective to invest itself in issues of knowledge production

for multiple audiences in myriad and complex ways. Questions about power, privilege, mediation and representation have posed constructive challenges as well as political possibilities for *sangtins* to grow as an alliance of transnational actors – an alliance interested in understanding and transforming frameworks and institutional spaces and hierarchies in and through which knowledge about issues and processes such as difference and discrimination, oppression and resistance, justice and empowerment is produced, recognized and validated. While grappling with these more ‘abstract’ concerns, the collective has also juggled more ‘concrete’ priorities such as the relationship between intellectual critique, political journey and livelihoods, and whether and how a multi-locational and multi-institutional alliance can maintain a balance among these without centering the vantage points of more privileged members of the collective.

This essay authored by two of the nine *sangtins* is itself a part of our ongoing battles and negotiations, not simply within the collective, but also with spaces of academia, NGOs and think-tanks. In merging our analysis from our specific institutional contexts (and linguistic comforts and discomforts with respect to English), we are acutely aware of the limitations and contradictions of our locations – starkly unequal in relation to each other, yet more privileged vis-à-vis other *sangtins*.⁷ We also recognize the responsibilities and possibilities that open up with the act of claiming this analytical space together. Our co-authorship underscores the collective’s position that in any long-term collaboration across unequal worlds, the accounting of the nature and bearers of benefits and losses cannot be undertaken from the perspective of a single institutional location or by a single member of the alliance. Rather, it is in and through the collaborative moments of reflection and writing that the alliance gains new energy and insights to advance the struggle, to reassess the meanings of what has been gained or lost, and to determine the directions in which new steps might be taken.

In linking various segments of our *yatra* in different institutional realms, then, we consciously blur the conventional definitions of academic, activist, and creative writing. To advance the collective’s goal of widening the political and intellectual spaces for its struggles, we write with two audiences in mind: (a) the readership of *Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies of India*; and (b) those NGO workers, organizers, public intellectuals, and community members who wish to know where and how our journey is moving in the aftermath of the critique produced in *Sangtin Yatra*. To better reach this second audience, the Hindustani version of this chapter will appear in Sangtin’s newsletter column, *Sangtin Yatra Jaari Hai* (the journey of *sangtins* continues). By crafting an analysis that attempts to advance dialogue(s) with these audiences simultaneously, we hope to resist a common tendency to maintain a separation between the theoretical and political insights that are produced for national and international Anglophone academic audiences on the one hand, and for the activists, NGO workers, community members, and thinkers in the vernacular realm, on the other.

In order to achieve this simultaneous resonance and relevance across worlds, we continue to rework here (as we did in *Sangtin Yatra*) the tones, styles and languages in which narratives and analysis are produced in conventional intellectual productions, NGO reports and journalism. We share with you notes from a *yatra* that is in the process of continuously unfolding – notes that are interwoven with an evolving praxis in which nine collaborators from diverse locations learn and grow together as we articulate our overlapping intellectual agendas, determine the trajectories of our political journeys as individuals and members of an alliance, and as we get inserted in new institutional spaces with familiar hierarchies and inequalities—of caste, religion, class, gender, and geographical scale/location—and begin the process of understanding, challenging and transforming them.

The journey after *Sangtin Yatra*: Specifying/translating the ‘politics’ of knowledge production

Within three weeks of its public release in Lucknow, *Sangtin Yatra* became a target of attack by NSY, a pseudonym we use for a large government-sponsored NGO where seven out of nine authors were employed: four as mobilizers, one as a teacher in a literacy center, one as a junior resource person, and one as the coordinator of all others in the district. The backlash developed into an intense controversy that focused on authorizing or discrediting the ‘truths’ of the *sangtins* as well as recognition or dismissal of the partnership among the nine authors. The details of this controversy and the contents of the original *Sangtin Yatra* are covered in the collective’s English book, *Playing with Fire* (Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] 2006). Here we briefly reflect on NSY’s attack and how it led us to seek allies and supporters transnationally, and subsequently to create *Playing with Fire*.

The following excerpts from *Playing with Fire* give a flavor of the critique that made *Sangtin Yatra* controversial:

Excerpt One:

Hasn’t it been only six years since we first learned to ride our bikes and stormed the neighborhoods, streets and villages of Sitapur? Who among us had imagined that we would so confidently rebel and march out of the same households that caged usWhen we prepared to write this book, we again felt a sense of adventure creeping into our bones. Would this world be able to see us formerly uneducated women as writers? Would it give us the same respect and wisdom that it accords to all its upper caste and elite scholars and thinkers? Would our readers be able to value the courage and trust with which we have poured out our most cherished and intimate moments, our deepest sorrows and wounds of humiliation, and everything sweet and bitter that we have encountered in our lives? We knew all too well from working in a women’s organization that it is much easier to interrogate the definitions of honor, morality and justice by giving instances from the lives of others, rather than by applying those critiques to our own clans and families. Even so, we unveiled details about our lives in our

diaries and discussions because we believed that we would not be able to advance this struggle by hiding things. We suspect that our readers will read with pleasure—and perhaps, respect—the details we furnish here about our intimate lives and relationships, our sexuality, our poverty, and the putrid swamps of casteism and communalism that we live in. But we wonder whether they would be able to read with equal pleasure or respect our analyses and critiques of women’s and development NGOs. But on this issue, too, we were inspired by the belief that if we couldn’t muster the courage to say everything even after arriving at this juncture in our journey, then it would be difficult to fight the battles to come.

Excerpt Two

[T]he scope of work done by rural-level NGO workers is defined in a rather constrained way in every respect. We are not given many opportunities that would allow us to link what is happening in our villages to the conditions and struggles ongoing in other states and countries. Similarly, we are not able to fully connect the violence against Dalit women with other forms of violence . . . Almost every other day, new workshops are organized to ensure that our documentation is refined and polished in accordance with the wishes of our funders. But . . . we get very few spaces or resources to grapple with a range of sociopolitical processes that are discussed in academic seminars and make the national and international headlines every day – e.g., globalization and the negotiations of the World Trade Organization, the ever increasing suicides of peasants in our country, or the privatization of water. As a result, we face severe limits in our ability to relate these processes to the kinds of violence that are wreaked regularly on the bodies and minds of women in our villages. And it is precisely our inability to make these connections that allows established experts and other researchers to carry out study projects “on” us . . . In Sangtin, we have decided to reflect in depth on how violence that is targeted on women’s bodies is interwoven with other forms of violence, and to advance those reflections and understandings collectively with members of our village communities.

The insights coproduced in *Sangtin Yatra* parallel and complement critiques that have been reverberating for over a decade on the changing configurations of NGOs under neo-liberalism. NGOs’ increasing dependence on foreign donors and government funding has gone hand in hand with their growth as an arm of the state; as a result, activism is increasingly privatized and resistance gets converted into jobs that fetch salaries (Armstrong 2004; Kamat 2002; Roy 2004). Furthermore, the structures and practices of information retrieval and knowledge production work in ways that southern NGOs and their workers frequently become suppliers of intellectual raw materials for the Northern NGOs; the latter demand transparency and accountability from the former ‘while maintaining secrecy and no accountability in return’ (Nnaemeka 2004: 367). Greater dependence and closeness to funders result in upward accountability and technocratic definitions of achievement in the NGOs, so that ‘unit costs,’

quantifiable 'outputs', and detailed specifications of what 'partners' are expected to do, become organizational norms (Hulme and Edwards 1997: 8). This kind of instrumentalist approach where empowerment becomes a blueprint is inconsistent with claims to promote long-term qualitative change and forecloses possibilities of true partnerships. In the realm of women's movements, professionalization of 'gender issues' and decline in feminist mobilization on the ground has often been accompanied by 'the NGOization of grassroots feminisms.' This phenomenon is marked by the rise of a class of 'femocrats' which unilaterally tends to decide what is best for all women, at the same time when women's NGOs have been reduced to marginalized forces within corporatist civil society (Lang 2000, Spivak 2000).

When nine *sangtins* decided to share their reflections on similar trends in 'lay' language with local communities and NGOs workers in *Sangtin Yatra*, it created a massive furore in NSY. Question marks were placed on the truth of the *sangtins'* critiques; on the credentials of rural NGO workers as legitimate intellectuals; on the ownership of the collective's ideas and efforts; and on the honesty of Richa Singh and Richa Nagar who allegedly had—for selfish reasons—tricked the less privileged rural activists to 'shamelessly' spill their personal stories and to bite the hand that fed them. Within a month of the book's public release, NSY began verbal harassment of the authors based in Sitapur. This was followed by official notices transferring Richa Singh out of Sitapur and threatening to fire Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Richa Singh, Shashibala, Shashi Vaish and Vibha Bajpayee on the grounds that they had participated in a criminal act against NSY by writing *Sangtin Yatra*.⁸ As for Richa Nagar, the NSY leadership concluded that she was back in Minnesota, the book was out, and the drama of collaboration was over. A letter to the chair of Women's Studies at Minnesota accused Richa Nagar of leading an unethical and exploitative research project, and demanded that the chair take disciplinary action against her (Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] 2006).

But why did *Sangtin Yatra* become a cheeky mistake for which the authors had to be punished, when similar arguments have been made by prominent critics writing for highly educated audiences? *Sangtin Yatra* explicitly contests representational practices where rural women are 'solicited, cajoled, encouraged to speak' so that 'developed' urban women 'may speak to one another about "them"' (Lazreg 2002: 127). The authors formed an alliance to critically reflect and write about the lives and work of the seven village-level NGO activists—not to produce entertaining stories for crass consumption by the urban middle-class—but to make our self-critiques the basis of imagining new directions for the activists' future political work with the poorest communities in rural Sitapur. After considerable reflection on the division and definitions of 'skills' that went into the book's writing and production, each author believed that the work was written and 'owned' by all *sangtins*. We self-published the book in the name of Sangtin, the organization that the authors based in Sitapur had cofounded (with other

community workers) in 1999 to carry on their work after the time-bound program of NSY withdrew from the Mishrikh block of Sitapur.

These strategies of representation were articulated by *sangtins* as an intervention into the politics of knowledge production. However, it was not until the visibility of *Sangtin Yatra* made our collaboration suspect and a source of insult to the state-level leadership of NSY that the collective began to grapple more deeply with the political meanings of knowledge, and the relations, conditions, tools, languages and names through which its producers and content are legitimized, challenged or eliminated. The attacks in the aftermath of our initial critique revealed to us that the norms and culture of expertise that we had critiqued in *Sangtin Yatra* were a tiny piece of a much larger picture; continuing the *yatra* necessarily entailed a commitment to disrupt the order of dominating knowledges and of the hierarchies of status and authority from which expertise is produced in our societies. As Edward Said (2002: 119) notes, the cult of professionalism and expertise has created a positive (as opposed to an implicit or passive) doctrine of noninterference among fields. Consequently, the most crucial policy questions affecting human existence are left to 'experts' whose language is 'oblivious to everything but a well-guarded, constantly shrinking fiefdom forbidden to the uninitiated' (Said 2002: 128). As professionals are bestowed special privileges of knowing how things really work and of being close to power, what emerges is an interpretive community whose constituency, specialized language and concerns 'tend to get tighter, more airtight, more self-enclosed as its own self-conforming authority acquires more power, the solid status of orthodoxy and a stable constituency' (Said 2002: 127-128). To counter this cult of professionalism, Said calls for a 'politics of interpretation' rooted in a dialectical response. Non-interference and specialization must be replaced by *interference*, 'a crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make' (Said 2002: 145). According to Said, the first task in this exercise is to have the recovery of a history hitherto either misrepresented or rendered invisible. The next phase requires:

connecting these more politically vigilant forms of interpretation to an ongoing political and social praxis . . . For to move from interpretation to its politics is in large measure to go from undoing to doing, and this . . . is risking all the discomfort of a great unsettlement in ways of seeing and doing (Said 2002: 147).

If *Sangtin Yatra* was an attempt to recover narratives of those who are frequently misrepresented and rendered invisible by the development industry, the journey in the aftermath of *Sangtin Yatra* has been a move from undoing to doing. Not surprisingly, this move brought a new set of challenges – that of recognizing and politicizing the locations and languages from which the undoing can be translated into doing.

The attack on the *sangtins'* livelihoods and freedom of expression was made worse by the reality of a collective that was scattered in two continents, two districts, and six villages. Meanwhile, the authors in Sitapur were incessantly maligned in their workplace: Not only had they 'stripped themselves naked,' they had also overstepped their '*auqat*' (limits) by critiquing those very institutions that had taught them how to 'speak' and 'step out' of their cages. Moreover, NSY's tremendous influence at the state and national levels and its credentials as an organization dedicated to the empowerment of 'most marginalized' women, made it difficult for the collective to get overt support of individuals or organizations who had co-dependencies with NSY. The *sangtins* in Sitapur became convinced that it was time to mobilize pressure from supporters in a way that could by-pass the politics of NSY at the state and national levels, and yet make the Government feel responsible for the actions of NSY. The result was a cyber-petition prepared with the help of supporters in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Minnesota, Washington DC and New York. Signed by Indian professors and activists in India, Nepal, USA and UK, the petition was dispatched to seven departments of the state and central governments. The petition coincided with commentaries written by prominent educators and critics in national dailies and periodicals to support us in our battle. NSY's attacks on the village-level NGO workers stopped within days of the receipt of petition and publication of commentaries, but Richa Singh's transfer was not withdrawn.

Arguably, both the backlash, and the petition and commentaries supporting *Sangtin Yatra* can be seen as paving the way for new trans/national solidarities on the politics of NGOization and knowledge production. The issues of elitism, exploitation and accountability that we had raised in the book now acquired more gravity and visibility. As reviews and excerpts from the book kept appearing in the Hindi press beyond the borders of Uttar Pradesh, we grew confident that our analysis was converging with the struggles and concerns of many. Ultimately, it was the courage derived from this kind of wide support that led Richa Singh to resign from NSY and return to Sitapur to continue the collective journey with *sangtins*. With this resignation came critical support from the Minnesota chapter of the Association for India's Development (AID-MN). Members of AID-MN familiarized themselves with *Sangtin Yatra* and associated politics, initiated conversations with members of the collective and with AID chapters in other parts of the US and India about Sangtin's future directions in light of its changing relationship with NSY, and decided to provide a *saathiship* (a fellowship for activists) to Richa Singh so that she could work towards the goals articulated in *Sangtin Yatra*. Closer to home, the struggle was honored by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) which invited Richa Singh to participate in the review of national curriculum framework as a member of the National Focus Group on gender issues in education. Furthermore, NGOs and activist networks working within India recognized Sangtin as an ally in struggles against communalism, casteism, violence against women, economic globalization and imperialism. Along side these developments, there also arose an interest in translations of *Sangtin Yatra* – in Marathi, Telugu, Bangla, Urdu

and English. With the onset of NSY's attack, the collective instinctively knew that an English translation would be necessary as a shield in case of intensified hostility, and Richa Nagar began to translate the text. The cyber-petition yielded greater urgency to this task. For the petition to work across borders, we needed the English translation to gain potential allies who wanted to familiarize themselves with the book before signing the petition.

The issue of translation acquired deeper connotations for the collective in every advancing phase of *sangtins' yatra*. Very briefly, we started our journey by grappling with translation across the borders of Awadhi (read: rural, oral, traditional) on the one hand, and Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani (read: urban, written, sophisticated), on the other. NSY's backlash took us into another realm of translation: Across the borders of Hindustani (read: vernacular, ordinary, regional) and English (read: elite, national, transnational). The reception of the English version was now pushing us into yet another sphere in the politics of translation and reception: We felt a need to translate the meanings of our labor across the spaces of NGOs and social movements (read: political, grounded), and academia (read: intellectual, theoretical). On the one hand, the excitement of those who read the English translation convinced us that the process through which we had highlighted the politics of knowledge production and NGO work enabled *Sangtin Yatra* to speak across borders.

On the other hand, the collective recognized the inseparability of the intellectual and political, of theory and praxis, and the need to creatively politicize these interwoven strands for members of NGO sector, educational institutions and the communities where we live and work. The harassment targeted at the eight *sangtins* in Sitapur frequently took the form of accusations that the sharp analysis and language of *Sangtin Yatra* could not have been produced by them since they were not highly educated or qualified intellectuals. However, Richa Nagar's work with the collective—especially that work which did not acquire a familiar 'academic' form (e.g., petitioning, networking with supporters, preparing official responses to NSY, facilitating conversations between AID-MN and Sangtin)—was deemed as belonging to the realm of 'activism.' As the nine authors scrutinized these prevailing discourses about what and who constitute 'legitimate' knowledges and knowledge producers, we saw tight connections with the same cult of professionalism and expertise whose exclusionary and paralyzing effects we had highlighted in *Sangtin Yatra*. We could only continue the *yatra* by establishing our labor and enterprise as simultaneously activist *and* academic. The decision to write *Playing with Fire* and to publish it with Zubaan Press in New Delhi and University of Minnesota Press in Minneapolis emerged from these churnings.

**New institutions, old discomforts:
Sangtin's struggles for survival**

The journey after *Sangtin Yatra* taught us that it is not sufficient to tease apart multiple layers of politics that define every act of knowledge production. For,

each new act of politicizing can itself create distinctions that (ironically) emanate from our preexisting locations in the same institutions whose norms of professionalism or expertise we wish to contest. Thus, even as the collective chose to agitate from the transnational space to rescue the jobs of the village-level NGO activists, it made Richa Nagar the primary person who could inhabit, converse and translate in and from that space. But the collective had also learned that this contradiction did not necessarily make the transnational location more 'inauthentic' and therefore, 'guilty' and the local spaces more 'authentic' or 'innocent.' Rather, the collective came to see the politics of knowledge production as deeply intertwined among the local, national and transnational scales. Rejecting authenticity as a political strategy or an intellectual stance, then, the collective has become invested in trans/national solidarities as a tool to reimagine and reconstitute the relations, conditions, and processes of knowledge production, as well as the purposes for which these reconstituted knowledges can be deployed.

Since June 2004, we have found ourselves confronting and challenging familiar attitudes and assumptions with respect to expertise, qualifications, and intellectual legitimacy—in publishing *Playing with Fire*; in negotiating the parameters of new projects with international organizations such as OXFAM and more alternative groups such as ASHA Trust (Lucknow); and in configuring Richa Singh's *saathiship* with AID and Sangtin's representation in NCERT. Although a detailed discussion of these interactions falls outside the purview of this essay, we want to point out a critical contradiction that appears repeatedly. On the one hand, we witness an institutional desire to recognize the collective's accomplishments and to create space for us as critics and community workers with a different kind of vision and caliber. On the other hand, the rules, practices, and cultures of professionalism in these institutions often make it difficult for them to accommodate some of the basic principles of our collaboration. Let us consider some examples that capture this tension and their meanings for this *yatra*:

Whereas Zubaan Press embraced all the authors as Sangtin Writers, market considerations and cataloging systems prevented University of Minnesota Press from granting us authorship as nine *sangtins*: The collective had to be split into Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar. Even the placement of Nagar's name after Sangtin Writers required negotiation before it was accepted; the placement of the actual names of the eight Sangtin Writers is under discussion at the time of this writing.

Both presses felt that the translation of *Sangtin Yatra* must be contextualized and its significance more clearly articulated in *Playing with Fire* for an audience that was more academic than the intended audience of the original book. The collective understood this point, but this requirement made Richa Nagar the only author who could write the framing chapters for a national and international readership. This resulted in deliberations about the tone and style through which

the 'Introduction' and 'Postscript' could be used to resist the very idea of framing and authorizing. Once the chapters were written, every sentence was translated, discussed, and revised where necessary – until the entire text became an essential part of our journey. The contents of these two 'framing' chapters fed directly into the new mission statement of Sangtin.⁹

Whereas academics interested in praxis and method frequently express a desire to understand the details of our collaboration, some find it difficult to accept it as a process that cannot be fixed, contained or neatly outlined in ways that are replicable or verifiable. Further, well-intentioned members of academia and NGO sector frequently ask why a collective whose eight members are far from fluent (or even comfortable with the idea of speaking or writing) in English, are claiming authorship of *Playing with Fire*? The *sangtins* see a burdensome irony in this question. We ask in response: a) Why is the collective not considered mature enough to make its own decisions about where, when, how and through whom it wants to translate and circulate its narratives and critiques? And b) why are researchers and development experts who do not speak a word of Awadhi never asked the same question about reports that are generated for dissertations, books and reports to donors?

Finally, international and regional NGOs and solidarity groups that have approached us with the intention of assisting our journey often find themselves in a bind. First, their rules allow them to give grants only to 'qualified' individuals (as Principal Investigators or project supervisors). Second, even if these supporters are willing to give us the space to redefine 'empowerment' or 'violence' on Sangtin's terms, their rules often prevent the grassroots activists from claiming ownership of their own work and from sharing their critical reflections on that work in public fora so that the institutional critiques may continue to expand. Herein emerges yet another contradiction that haunts this project: Whereas Richa Singh's resignation from the post of NSY's district coordinator prompted NCERT and AID-MN to recognize the risks that she had taken for a collective battle and to honor her efforts as an individual, Sangtin's efforts to secure minimal funds from funding agencies in the name of the organization or its other volunteers (who seem 'less qualified' on paper) has frequently met with resistance.

As the collective grapples with these tensions, we continue to face harder, more pressing questions surrounding the precariousness of livelihoods of the six *sangtins* who are employed at NSY, as well as Sangtin's in/ability to provide livelihoods to its new volunteers. At a time when the term 'foreign funds' tends to construct an opposition between imperial domination and national sovereignty in the context of left social movements, several organizations are developing political methods of building power through their own members as their 'primary agents of possibility' (Armstrong 2004: 52). Even as Sangtin draws inspiration from these groups, it continues to experiment and struggle with its own context-specific challenges and limitations. Organizing *chikan* embroiderers and small-

scale milk producers in Sitapur into cooperatives are two such experiments. Through these initiatives Sangtin hopes to generate resources and energies for (a) improving the access, quality and relevance of basic education available to the least privileged children and (b) creating spaces for more collectives of women and men to emerge so that they can envision self-empowerment through dialogue and devise strategies to fight political, economic, psychological and bodily violence. Our power to realize these simple dreams, however, hinges in critical ways on our ability to continue pushing the borders of formal knowledge production, and expectations about who should reside within those borders.

Journeying through questions: the possibilities and contradictions of collaboration

...the movement is a web of interconnected strands, of recurring themes and discernable patterns. Autonomy. Participation. Democracy. Diversity. The reinvention of power. The importance of creativity and subjectivity. Real and basic needs rather than ideology as the basis of political action. Access to the 'commons' – whether water, public space, software, seeds, or the manufacture of medicines. And constant questioning and innovation, especially when the movement is the most self-satisfied or most despairing.

For movement implies motion, journeying, change...

Notes from Nowhere 2003: 499

संगतिन यात्रा पुस्तक आने के बाद कैसे चली हमारी यह यात्रा? कभी-कभी सोचती हूँ कि यदि ऋचा नागर इस लड़ाई में हमारे साथ न होती तो क्या बच पाता यह समूह? लड़ पाते हम इतनी लम्बी लड़ाई? हमें यह कभी नहीं लगा कि ऋचा नागर साथ नहीं होगी, लेकिन सवाल यह है कि हम कहाँ और किस ताकत के साथ बैठे हैं? ऋचा नागर के बिना भी लड़ाई चलती पर इतनी लम्बी नहीं चल पाती और समूह बिखर जाता। लेकिन उस सूरत में भी हम समझौता नहीं करते। दरअसल, बिखरने की कीमत पर भी संगतिन यात्रा में लिखी बातों से समझौता नहीं करना इस सामूहिक कार्य की एक बड़ी उपलब्धि है...

बराबरी के लिए काम कर रहे एन.जी.ओ. की दुनिया में पदों का बखूबी बँटवारा है—यह पद सिर्फ काम की ज़िम्मेदारियों के अनुसार तो कतई नहीं होते। इनके साथ मानदेय हमेशा शामिल रहता है। किसका मानदेय अधिक है और किसका कम और इसी के हिसाब से व्यक्तियों का मान घटता-बढ़ता है। कागज़ पर मैं संगतिन की सदस्य हूँ और सुरबाला, सचिव। लेकिन क्या हम दोनों की स्थितियाँ बराबर हैं? सुरबाला और मैं जिन पदों को छोड़कर एन.एस.वाई. से निकले हैं उन पदों का फर्क ही हम दोनों में अन्तर पैदा कर देता है। जबकि सुरबाला ने अपनी मरज़ी से एन.एस.वाई. उस समय छोड़ा जब संगतिन महज़ एक नाम था, और मुझसे परिस्थितियों ने एन.एस.वाई छोड़वाया। मुझे छोड़ने की कम तकलीफ़ हुई क्योंकि मेरा व्यक्तिगत जीवन बहुत प्रभावित नहीं हुआ। हाँ, मेरे पास पहले वाली सत्ता नहीं रही, और उस सत्ता की सुविधाओं और संसाधनों के बिना बदलाव के काम को जारी रखना हमारे लिए चुनौती बन गया।

मैंने जब एन.एस.वाई. छोड़ने का फैसला लिया, पूरा समूह मेरे साथ था। कुछ मित्रों ने कहा कि तुम छोड़ रही हो तो सबको छोड़ना चाहिए। पर मुझे मालूम था कि मैं अपनी रोज़ी-रोटी किसी तरह चला लूँगी। क्या अन्य संगतिनों की स्थिति ऐसी थी? एड-मिनिसोटा के साथियों ने साथीशिप तय करने से पहले मुझसे पूछा था कि मेरी ज़रूरत कितनी है। यानी सुरबाला को यदि यही साथीशिप मिलती, को उसकी ज़रूरत के हिसाब से ही मिलती।...

रात एक बजे से बैठी हूँ और इस समय साढ़े तीन बजा है। बिजली के जाने में थोड़ा समय है लेकिन अगर अभी चली गयी तो जितना लिखा है वह भी न भेज सकूँगी। सीतापुर में लम्बे समय से बिजली लगभग दस से चौदह घण्टे नहीं रहती। इस छोटी-सी सुविधा से कितना फर्क पड़ता है यह यहाँ के गाँवों में काम करके मैं खूब देख पाई हूँ। मिश्रिख में सात दिन रात में लाइट रहती है और सात दिन दिन में – कई बार इसमें भी अनियमितता होती है।

कई गाँव ऐसे हैं जहाँ महीनों लाइट नहीं रहती और ऐसे भी गाँव हैं जहाँ अभी भी बिजली नहीं पहुँची है। मिश्रिख, सीतापुर, लखनऊ और दिल्ली में बिजली की स्थिति मिलाने बैठे तो ज़मीन-आसमान का अन्तर है। बड़े शहरों में बैठे साथी कई बार किसी काम को ई-मेल के माध्यम से तुरन्त भेजने को कहते हैं। लेकिन यहाँ बैठकर स्थिति इतनी आसान नहीं होती। और अगर यही ज़िम्मेदारी सुरबाला या रामशीला पर आ जाये तो? सुरबाला के गाँव में बिजली ही नहीं है और शीला के यहाँ अक्सर महीनों बिजली नहीं रहती। सीतापुर में कम्प्यूटर की सुविधा के साथ रहना मुझे ख़ास तो बना ही देता है।

घुवीकरण के इस दौर में कहने को तो पूरा विश्व एक गाँव, एक बाज़ार बन रहा है। लेकिन कितनी ख़ाइयाँ हैं स्थितियों में, स्थितियों से पैदा होने वाली उन ज़रूरतों में जिनके हिसाब से अनुदान और प्रोजेक्ट निर्धारित किये जाते हैं। जब कुछ लोग ख़ास सुविधाओं के साथ और बहुत सारे लोग बिना सुविधाओं के बैठे हैं, फिर हम कैसे उम्मीद करते हैं कि दोनों—यानी, सुविधासहित और सुविधारहित—बराबरी का काम और आपस में बराबरी का व्यवहार कर ले जायेंगे?

Every step of this journey thus far has been deeply collaborative. In different ways, each of us has poured her soul into it...risked her honor for it. This probably could not have happened if we had not made a commitment to confront at all times, the uncomfortable differentials among ourselves of our socioinstitutional locations, power and access to resources. This awareness of power differentials becomes especially pronounced when we ask how our collaboration has continued after NSY's angry attack on the livelihoods of seven *sangtins*. Richa Singh bluntly asks whether such a long, hard battle could have continued in the absence of not simply the commitment but also the power of location and resources that Richa Nagar brought to the collective. She is confident that once the book was written and the risks taken, the battle would have continued irrespective of Richa Nagar's involvement; but she wonders if the collective would have been dismantled in the absence of the national and transnational support that our journey was able to get through networking and solidarity building in which Richa Nagar's social, geographical, and institutional location became a major advantage for the collective. But while Richa Singh can imagine the scattering of the collective in the face of threat to livelihoods, she cannot imagine that the *sangtins* could compromise the principles articulated in *Sangtin Yatra*: This itself attests to the success of the *yatra*.

The world of NGOs, ostensibly committed to bringing about greater equality, is efficiently divided along the lines of positions. These positions are never defined merely according to responsibilities. They are inevitably entangled with honoraria amounts; the importance of NGO staff increases or diminishes on the basis of who gets greater or lesser honorarium. On paper, Richa Singh is a 'member' of Sangtin and Surbala is the 'secretary.' But does that make their situations approximately equal? The very difference in the positions that each of them left at NSY itself creates a distinction in their present circumstances. Even though Surbala chose to leave the security of NSY's job at a time when Sangtin was merely a name, whereas Richa Singh was forced to leave NSY after *Sangtin Yatra* faced backlash from NSY officials. Richa Singh feels that her own personal life was not deeply affected after she left NSY. However, she did lose her old authority, the absence of which translated into the disappearance of many conveniences, facilities and resources. And working in the absence of these became Sangtin's major challenge.

When Richa Singh decided to leave NSY, the whole collective was behind her. Some comrades suggested in the spirit of solidarity and fair-mindedness that if Richa Singh was quitting, other members of the collective who were NSY-employees should also quit. But did the other *sangtins* have the same options of being able to acquire an alternative livelihood as Richa Singh did? No. And soon, AID-MN's *saathiship* for Richa Singh became a major supporter for the continuation of the dreams and stances we had taken in *Sangtin Yatra*. Yet, Richa Singh remembers that at the time her *saathiship* was being finalized, friends at AID-MN asked her what her minimal financial needs were. While such a question is understandable from the organization's perspective, Richa Singh could not help wondering that were Surbala to get the same *saathiship*, would her material circumstances automatically translate into her getting a lesser honorarium than Richa Singh?

On June 20th 2005, Richa Singh gets on the computer at one AM to write pieces of this paper in Hindustani to send to Richa Nagar. At three thirty AM, she realizes that she still has about an hour left before the electricity is cut-off, but then worries that she will lose everything if the power is cut-off early. For a long time now, Sitapur town has daily outage ranging from ten to fourteen hours. Inside the Sitapur district, Mishrikh block (irregularly) receives electricity supply for seven days during daytime and for seven days at nighttime. There are villages in this district that do not get electricity for months in a row, and there are also villages where electricity has still not reached...If one starts comparing the hours of electricity supply received in Mishrikh, Sitapur, Lucknow and Delhi to each other, each comparison will yield a difference of night and day. Sometimes friends in big cities will just ask to complete something quickly and send it immediately over email. But sitting in Sitapur, it does not seem so easy. And what would happen if the same job were assigned (in the spirit of equality) to Surbala or Ramsheela? Surbala's village has no electricity and Ramsheela's village gets it for a few hours in months. In such a scenario, the very access that Richa Singh has to a computer in Sitapur town, bestows privileges on her that problematically make her 'more special' than the rest.

In this phase of globalization, the globe is becoming a so-called village, an interconnected market. But how many gulfs keep yawning between our circumstances as well as the 'needs' created by those circumstances on the basis of which grants and projects are determined. When a few people are sitting with very special facilities and scarce resources and the majority are losing access to basic resources for survival, how do we expect that both the resource-rich and the resource-poor will come together in the same institutions to work and behave as if they were equals?

On the surface, these questions seem no different than the ones with which we began our journey in 2002. But our *yatra* thus far has imparted them deeper meanings. Although NSY's backlash made us more confident than ever about

the truth of our critique, it also showed what the price of articulating that critique could be. That the only source of livelihood of our most economically vulnerable *sangtins* could be snatched as a punishment for critical reflection and collaboration was a reality that shook us. The fact that six *sangtins* are still working in NSY as a result of battles fought in 2004 does not eliminate the possibility of a similar backlash happening again. Yet, in order to remain true to our commitment, the collective must continue identifying and challenging institutional norms and practices that exclude, dominate, or maintain the status quo in the name of helping, empowering or giving voice to the ‘marginalized.’ The knots become tighter and harder for us as we gain access to some spaces and lose others by raising uncomfortable questions. We are committed to changing unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power – whether it is hours of electricity, or the right to claim a truth as legitimate intellectuals, or the right to appear as authors on the cover of a book written in English. But we also have to be vigilant about what is at stake here. As we fight to re/claim intellectual authority and legitimacy for our insights; to redefine empowerment and violence on our own terms; and to engage in constructive criticism of the institutional spaces where we are hired, fired or invited to work – we cannot afford to engage in critique that advances the careers and visibility of some in the collective while jeopardizing the access to livelihoods for others.

The primary objective of our journey has been to initiate and sustain difficult dialogues – amongst ourselves and with those institutions with which we become affiliated. Like *Notes from Nowhere* (2003) we, too, believe that it is only through these difficult dialogues that our journey can move forward. Through constant interrogation of the contradictions that remain within us, we want to steer away from simplistic claims about equality among us; but we also believe that if people sitting in unequal places will not rise up to build alliances then the gulfs residing in intellectual and material struggles will continue to widen. The journey on which we have come thus far through trust, solidarity and self-critique cannot stop at one or two critical experiments, one or two books, or one or two institutions. It is a dialogic process—a dialectical response—that can be sustained only through continuous movement and questioning.

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Notes

¹ We use the term ‘Hindustani’ to avoid artificial compartmentalization between Hindi and Urdu.

² *Thelia* is a three-wheeled manually pulled wooden cart used in Sitapur to haul goods and people.

³ *Mayaka* refers to natal home and *sasural* to conjugal home. For many women living in Sitapur, these two homes tend to be in separate villages, towns or districts.

⁴ For detailed discussion of the collective process, see Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] (2006).

⁵ Awadhi, or the language of Awadh, is predominantly spoken in the rural areas of central and eastern Uttar Pradesh, including the districts of Bahraich, Barabanki, Faizabad, Gonda, Hardoi, Lakheempur, Lucknow, Raibareli, Sitapur, Sultanpur, and Unnao.

⁶ Similar arguments are made in a different idiom than Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] (2006) by Freire (1993), John (1999), and Spivak (2000).

⁷ For a discussion of inequalities in status, salaries, skills, and circuits of influence; their strategic deployments; and how these were negotiated within the collective, see Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] (2006). An ongoing struggle with such power differentials has been a critical part of this journey. We do not wish to regurgitate these points to simply defend or legitimate ourselves as authors of this essay. However, we should note that although this essay was initially going to be authored by three *sangtins*, we are the only ones who could afford the luxury of time and facilities required to undertake this task at the time of this writing (June-July 2005).

⁸ Surbala also began her activism as a mobilizer at NSY but resigned in 2000 to become an unpaid volunteer at Sangtin, in which capacity she collaborated closely with NSY.

⁹ The new mission statement states: 'Founded in 1998 by a group of local women in the Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh, the organization, Sangtin, works for the sociopolitical and intellectual empowerment of rural women, youth and children and of the communities in which they are embedded . . . [The] book *Sangtin Yatra* constituted a critical part of Sangtin's growth. *Sangtin Yatra* was fired by a desire to imagine how the organization Sangtin could become a true *sangtin*... for the most marginalized women of Sitapur. Sangtin is committed to enhancing the ability of ... least powerful individuals and groups to challenge and change—in their favour—existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions. At the same time, *Sangtin Yatra* has also inspired a vision that aims to empower the local communities intellectually by questioning the very idea of who is on the margins . . . Rather than thinking of marginalized communities as people who need to be connected with the mainstream, Sangtin wants to work towards getting rid of the structures that create the margins in the first place...'