Selective abortion:

A choice? A right? A justice issue?

An in- depth conversation with Manisha Gupte, co-founder of Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM) organization and a globally respected leader and mentor in the gender and rights movement.

In conversation with Ayesha Bashir, Communications & Networking Manager, ASAP

A: Thank you so much, Manisha Tai, for joining in, and let's get right into it. Just to give a little bit more context to our audiences could you share a little bit about your journey within the feminist movement and how that led you to engage with the abortion rights movement?

M: In the 1970s—well, even in the 60s and 70s—there were many progressive movements worldwide and in India. The feminist movement was one of those. All movements, whether they were against racism, Dalit rights movements, the Dalit Panther movement, peasant movements—all of these supported each other. The 70s was also a time when the internal Emergency was declared in India. Ironically, 1975 was declared by the United Nations as the Year of Women, followed by the Decade of Women.

So, in that sense, it got a bit of legitimacy, where countries could sign up, and there was a space to push the women's agenda. The feminist movement, as we call it, was slightly different from the other movements. I was part of a non-party political group where we also fought for land rights and women's equal access to land. So the women's question was taken up, economic questions were taken up, issues of violence—state violence, rape by the police, any kind of sexual assault by the police. Both state and family violence were taken up. It was on this wave that we grew in the 1970s and also in the 1980s.

It was slightly different in the sense that the core question asked by the feminist movement was about patriarchy in every part of our lives, in every moment of our lives. So while we had an understanding of class and caste consciousness, feminism gave us the lens to see patriarchy operating within all these structures—whether it's pluralism, capitalism, or imperialism. It allowed us to apply the lens of gender inequality inside and outside the house. That was the feminist movement of the 1970s: extremely rich, vibrant, and thrilling.

Now, about the connection with the abortion rights movement. Largely, that was my engagement with the global women's health movement. In India, we didn't really need to discuss abortion very much because in 1971–72, we got a fairly liberal Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, which was before we had got our act together.

So we didn't really have to fight for abortion in India, though Sections 312 to 316 criminalize abortion. But at least under certain circumstances, if you went to a medical practitioner who had training in how to conduct abortions, then this provider-controlled, yet liberal interpretation would be possible.

And we'll discuss later how the whole issue of abortion came into discussion, related to our engagement with the global feminist movements working on health, and understanding at the grassroots level what people's needs were for abortion and then of course because of the campaigns against sex determination.

A: Why do you think we got so lucky with a fairly liberal abortion law?

M: It was because of the very high maternal mortality and then there was this really very progressive committee that was formed: the Shantilal Shah Committee. Considering that they started their work in the 60s, they made some pretty bold statements.

When it's a huge population suffering something then the need comes up as the possibility of a right. And that was the case here too.

We always also suspected that one of the reasons for the liberal interpretation of the Act was also because of the increasing emphasis on population control. But we don't have actual proof for that.

Unsafe abortions did account for a lot of mortality during pregnancy. So this commission then worked from 1966 onwards, and in 1971–72, it culminated in the Bill and then the Act.

I'm sure they knew what was happening abroad, but we did not have the domination of the Catholic Church. That's why there was no direct fight with the state, no direct fight with any religion. So even Christianity or Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism while none of them would come out openly and say that abortion is fine, let women go ahead, we didn't have any interference by them in State matters.

During the writing of the Indian Constitution, we had women from all religions participating, and they made some tremendously feminist arguments in the formulation of the Indian Constitution.

So it goes back to the 1940s and 50s. We basically stand on the shoulders of giants who worked before us, and men who were sensitive. And that's how we got the MTP Act. As we said earlier, the MTP Act absolves physicians, in certain situations, from being criminalized under the Indian Penal Code if they provide abortion as per the conditions of the MTP Act.

A: So the main purpose was protecting them from criminalization?

M: Yes, but also making abortion possible for a lot of people.

A: Absolutely. And the law has also been an evolving process, right? And feminists have constantly engaged with it over the years.

M: Absolutely. There was an amendment in the 2000s, and then again in 2020 and 2021, there was a major amendment. And definitely, feminists have played a major role.

A: Absolutely. So that brings me to my next question, which is: since you've also been in the movement for such a long time, and you've seen all of these things change and evolve—times have also changed. From the demographic perspective, from needs-based to rights-based, and also with the socio-political contexts constantly shifting—what have been some of the key milestones for you in this journey that you look back on and think about? Tell us a little bit about that.

M: Many campaigns were going on at that time. I remember that when we started consolidating the campaign against discriminatory sex determination tests in India, we were also campaigning against population control. We were also campaigning against dangerous and invasive contraceptives being used in the Indian family planning program.

We were also very upset about the fact that all of women's health was relegated just to maternity. Basically, after women had two children, they just dropped off the public health train. Nobody cared for them because the tubectomy was done. In the rural areas where I worked, girls were married at the age of 16. I hesitated—see, I said women and then I said girls—because in my mind, you're a woman or a girl not because of your age but because of your address.

If you're in the city, a 16–17-year-old is a girl. In my community, 16, 17, 18 is a woman because she's already married. So the demographics, the whole thing—as we look at people—also changes. They get married at 16 or 17, have their first child at 19. If that's a boy, then after the second delivery, the tubes are tied. If it's a girl and then a boy, then they wait a couple of years until the boy is out of the risk of infant mortality. By the time they're 21 or 22, their tubes are tied.

So all this until now was free because the government was interested in tying your tubes. Then 10 or 15 years later came the private sector with hysterectomies. So we had so many women—even in 1987, when I moved to live in a small village with my partner and our little baby son—women had hysterectomies in their mid-30s, as early as that. Because if you don't need that apparatus, then the private sector steps in.

All these violations were happening, but they were never considered as part of women's health. Endometriosis, uterine prolapse, cervical cancer, arthritis, back pain because of postures, depression, anxiety, aging women's issues, menopause—none of these were part of the agenda. And we were all fighting for these.

So the campaign against discriminatory sex determination has to be seen in the context of all these different campaigns, because none of us were part of just

one campaign. We were part of many. I'm only talking of health—there were so many other campaigns that were not directly related to health.

And we were all part of all those campaigns. All meaning: numerous, as many as we could be. If we were not actively part of that campaign, we were at least supporters—we were there on the streets when actions took place. So the campaign has to be seen in this context.

And the major thread that unites this context is gender-based discrimination. That kind of unites all the other campaigns. So it was gender-based discrimination that this particular campaign was about.

And we woke up to it from two or three different angles. One was hoardings coming up in Northern India: “Better 5,000 now than 50,000 later” or “five lakhs later.” Spend this much money now so that you don’t have to spend on dowry. People didn’t know what it was, but we were seeing these hoardings. Friends were bringing information about them.

And then there was a multinational company in Bombay that called some feminist friends, because they said that the spouses of their employees—they didn’t have a single woman employee, not even in the housekeeping department—were bringing medical bills for reimbursement. They couldn’t understand what it was. Sometimes it was just one bill, and sometimes it was accompanied by an abortion. They had no clue what this was. That’s how they called feminist friends from Bombay to come and talk. And that’s when we stumbled upon sex determination.

So these were the different ways in which, while we were active in many other campaigns, this came up as a red flag.

A: And so it came up as in—that you realized this is happening, like this is happening on such a big scale, of course.

M: And actually, first of all, what is happening?

A: What is happening? Because nobody was looking into this.

M: Because why is it sometimes accompanied by abortion? And why is it sometimes not accompanied by abortion? That was the mystery, right?

A: So with that I will come to the third question— more directly related to issue of sex determination. First of all, how did you figure out the 'mystery' or that this (sex selection) is happening and from there, where did you go? How did you approach the issue?

And you have also played a critical role in challenging, of course, sex determination in India, and have been working on it for a long time. And it's also an issue that is not just central to India, right? We have seen it surface across South Asia—So just share a little bit more about that and how it intersects with the broader abortion rights movement. Like, why, as abortion rights advocates, it concerns us, and what the challenges and intersections are.

M: Yeah, so as I said, this mystery—people started talking to everybody, and nobody was embarrassed about saying it. In fact, it was like a major landmark that... Son preference has always been there, right, in our cultures? It's been there all over the world.

It's when nuclear families formed and educated children left their family homes and went to cities to do jobs—that's when the discrimination reduced. But until very recently—I mean, even the throne of England, right? It's the first-born son that would inherit the throne. Or princesses were married to princes of other countries to keep peace or expand empires. So gender discrimination still exists all over the world.

This is not something that is very specific to India. There are different manifestations of gender-based discrimination in different countries. And that has its context, which I'll go into later—in terms of social justice and reproductive justice. It's connected with poverty, it's connected with access to information, it's connected to having any choice or rights over your own body—control over your own body. It's about patriarchy. It's about so many other systems of domination. So all these exist.

Now, when this discussion was happening, the son preference that existed for centuries—here I want to add another bit: it's not just son preference or not-son-wantedness, it's also daughter-unwantedness.

So you might have three sons, but the daughter brought "dishonor" (in quotes) to the family with her behavior—if she decided to marry someone, if she got

pregnant, if she was even sexually abused, or if she didn't stay in the house of a violent husband and came back to her natal family.

A: Economic burden as well, right?

M: Absolutely. Economic burden and also culturally, right? The whole issue—patriarchy's mystery lies in the womb. In which womb does whose seed go? That is the basic question. It's a question of the seed, right? Whose seed is there?

And that unwanted seed in the womb of your community, your family, or your religion brings dishonour not only to the person but also to the family, to the community, and to the entire caste and religion.

So it's in that context—you might have four sons, but that one daughter is still unwanted. You might treat her like the angel of the house, like a doll, whatever—but she's never a full person. Just because she's one sister among three brothers doesn't mean you give her equal inheritance. You don't. You give her a grand marriage, a grand wedding—that's what you do to send her to the husband's house. But that doesn't mean you will give her inheritance because you love her so much.

So patriarchy exists, and therefore it's son preference and daughter-unwantedness. Earlier, it was more mumbo-jumbo—say this prayer, give this offering to the god, all kinds of rituals. It was all mumbo-jumbo. But now these tests actually help you make it happen.

For the first time, there was a scientific way in which you could choose a son and not have a daughter. And that's what everybody was doing—and was proud of it. Everybody wanted to know about how those tests worked.

I remember Ravi Duggal and I wrote a centerpiece editorial for the edit page of *The Times of India* talking about sex selection, prenatal sex selection, the Ericsson technique, and ultracentrifugation—where you separate the X and Y chromosome-bearing sperms, and you give the Y-bearing sperms an advantage over the X when doing in vitro fertilization.

We wrote this article in 1984 or 1985—I'm not sure which—and we got only one phone call in response. It was from a gentleman in Punjab who wanted the address of the doctor who did that.

So why I'm putting the context in is: there is a context before the Act, and there is a context after the Act. Like the feminist movement of my generation took the MTP Act for granted, the feminist movement of today takes the PNDT or the PCPNDT Act for granted. And therefore, there is a critique of that Act without understanding the context in which the Act came—because all this is in the 80s.

Maharashtra was the first state that banned it—it was January 1, 1988, when the Act came. And we had been campaigning for at least another four years before that. The Act at the Centre came in 1994. And people like me—I was associated with both. I was associated with the campaign, with the expert committee in Maharashtra, and also with the expert committee at the Centre, which brought out the PNDT Act—Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act.

Then MASUM, Cehat, Dr. Sabu George, and I, filed a petition, a public interest litigation in the late 90s, to ask why preconception techniques were not included. It was only prenatal—this is chorionic villus biopsy, later ultrasound. But prenatal.

I talked about the Ericsson technique and about ultrasound education. So we asked why that wasn't included, though as a member of the committee I had pressed for preconception to also be included—because that is a much more invisible discrimination. You don't even get pregnant—you avoid the "wrong" fetus even before pregnancy.

We had asked that question even in the 1980s. But the state wasn't prepared—either because they didn't have enough information about preconception or because some might have had anti-abortion sentiments. I know one person on the government committee who had an anti-abortion sentiment. When I brought up preconception, she said—she was a private doctor, a gynecologist—"But that's the answer to all our problems! Women won't need abortions."

So this kind of tension existed right from the beginning—not in the feminist movement, but in mass consciousness. So it was actually our organizations that converted the PNDT into the PCPNDT, which came in 2003.

What I'm saying is that this campaign has to be seen in the context of gender discrimination—in the context of many feminist campaigns that were talking

about gender discrimination. And this was overt gender discrimination that the entire country was revelling in. “This is a fantastic test! This will give us exactly what we want.” And so the campaign was to question that.

Just to go back—MTP was an exception to criminalization. It was in that context that the MTP Act came. We can critique it—saying it’s provider-controlled, not feminist, etc.—of course, we have the right to do that. But we must understand the context in which it came.

In the same way, the campaign against sex determination tests came in the context of everyone agreeing that they didn’t want girls. These tests were seen as a panacea—a possibility to have a son and not a daughter.

So we were campaigning against that. And the Act, in that sense, became a showcase: “See, this is gender discrimination.”

So what did it question? The campaign questioned patriarchy. It questioned gender-based discrimination. It questioned the ethics of doctors. You study, get an education, and then you use it to drag society back into medieval times?

It tied in with abortion, with population control policies. Because at one end, the state was bringing in what was called NRR-1—Net Reproduction Rate of 1—meaning one womb brings in only one other womb. The NRR was about the number of uteruses in the country—because that’s where reproduction happens.

So the state was already in the process of bringing the two-child norm and punishments for anyone who didn’t follow it—taking away economic benefits, which came later in the new population policies.

So this was happening at one end. If only one womb could replace another womb, how was that going to be possible unless there was sex-selective abortion?

The second daughter wasn’t wanted—even by the state in its policy. So when you have an NRR-1 policy that comes in, you have a highly incentive- and disincentive-based population control policy which targets the poor, which targets minorities, which targets anybody who doesn’t have access to contraception or development, whose children die and who therefore need

more than two children. Then you take away their political rights and economic rights.

In the context of all this violation of people's other reproductive rights—did the state ever conduct sex determination tests? No. So there was no act of *commission*. But there was an act of *omission*.

What were the two acts of omission?

One: not controlling the private sector. Two: its population policies.

So it was in this context that sex determination tests were going to become more and more popular. Because that was the only way people could stick to the two-child norm—because obviously, one child had to be a son.

So it's in this entire context of challenging the state—which we had done since the 1970s—that you have to locate the campaign against sex determination tests.

A: Yeah, and it's so interesting—now that I think about it—in the present context, how disconnected we are from the context you just mentioned, and what it all came from. I know, of course, when the PCPNDT Act came about, and then I think another major news story that brought this issue to the forefront was the issue of missing girls. And again, the major worry—even today—is, I think, related to the utilitarian perspective.

We've always talked about it in our Youth Advocacy Institute, about the sex ratio—the worry around sex ratio and the numbers. So, can you talk a little bit about that as well— how critical the sex ratio is, if at all?

M: So, see, most countries in the world have a high femininity ratio—that is the "normal" sex ratio. Only in some countries, where only men migrate for jobs or in cities where the first generation of migrants are only men and then the wife and children follow later, do you have a high masculinity ratio. These are artificial circumstances. Otherwise, most countries have a high femininity ratio.

Also, women have longer longevity—their life expectancy is always higher than men. So, a high femininity ratio is considered, in quotes, the natural ratio. So, the fact that there is a skewed sex ratio in which there are fewer women—especially fewer girls—is itself an indicator of gender discrimination.

So, is the sex ratio completely alienated from gender-based discrimination? No, it's not. Talking about a skewed, gender-based sex ratio is also a critique of gender-based discrimination.

Now, the way we look at it—that's why we call ourselves feminists—is not from a utilitarian point of view. But if you look at India from 1900 onwards—40–45 years of colonial rule—the sex ratio has always been low. Women have never been more than 1,000 per 1,000 men. It's gone up and down a little bit, but it's never been something like 1,010 women for 1,000 men. Never.

So that itself is an indicator of gender-based discrimination. And there are two critiques of the falling sex ratio. One is: it's an indicator of gender-based discrimination, so please look at that. And the other is the state's perspective: a utilitarian one. Or families looking at it in terms of how many homes are "required" and how many are "unrequired."

So again, it's a dual critique. It's not a binary; it's nuanced.

Is a skewed sex ratio where there are fewer women okay? No, it's not—because it's itself an indicator of gender-based discrimination. That's not how it should be. But the way we critique it and the way the state critiques it are different.

The state, of course, has a utilitarian approach. The family also sees it in utilitarian terms. The market too—how many women, how many jobs, whether women are required in the marketplace, or whether women should go back home.

It's about economic recession. It's about jobs shifting—from India to Bangladesh, where you have all those horrendous deaths of women who couldn't escape sweat factories. And what a shame—because it was actually the sweat factory jobs of the 19th century that gave us International Working Women's Day. It was their strikes across Europe and the Americas. The conditions. And still, women have to die in a blaze because they can't escape sweatshops.

So it's all about manufacturing. It's the market. Market, community, family, state—everyone manipulates. And finally, what is the location of manipulation? It is the woman's uterus. That is the spot where the manipulation takes place.

A: You've always emphasized how careful we need to be—especially as abortion rights advocates—to ensure that our agendas are not co-opted by conservative forces. And I'm sure this is something you've also grappled with in your work. So how have you seen this happen over the years, and how can we guard against it? How have you been able to guard against it? Just guide us a little bit on that.

M: We always think that we're smarter than capitalism, or smarter than religion, or smarter than caste—and we aren't. Our campaigns are what—40 years old? 50 years old? How long have patriarchy, caste, class, religion, cis-heteronormativity survived? They've had to be smart to survive thousands of years.

So we should not be complacent, thinking that we've got them by the horns or the tail, right? Anything we do will be co-opted. And we have to start off with an understanding of what will happen when it *is* co-opted.

You see any campaign, any social media conversation—you start with the price of onions and potatoes and it'll come down to religion. And it'll come back to your patriotism, based on how much you hate your neighboring countries. So anything we do is going to be co-opted.

There are different kinds of co-optation that happen.

One is: as long as the discussion stays pristine—the kind of conversation you and I are having now, or the conversations that will go to the advocates within ASAP—these are pristine places, right? Places where you have the luxury and the possibility of intellectual engagement, ideological engagement, analytical engagement. That's where these conversations can take place.

But if it doesn't become a mass movement, what are we going to do about it?

There's always that question: depth or width—or the height, right?

When a lot of emotion comes into play, or when there's a moment of theater—where something really big happens, and you say "aha," or "oops."

So all these dimensions work.

While we were campaigning—we were a group of feminists discussing this—a lot of the lingo was known, a lot of the pitfalls were already understood.

Because again, I'm emphasizing, this campaign is not disconnected from the other campaigns we were part of as feminists. So much of it was already known—language, framing, critique.

Now, when it leaves those walls—and *should* it leave those walls? What's the point in 50, or 100, or 500 people discussing this in a country of over a billion people? It has to leave the walls.

And there's always that risk that once it does, the voice gets amplified and magnified—but you lose some of the intellectual or analytical depth. In a mass movement, they'll call it snobbery. They'll say: "You have the privilege to sit in that room, you have the privilege and the funding to have these conversations." But they're taking up spontaneous campaigns. Groups organizing vigils, calling out doctors performing sex determination, or making posters.

And what would make it more attractive? To make it gory, right?

Isn't it like—you read a newspaper article about a building collapse or a train accident. And what's the first thing you look for? How many people died. That's our benchmark of how serious the event was. There's that kind of perverse voyeurism about the maximum damage.

If two people died versus 200, the latter feels more serious. That mindset exists in all of us.

So the temptation is always to dramatize something, to exaggerate something in a campaign. And rational voices sometimes don't find the same space. Reasonable voices often don't find that space in a mass campaign, because people want to *do* something.

And that's what happens in any campaign that comes out of the walls of a training class, or from people who meet regularly—maybe every Monday or twice a month.

That's the trade-off that happens.

Now, when you write a book—I've prepared flip books with colleagues, so many of them—you don't realize the power of the artist who designs the cover

page, who creates the visuals. Because again, it's the visuals people look at first before they read the text.

You give the work to an artist, and a self-determination poster comes back with blobs of blood falling down.

If you're not vigilant enough to catch that—how can you be vigilant when you're sitting in one place and the posters are being prepared a thousand kilometers away?

Should there be surveillance on what everybody does? Is that even possible?

All these things were springing up spontaneously. And what made it more attractive, what made it more exaggerated, what drew a response was showing things like violence against female fetuses.

Because I'll stand and watch something like that.

Who's going to stop and read something about gender-based discrimination or patriarchy at a bus stop?

They were catching attention. It's not like they were without purpose—they *were* catching more attention than all the stuff we were talking about.

I've spoken—I can't even count—at least 200, 300 places during the sex determination campaign. We were booed many times—outside Churchgate railway station, in colleges, wherever. "You're anti-science. You're anti-development. You're anti-doctor. You're anti-woman. You're anti-national." So many things. "Anti-technology. Anti-science." All of those labels were put on us.

So in 2020 or 2025, when we're called anti-national or whatever—these were the same labels put on activists in the anti-sex determination campaign. "You're talking about something that's an easy solution to the problem of population."

Since childhood, we're taught in school that overpopulation is the cause of poverty. Whereas actually, poverty is the cause of overpopulation.

But when you've been raised being told that the poor are the problem—their population is exploding, they cut down forests, use it for firewood—it's an anti-poor agenda we've been taught since childhood.

So now, if that's what we've been taught—that overpopulation is the cause of all problems—it exacerbates the problem, definitely, but not because of numbers. It's because the poor are getting less and less of the pie.

So in this entire context, when people outside started taking up the issue—they just went for it. And more and more anti-abortion materials started coming.

Let's remember one thing: while we, as feminists, were talking about gender-based discrimination in our campaign, the rest of the country was seeing this as a way to get rid of daughter-unwantedness and to have sons.

We were speaking two different languages.

We were locating it in the context of gender-based discrimination. But most people saw these tests as a solution.

So in their minds, it was always about *sex* discrimination. Our campaign was about *gender*-based discrimination. But for every one of us, there were a million people outside who saw sex-selective abortion as a simple solution. It was never seen as a gender issue.

So, of course, the posters were about violence in the fetal stage—"Look how this poor female fetus got killed." That's where the narrative went. That's why "female foeticide" became the term.

So all the people who took the campaign beyond our walls—were they all imbeciles? No. They knew society better. They knew exactly why these tests were being used.

We were talking on an analytical, ideological level—one way to identify gender-based discrimination. The rest of the country was seeing the elimination of the female fetus.

So, of course, all the posters showed that—and that's what had to be crafted for that moment.

A: And that's one side of it, right? The other side of the posters we've seen is again the other extreme—reducing women to their traditional roles, going back to the motherhood narrative. This whole idea that women are needed just to give birth. That narrative. You mentioned that earlier too.

I know we've touched on this already, but in today's context, with the new government we have—which is extremely right-wing, conservative, patriarchal, and deeply casteist—they also tried to "address" the issue. They launched the campaign, and you talk about it in your article *The Gordian Knot*, which is brilliant by the way. We'll definitely share the link with the audience. You really explain how the government approached this in exactly the way we didn't want it to go.

Because what you were talking about was the root cause of daughter-unwantedness—*why* that even exists. And you also mentioned the idea of selection happening post-birth as well. So, if you could speak a bit more on that—has the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl, Educate the Girl) campaign succeeded, even a little? Are you happy with the way things have turned out? What's your take on that?

And just one more question, which is sort of connected: earlier you said you were called anti-technology. That's something you also explore in *The Gordian Knot*. Are you an anti-technology feminist? Especially in the context of sex determination—we know the direction technology is heading. How are we going to stop that? Where do we draw the line? So if you could shed some light on those two things.

M: I'll start off with the technology part.

What is science? Science is a systematic observation and interpretation of the laws of nature. What goes up must come down—we observe that, and then we name it: gravity. So, science is about systematically understanding the world around us.

And what is technology? Technology is the application of that understanding. You apply science and make it useful. Like, if you want to fly a plane, you need to understand how to work *with* or *against* gravity. That's how invention takes place.

Now, science and technology are never practiced in a vacuum.

Why couldn't Galileo and others say that the earth revolves around the sun? Why were they not allowed to say that the Earth isn't flat? Until they were *allowed* to say it, was the earth actually flat? Did the universe actually revolve

around the Earth? No. Those truths existed regardless. But how you express and share those truths—that has social and political consequences.

So how can one be anti-science? How can one be anti-technology?

Look at us right now—we're recording this conversation. This laptop, this setup—is this not technology? We travel from one place to another using transport—that's technology. So how can we be anti-technology?

I'm also anti-banning. I don't think banning anything ever really works. Of course, this is a privileged position to say that from.

Now, take Raja Ram Mohan Roy. He worked with the British to ban *sati* in India. What did he use? Dharmic arguments. He said, "Nowhere in Hindu texts is *sati* prescribed." You can critique that—but that's the tactic.

Even today, we see feminists within Christianity, Islam, Judaism, using religious texts to argue that these practices were never intended or sanctioned. They try to find feminist readings *within* religion.

But as an atheist, I personally critique the use of religion for *any* kind of social justice work—because religion and modernity cannot coexist. Hamid Dalwai, the founder of the Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal in India, was once asked: since Islam is one of the most recent religions (after Sikhism and a few others), is it more modern?

And he replied: religion and modernity cannot be spoken in the same breath.

Modernity—as we understand it—comes from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, just a few hundred years ago. Religion predates that. So, trying to apply religious frameworks to modern principles is inherently contradictory.

But of course, people use whatever frameworks are available to them. That's the socio-political space we operate in.

That's why I always try to nuance the conversation. I like to muddy the waters. And the moment the mud settles down—I take a stick and stir it again. Not to paralyze people, but to stop us from becoming too *possessive* about any one campaign.

If I was part of a campaign, that doesn't mean that campaign is above critique. If I'm part of a movement, that doesn't mean it's infallible. That's the broader ethos of reproductive justice.

Take Loretta Ross, for instance—a Black critic of the mainstream feminist movement. She and others pointed out that the white feminist movement in the Global North focused heavily on abortion—but for many Black women and other marginalized communities, abortion was *just one* of many unmet needs.

That's why all conversations have to be contextualized.

Any single-rights conversation can sometimes become problematic for *other* rights. In our campaign against sex determination, we were very closely connected to the international feminist health movement, which was largely Global North and white-dominated. For them, abortion was the central issue.

But when we brought up *repeated abortions* in a social context—because women didn't have access to contraception, or because they were abused, or because they were still children themselves—the solidarity was not the same.

What about when the pregnancy *reveals* the abuse? A girl becomes pregnant and it turns out she's been abused since she was four or five—abortion becomes part of *that* conversation.

So again, the conversation around abortion rights has to stay nuanced.

Yes, abortion must be a right. *Everyone* must have the right. But the *need* for abortion must reduce. It's not like education—where more is better. The right must always exist, even if you never need to use it.

So on one hand, we were fighting for abortion rights. But on the other, we were saying: selective abortion after sex determination is a problem.

We saw it as an act of gender-based discrimination. But when the conversation became a mass movement, it was framed as anti-abortion.

Similarly, selective abortion based on *disability* was seen as okay—because we weren't hearing from the disability rights movement in the 80s. They were not yet organized in the same way.

But today, we must bring in parents of children with disabilities, people living with disabilities, their partners, carers, everyone. Otherwise, we risk taking a blanket position that pits one marginalized group against another.

Even the LGBTQIA+ movement could critique abortion rights movements as heteronormative—"We're two gay men, why should abortion matter to us?" But we know that trans men have uteruses. And again, class matters—if you don't have the money to transition, you're still living with a uterus you don't want.

What about bisexual people?

So that's the context we need. To keep abortion a right, while making space for more people to be part of the conversation. And when you open the door to more people, *some* politics will get diluted.

That's the job of an astute campaigner—to be conscious of history, of broader socio-political systems, of cultural realities. To keep being *reflexive*—and I use the "x" deliberately—reflexive about whether our *methodology* is truly liberatory, or whether it's taking us in circles.

We have to keep re-examining our positions—not get so attached to what *we* did, and yet not be ashamed of movements that took place in different contexts.

Now, coming to the last part of your question—the State.

Of course, a right-wing State is worse than any other kind. A State built on cultural nationalism, religious nationalism—that's a state edging toward fascism.

What are the worst forms of State? Military dictatorships, totalitarian regimes.

Can we ever expect a *feminist* State? Not really. The concept of State itself is a patriarchal notion.

Look at Engels—*The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. The family, private property, and the State emerged as a triad. You can't separate the State from patriarchy, or from the protection of property.

Sure, some people *within* the State may be progressive, even in a bad government. And some people may be extremely conservative even in a so-called progressive government.

But when the State *as a whole* becomes patriarchal—when conservatism becomes national policy—everything gets worse.

Now, we've reached population stability. For years, we didn't—not because of too many births, but because of fewer deaths. That was the actual reason for the continued population rise.

But now that we're stable, what happens in an anti-minority, anti-gender-rights context?

I wouldn't be surprised if abortion became harder for some people—and easier for others. Because in such a regime, some uteruses are seen as "higher quality" or more desirable than others. Some seeds are seen as more valuable than others.

We know the Nazi policy: while millions were being sterilized or euthanized, the "desirable" race was being forced to reproduce in stud farms.

You can have *dual population policies* in the same country.

And the way to enforce that? Forced contraception. Denied contraception. Denied abortion.

Because the site of that entire battlefield is—and will always be—the body with the uterus.

A: We've seen, globally, how states have treated people as demographics and numbers. And, like you mentioned earlier, even population "stability" has always been about achieving a certain kind of population—*our kind of people*. You don't want refugees, you don't want immigrants, you want people who reflect the dominant narrative. That's always been the case.

Since you touched upon that, I wanted to ask you about the ICPD. There have been moments where the global narrative shifted towards human rights and autonomy, prioritizing the individual—seeing people as *humans* rather than just numbers.

But despite that, we've also seen how those frameworks can get overshadowed by nationalism, militarism, religious orthodoxy, and economic anxiety.

So how do we *keep* the human rights lens from being drowned out by those competing priorities?

Also, there's this recurring argument we keep hearing—especially now on platforms like TikTok and social media—where people say, "Oh, China is the ideal state. They provide housing. There's no homelessness." Or, "Singapore is perfect—look at the GDP, look at the income levels."

So even if these are authoritarian states or dictatorships, some people are asking, "Is that okay? If the economic outcomes are good, does it justify the lack of rights?"

What would you say to that?

M: So, the ICPD—like everything else—is deeply contextual. We've been tracking population conferences since at least Bucharest in 1974, then Mexico in 1984, and Cairo in 1994. Every decade, there's a new version. And to us, the Mexico conference in 1984 was *several steps backward* compared to Bucharest.

Why?

Because Bucharest raised critical questions about ownership and consumption of resources. It wasn't just about how many people there are—it was about *who controls the resources*, and how they're distributed.

But in Mexico, the United States got around 80 countries to pre-sign a declaration that discussion of resources and consumption *would not be allowed* at the conference. That was the condition before even stepping into the room.

That move was classic neo-Malthusianism in action—at its peak.

So, what does Malthus say? That resources grow in an *arithmetic* progression, while population grows in a *geometric* one. Meaning: there will *never* be enough food or resources for everyone, and some people are just going to be left out. "Tough luck," essentially.

But what Marx says is very different. Marx asks: are all the resources *equally distributed*? What's actually on Mother Earth's table? And who's sitting at it?

Gandhi said it another way: “The earth has enough for everyone's need, but not for anyone's greed.”

So different thinkers, same fundamental question: is the problem really about numbers—or is it about *distribution*?

This ties into climate change, and how we are now *ravaging* the planet. Again, this isn’t just about population—it’s about the kind of consumption patterns, resource hoarding, and capitalist excess that drive environmental destruction.

Now, coming to the ICPD in Cairo in 1994—to us, it was a step forward, because it brought reproductive rights into the conversation as human rights.

But—and this is important—ICPD did *not* challenge the question of resource ownership and consumption. That was a huge omission. So yes, it was a step ahead in terms of recognizing rights, but it still left some of the foundational inequalities untouched.

There were even strange, contradictory terms being floated—like “feminist population policy.”

We asked: what even *is* that? How can population policy and feminism go together? It felt like an oxymoron.

So people like us—“dinosaurs” who’ve been in the movement since the 1970s—were watching these developments unfold with both hope and skepticism. And those who came into the reproductive rights movement post-ICPD often had a different frame entirely.

But let’s not forget—SisterSong, the Black women’s reproductive justice collective, was formed *before* ICPD. And they were already talking about what we had been saying all along: that you cannot speak of reproductive rights in isolation.

You have to locate them within social justice frameworks.

So we ask: should reproductive rights be seen as *individual* rights? Or should we be talking about reproductive justice?

And everyone who’s worked with marginalized or subordinated communities knows—the contradictions are real.

Because for many people, especially the poor, Dalit, Adivasi, Black, queer, disabled, immigrant, or stateless—having a right written on paper doesn't mean much if it doesn't show up in your material conditions. That's why reproductive *justice* goes beyond abortion or contraception—it's about *what kind of life you can live*.

So when people talk about China or Singapore as "ideal" states—just because they provide housing or seem efficient—what we need to ask is: at what cost?

Yes, you can make homelessness disappear if you criminalize poverty. Yes, you can raise GDP if you erase dissent.

But human rights aren't just about comfort—they're about dignity, choice, freedom, and equity. And those can't exist in authoritarian states where people are surveilled, censored, or punished for who they are or what they believe.

The goal should never be just stability. It should be liberation.

And liberation means asking uncomfortable questions—not just about *how many* people exist, but *which* people get to live with dignity, and who gets to decide.

A: If you could quickly clarify for our audience the difference between *reproductive rights* and *reproductive justice*—just in two or three lines?

M: Reproductive *rights* are shaped by the nation-state and are time-bound. For example, in India, abortion became legal in 1971. Before that, it was criminalized—even though the act itself hasn't changed. What shifted was the legal recognition of a *need* at a particular moment in time.

So rights are legal constructs that may exist today and be gone tomorrow, depending on policy. They're contingent.

Reproductive justice, on the other hand, goes *beyond legality*. It links the right to bodily autonomy with social realities—like access, affordability, safety, and freedom from coercion. It considers not just whether you *can* get an abortion, but whether you can do so safely, without stigma, or systemic barriers. It's rooted in social justice, not just law.

M (continued): Now, about rights—people often forget that legality is not the same as ethics or access. I remember someone who used to perform sex determination tests saying to me: "I'm not going to stop because it's *unethical*. I'm going to stop because it's *illegal* now."

That tells you everything you need to know about how rights work—they only matter if there's enforcement. So again, rights are legal, conditional, and contextual.

Human rights go a bit further. They say: "All people are born equal, with reason and conscience." But even *those* rights are only useful if they are recognized by the state and made actionable in law.

The real tension is between individual rights (like those in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR) and collective, economic, and social rights (like in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ICESCR).

During the Cold War, capitalist countries supported the former; communist countries supported the latter. The human rights framework *says* these rights are indivisible—but geopolitics has always divided them.

Which leads back to your question: is it okay for an authoritarian regime like China to offer high living standards but restrict individual freedoms?

Some people argue that it's fine as long as there's no homelessness and healthcare is universal. But I disagree.

As Gandhi said, *you cannot achieve peace through war.* The *means* matter. There's no magical "goalpost" where the ends justify the path you took to get there. I'd rather live in a messy, chaotic democracy than in a polished, benevolent dictatorship.

Because the solution to a weak democracy is not authoritarianism. It's *stronger democracy*.

So yes, China once enforced a one-child policy, now they encourage people to have three children. But entire generations now don't know what siblings, uncles, or aunts are. They were *raised* without those social structures. And

when those single children grow up, they face the pressure of supporting six elderly relatives.

Even if the economy is better, even if healthcare and education are provided—why not trust people to make their own decisions about reproduction?

At the end of the day, as we've said again and again, the battleground is the uterus. Population policy—whether it's about having more children or fewer children—can never truly be *pro-people*, because it treats people as numbers, not as humans.

A: It's so interesting how the state always looks at people through this utilitarian and economic lens. Take South Korea—there's not a history of strong girl-unwantedness like in other places. But now, people are increasingly choosing to have daughters, because women are seen as more caring, more likely to look after aging parents.

So does that mean South Korea is becoming more feminist? Or is it just that girls are seen as more *useful*?

M: That's such a great question.

Let's go back to Article 1 of CEDAW—the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It defines discrimination as *any act or omission, intentional or not, that prevents someone from accessing their human rights fully and equally*.

So even if the *intention* is to value girls, if it's still within a patriarchal, instrumental framework—where girls are "better" because they care more, or stay home more—it's still a form of discrimination.

It's what we call dialectical materialism—that contradictions exist *within* systems. So yes, within patriarchy, you *can* have girl-wantedness. But that doesn't mean patriarchy is gone. It just means it's adapting.

A: As we close this conversation, I think you've really helped us connect the many threads we had hoped to explore today. You touched on so much—

power, patriarchy, reproductive justice, disability, and state control—but ultimately, it all comes back to what we said earlier: the right to control one's own body and fertility, *regardless* of whether the state or the market finds us useful.

So just one final question.

How do we continue making the case for abortion rights—not to cater to demographic goals or economic interests, but as a right tied to dignity, choice, and justice?

Especially when, in India for example, we've seen how public messaging around sex determination and female foeticide often ends up criminalizing individuals—like mothers or families—without addressing the structural causes of girl-unwantedness. There's so much media focus on "saving girls," posters, BBC documentaries going viral, but barely any public education about the abortion law itself, like the MTP Act. So how do we move forward?

M: This kind of shadow fighting between the campaign for abortion rights and the campaign against sex determination is one of the most unfortunate outcomes of our advocacy landscape.

The fight against sex-selective abortions was *always* rooted in the larger context of gender-based discrimination. Similarly, the fight for safe abortion needs to mature—it has to grow to understand abortion not in isolation, but in the context of *other rights and realities*.

So what does abortion mean for someone unmarried, who may have wanted the child, but is forced to terminate due to stigma? We then have to question the inevitability of marriage as a prerequisite for motherhood. We have to talk about inheritance rights, illegitimacy, social judgment. We can't push for abortion access in a vacuum—we must also dismantle the systems that make that access shameful or coercive.

That's why the concept of reproductive justice becomes so vital. It requires us to step outside the comfort zone of single-issue campaigns.

When the campaign against sex determination became a mass movement, it got out of the feminist movement's hands. It became sensationalized. The same risk applies to the abortion rights movement if we don't anchor it in intersectionality.

As Loretta Ross and SisterSong argued even before ICPD—our work must sit within a broader, intersectional movement. For example, protecting the MTP Act is essential, yes—but also acknowledging that it's an *anti-disability* law in many ways. It's great for cis, able-bodied women carrying "healthy" fetuses. But what does it mean for disabled people? Or for those carrying fetuses with disabilities?

So we have to constantly self-interrogate. Reflexivity is key.

We also have to ask: Why is there no childcare? Why aren't there support systems for women raising disabled children? Why don't mothers get even one hour to rest? Where are the psychosocial support structures?

And that's the **difference between a campaign, a movement, and a revolution**.

A *campaign* is often single-issue. A *movement* links multiple campaigns. But a *revolution* changes the entire system—patriarchy, caste, class. These are like matryoshka dolls—each nested within the other. If a campaign gets too big and forgets it's part of a larger movement or revolution, then we risk losing the vision.

So really, this division between abortion rights and anti-sex selection movements is a distraction. It only helps patriarchy when we're pitted against each other. The sooner we realize that, the better.

A: Exactly. That's why it feels like we're still fighting the *same* battle. Because the root issue—patriarchy and the constructed unwantedness of girls—still hasn't been dismantled.

As we wrap up, could you just *briefly* define reproductive justice again—for those in the audience who may have missed it earlier? And since you've mentioned SisterSong a few times, maybe a little about their contribution?

M: Sure. To recap—

Reproductive rights sit between human rights and legal rights. Human rights are universal, theoretical, idealistic—they say all people are equal. Rights, on the other hand, are when those ideals get codified in law. For example, once a country ratifies a UN treaty and applies it in domestic law, that's when a human right becomes a *right* in that country.

But no one gives us rights—they are simply the recognition of our needs. And rights evolve. If today I need the right to abortion and tomorrow I need support to raise a child with a disability, that's also valid.

Now, reproductive justice—a term coined by Black feminists from SisterSong—is about understanding reproductive decision-making in its social and political context.

It's not just about *choice*. Because what is choice in a system rigged by class, race, patriarchy? Was choosing heterosexuality ever a "choice" when everything around me was heteronormative?

So reproductive justice goes beyond "choice" to ask:

- *Why was abortion my only option?*
- *Why didn't I have access to contraception?*
- *Why is parenting unsupported in my country?*
- *Why is my citizenship, race, caste, or disability status preventing access to services?*

It's about making sure that no one is forced to have children, and no one is forced not to—and that everyone can raise their children in safe, sustainable, supported communities.

Justice, not just "rights."
And for that, abortion must stay a right—not just for the privileged, but for everyone, always.

A: That's a powerful note to end on. Thank you so much, *Manisha tai*, for this incredible conversation. I really hope we can continue these discussions again

soon. And thank you to everyone who joined us today and gave their time and attention.