



# Our Stories, Our Words

Mapping a century of  
women's movements in India

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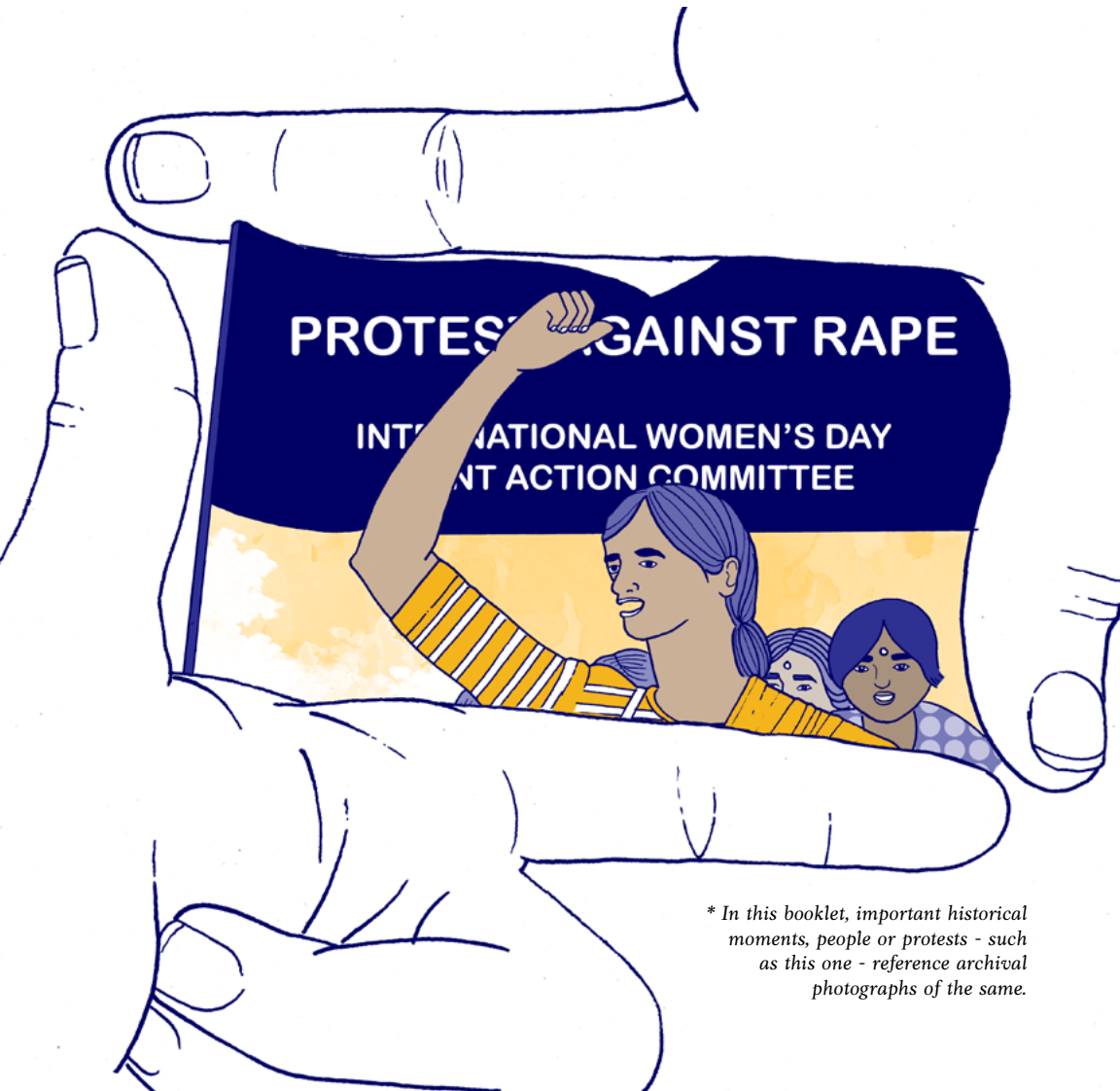
Mapping a century of women's movements in India



Visualisation, Illustration and Design:  
Vidyun Sabhaney

**Our Stories, Our Words (OSOW) is a new initiative from Zubaan to creatively map and document a hundred-year history of women's movements in India in the form of graphic stories. Ten books, covering a decade each, will map these non-linear and inter-generational stories over the period 1920-2020.**

Their sources will be multiple and wide-ranging, looking at activism, protest movements, life stories, cultural production, the setting up of women's groups and organizations. Each piece will be written and illustrated in tandem by a range of young artists and writers, with a focus on those from marginalized communities.



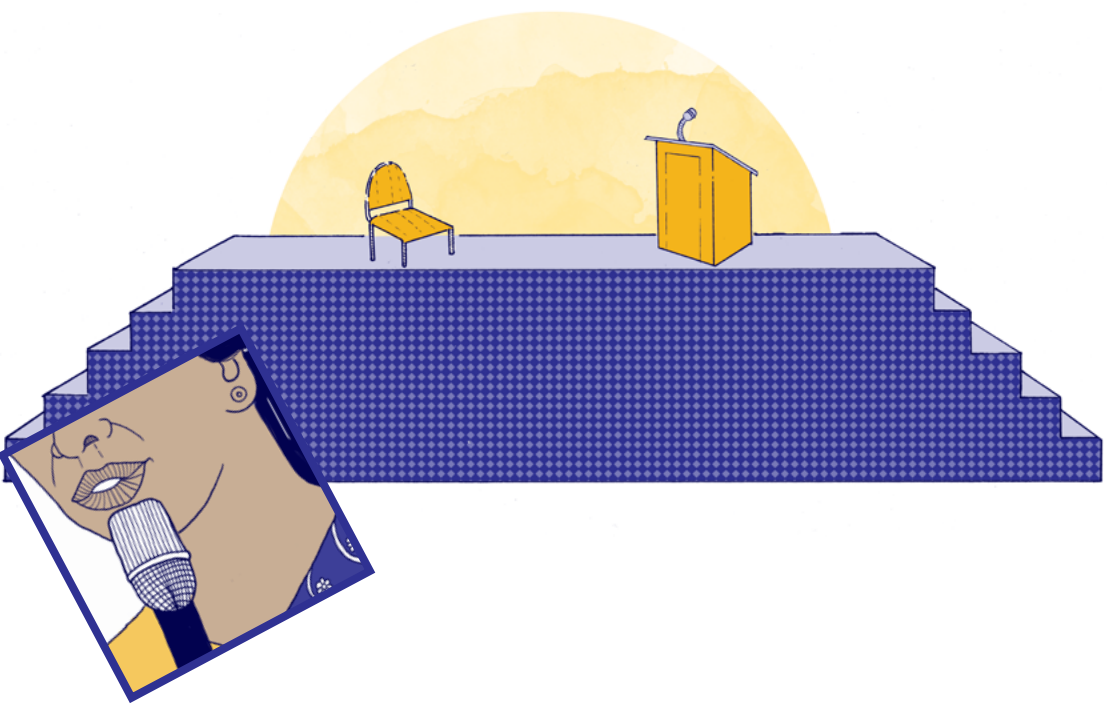
*\* In this booklet, important historical moments, people or protests - such as this one - reference archival photographs of the same.*



## Why OSOW and Why Now?

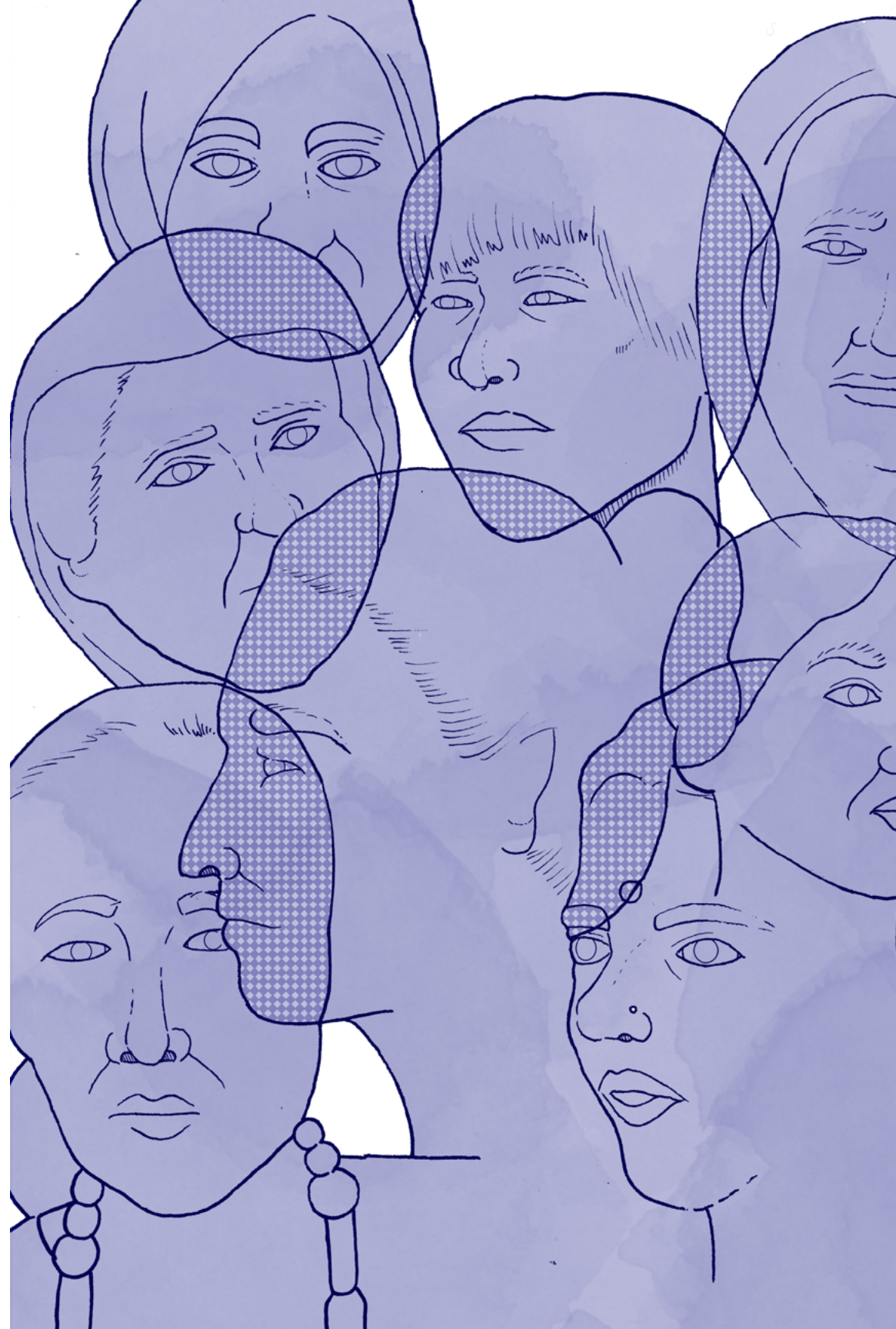
Very little of India's rich history of women's struggles and their contribution to social change has been documented in accessible formats thus far, and barely anything of this history is taught in our schools and universities. The absence of the social and political contributions of half our population in academic study marks a huge public knowledge gap.

Until recently, history writing has largely been the preserve of the powerful (mainly men, located within privileges of class, caste, sexuality, region, religion) and the histories available to us are those written from the seat of power. The resources such histories draw upon are documented, so-called 'reliable' records that leave out the lives lived outside the view of courts, circles of privilege, and upper-caste, upper-class men. Women and others on the margins barely make an appearance, let alone one where they are the ones writing the histories.



Within women's movements too, the focus on power has meant that only the most powerful and articulate voices – usually upper class, upper caste, urban, heterosexual – find expression. Yet the struggles of those who are seen as 'peripheral' are actually central to building the strength, variety and resilience of women's movements and it is only when we are willing to 'see' these connections that we can begin to understand how history can never be made up of the single narrative, instead histories must be various, diverse, inclusive, dynamic.

**Today, as the past is sought to be recast as a unitary narrative and a political tool to justify unequal and unjust agendas in the present, it becomes ever more important to explore the multi-layered-ness of our histories.**





OUR  
CITIZENSHIP  
RIGHTS

HINDUSTAN  
HAMARA  
BHI HAI

ASSI DAT KE  
RAHANGE!

AWAAZ DO...

...HUM EK HAIN

SADDA HAQ, AITHE RAKHI!

## Project Goals

OSOW will address the above issues by:

- focusing on the histories of women from across India for a full hundred years. In doing so we hope to question the received wisdom that women's activism in India has been sporadic and inconsistent;
- seeking our histories in multiple ways and from multiple sources (e.g. writings, documents, oral sources, pamphlets, photographs, songs, stories and more);
- questioning the binaries of urban/rural, centre/periphery, to create histories that are both expansive, and focused;
- re-investing in marginalized struggle as central to today's histories;
- breaking the hold of history writing in the hands of the powerful and creating publicly sourced histories written from the perspectives of those on the margins;
- creating a 'commons' of our histories, one that is accessible to all and that becomes a valuable teaching tool;
- providing multiple, sometimes contesting, narratives to establish that histories are open to different interpretations;
- creating a free resource for teaching and learning.

OSOW's histories will be both visual and textual. This, we believe, will provide greater accessibility, and make it easier to translate the texts into various languages.

Through these histories we hope to bring together a community of writers and artists across age, caste, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, location to bring a cultural richness, a depth of engagement, a wealth of knowledge to create histories that belong to us all.

भंवरी पीछे  
नहीं हटेगी  
हम सब  
उसके  
साथ हैं

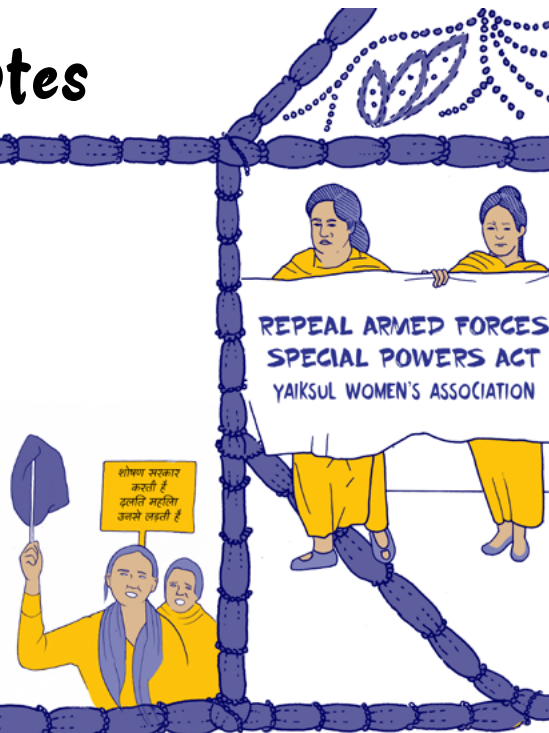
# Project Features & Commissioning Notes

Stories will be commissioned to engage with structures of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, queerness and disability.

This enterprise must clearly acknowledge areas where certain women and queer persons have been completely written out of the narrative, where no clear stories remain, instead of papering over these gaps.

Each contribution/chapter will be in the form of an illustrated or graphic stand-alone work, with the view for the pieces to have wide accessibility in terms of language. Graphic formats can uniquely illustrate and transform the linearity of traditional history-telling into a more complex, responsible portrayal of that which has been uncovered so far, and that which is yet to be drawn out.

Collaborators and participants in this work will be from the burgeoning communities of activist-writers, activist-illustrators, journalists and new and young academics from marginalized communities, privileging both new directions in each of these fields as well as disruptions and discussions being led by these communities.

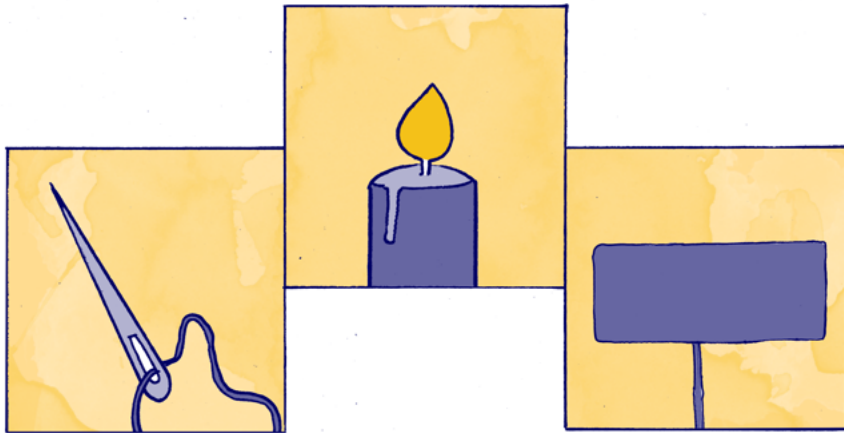


The aim will also be to pull workers and tradeswomen from the many artistic traditions that have characterized and contributed to the cultures of protest and resistance in this region. This can be, but is not limited to, traditional artists, singers, dancers, weavers, among others.

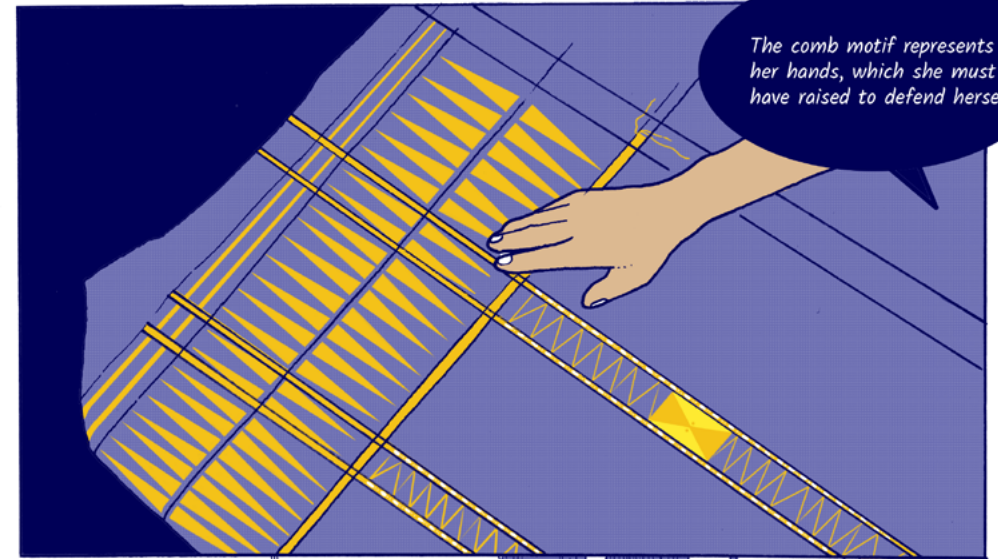
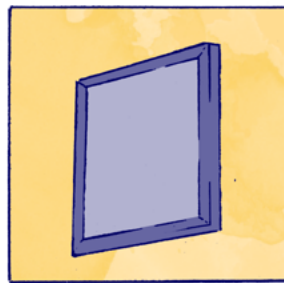
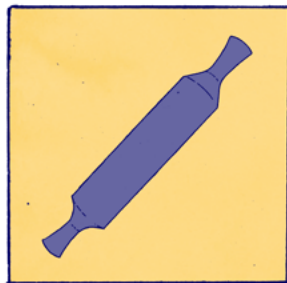
As such, a focus in each volume will also be on the interiority of women's lives — another aspect left out of 'hard' history — whether this be via various forms of creative expression, oral histories and folktales, or other personal and familial records.



## THE MEANING OF LUINGAMLA KASHAN

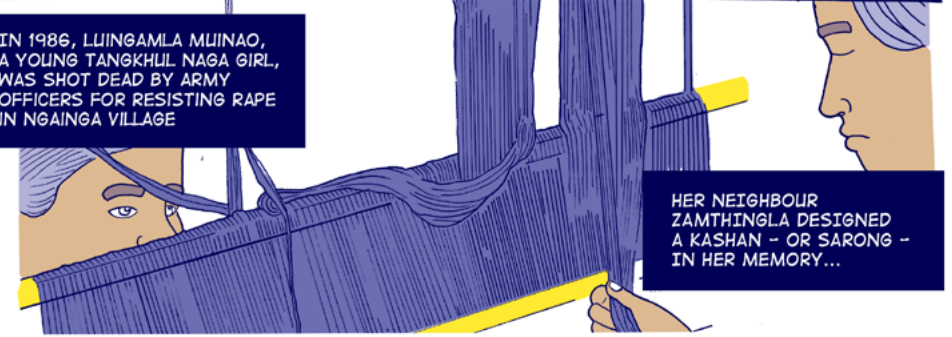


The project will bring out the stories embedded in women's struggles, and in their everyday lives. The following page is a sample of how one such graphic history might come together. It is based on a video in which the designer of Luingamla Kashan describes the meaning of each motif in the sarong (kashan) that she made to support the battle for justice for Luingamla, who was raped and killed by army officers.

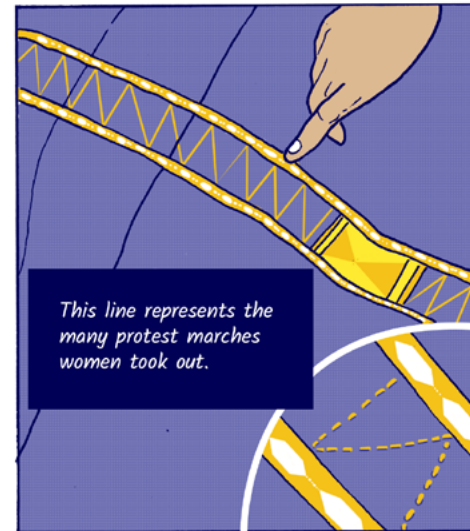


The comb motif represents her hands, which she must have raised to defend herself.

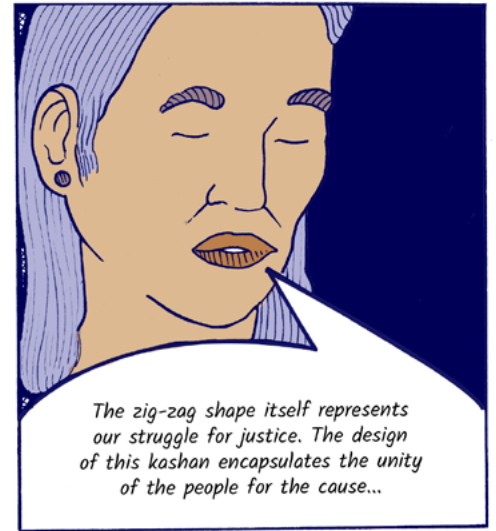
IN 1986, LUINGAMLA MUINAO, A YOUNG TANGKHUL NAGA GIRL, WAS SHOT DEAD BY ARMY OFFICERS FOR RESISTING RAPE IN NGAINGA VILLAGE



HER NEIGHBOUR ZAMTHINGLA DESIGNED A KASHAN - OR SARONG - IN HER MEMORY...

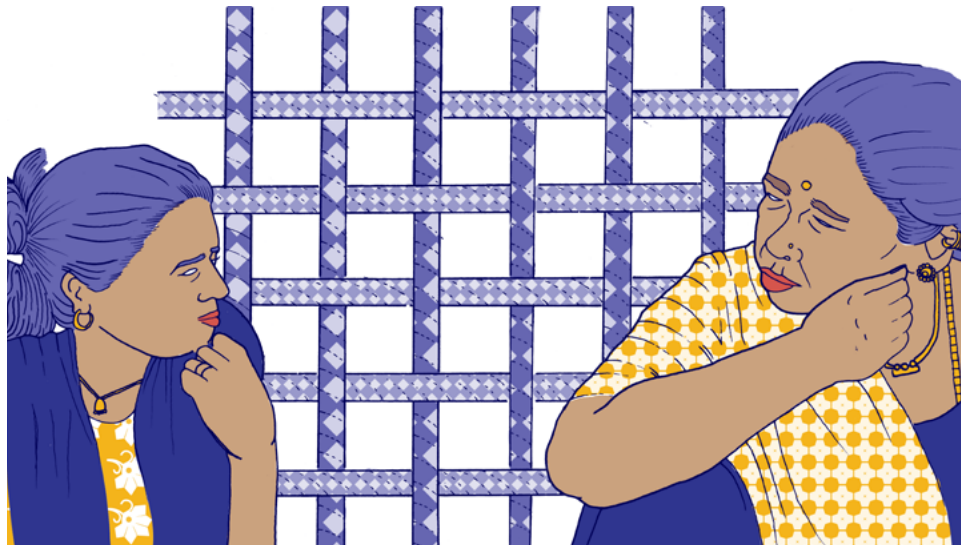


This line represents the many protest marches women took out.



The zig-zag shape itself represents our struggle for justice. The design of this kashan encapsulates the unity of the people for the cause...

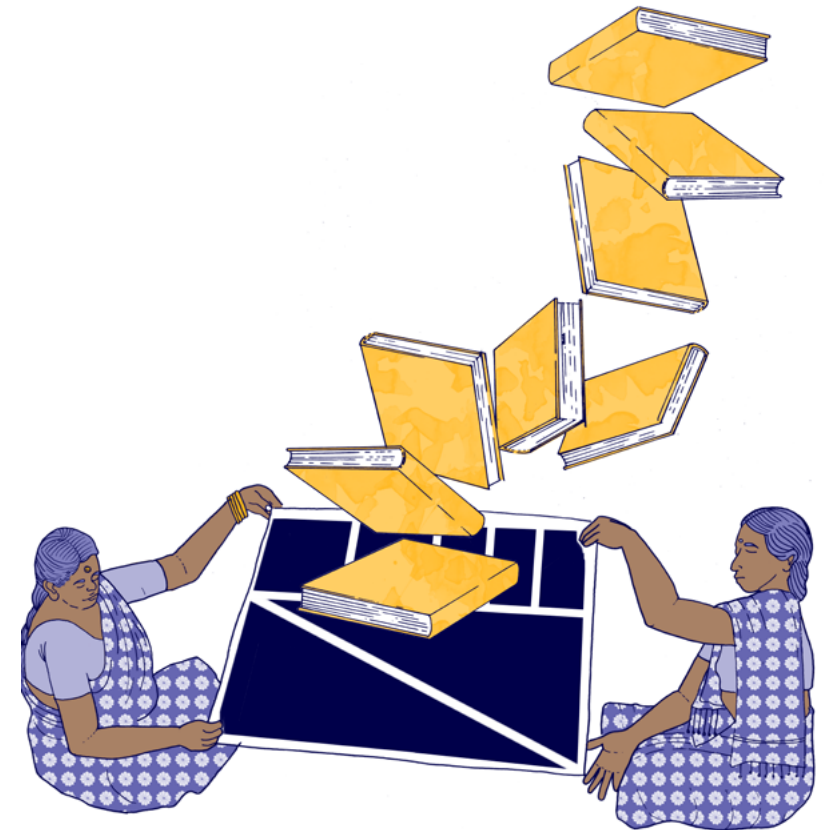
# Project Features & Commissioning Notes



**The project will pull in collaborations with primarily younger storytellers and professionals, while relying on more established women within the movements to democratize access and ownership of our common histories.** In this way we hope to collectively create an intergenerational weave for communities to relate to and for us to learn from. By this we hope to acknowledge and highlight women's stories across generations and families, and leave behind the restrictive 'wave' formations of understanding these histories, to instead focus on a less linear, Western and restrictive model of a public historical tradition which does not strive to flatten our multiple stories into a singular, 'mainstream' understanding.

**The spirit of collaboration** will run through the conceptualization of each individual piece as 'writers' and 'artists' (or co-creators from different traditions or mediums) will work in tandem from the very beginning, with guidance from the project team, advisors, and group feedback within each 'book' as well as from those who worked on previous iterations. In this way we hope to address the power dynamics that inform such exercises and to maintain the very important balance of representation.

As such, each 'book' will form a mosaic covering ten years in the period 1920-2020, and organize its contents not by year but by connections between narratives. As these exist across the boundaries of decades and movements, it will be an opportunity to weave accessibility into the structure of each volume, allowing readers to enter comfortably at any point.



Each volume can comprise of pieces of different lengths and subject matter, but each will cover through a range of special features: (i) founding stories of pathbreaking groups, organizations, NGOs (ii) 'themes/issues' that run through the movement like struggles against domestic violence, 'inclusion', feminist solidarity, etc., (iii) conflicts and negotiations within movements (iv) other South Asian movements and moments that have impacted the politics and resistance within these years, (v) laws relevant to that decade and (vi) wider international movements for independence and women's rights that have impacted our histories.

# Zubaan's history of history-keeping

More than a decade ago, Zubaan embarked on a project to map a visual history of the women's movement in India through the collection and archiving of posters produced for various campaigns by women's groups.

The poster, generally seen as an ephemeral form of art was, for us and for many who had been involved in different movements, a way of marking a particular moment, a form of mobilizing that was political, direct and creative. The project contacted groups and individuals across the country and received an enthusiastic response. Women searched their personal collections, groups conducted workshops and brought activists together from rural and urban areas, and in a few years, an amazing archive came together.

At the end of three years, 161 women's groups and a large number of individuals had enabled us to gather over 1600 posters, which we classified by subject, scanned and uploaded onto a public archive, the Poster Women website. An extension of the project allowed us to gather together creative pieces produced mostly by rural women (patachitras, Madhubani paintings, scrolls, applique banners and more) as another form of women's/ feminist art which are also available. All educational use of these resources is free.

In collaboration with activists on the ground, the archive was expanded in 2011 to include 40 written pieces by activists, speaking of their memories of the movement and sometimes of the making of specific posters. Later, 50 extended audio interviews with women activists from all over the country were added, and the archive will be further extended as we go on.

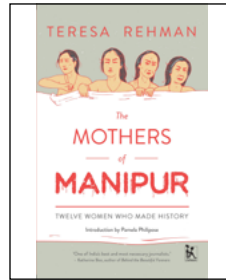
Every Zubaan project that followed expanded and deepened the knowledge resources that have been created. A three-year South Asia wide research project on Sexual Violence and Impunity resulted in 55 research papers from five countries that were compiled into six volumes, along with two independent full length volumes, making a total of eight books.



*\* This illustration references a photograph by Eileen McDougall of Ima Kiethel market in Imphal.*



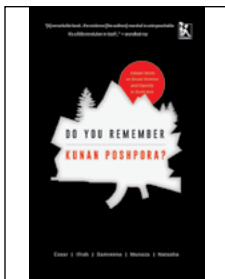
**A Life In Trans Activism**  
A. Revathi, as told to Nandini Murali



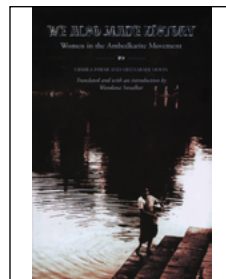
**The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History**  
Teresa Rehman



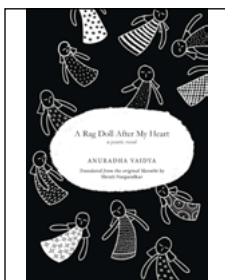
An ongoing research project on women's work (entitled No Space for Work) explored through its intersections with the structural and systemic violence women face in their lives, will provide accessible teaching-learning materials in multiple forms. In two interconnected projects, Body of Evidence and Stepping Stones, we focused on taking stories and findings from the sexual violence project to young people through theatre, poetry, performance, and in our Cultures of Peace and Fragrance of Peace projects we continue to source and disseminate written material, graphic stories, voice notes as well as audio and video productions from the Northeastern states. A crosscutting focus in all our work is on the voices of the marginalized, particularly Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, queer and trans voices.



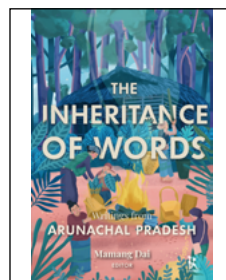
**Do You Remember Kunan Pushpora?** Essar, Ifrah, Samreena, Munaza and Natasha



**We Also Made History: Women In The Ambedkarite Movement**  
Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon



**A Rag Doll After My Heart: A Poetic Novel**  
Anuradha Vaidya, translated by Shruti Nargundkar



**The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh** Edited by Mamang Dai

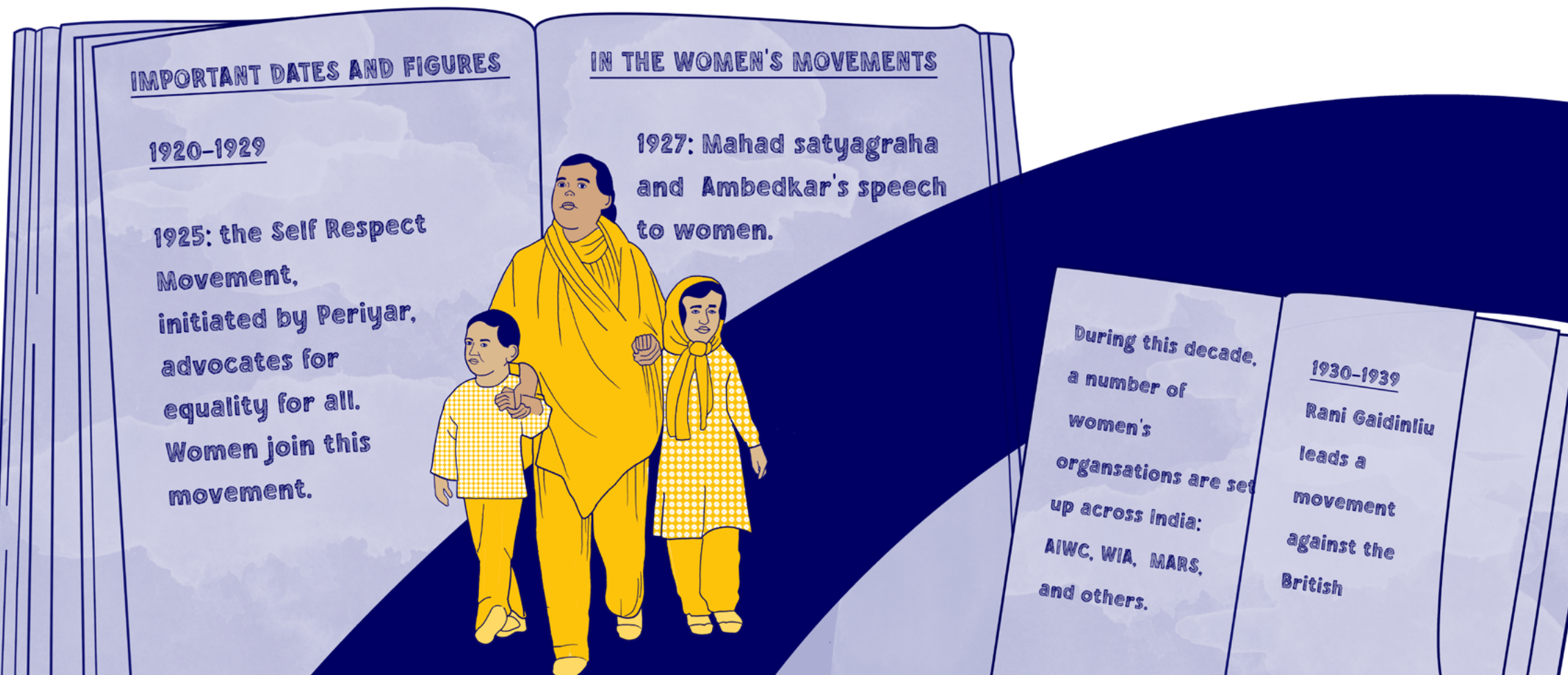


Over the years, Zubaan has worked hard to document and create a knowledge base on the multiple histories of women's movements in India and South Asia. These accounts – written by different authors – are a valuable resource, and have been widely used as educational material. They also have much to offer by way of feminist learnings: they lead us to questions and contestations about ideas of single and collective authorship that continue to be discussed within women's movements. All too often such accounts are only academic (with the 'academic' being understood largely as 'western' and therefore sidelining local knowledge and cultures), sometimes funded by academic institutions that are subject to the vagaries of governments in power, and they are weighted unevenly in terms of what is seen as 'mainstream' or 'marginal', 'national' or 'regional', 'urban' or 'rural', often ignoring the ways in which one seeps into and informs the other. It is with this in mind that we have decided to embark on this ambitious project, to map through graphic art and storytelling, a hundred years of women's movements in India.

## Public Access & Sharing

The stories and narratives created by the project will be shared in a variety of ways, and we hope this will continue beyond what we initiate. Some of the deciding principles of the dissemination are:

1. The archive of interviews will be open for use and reference
2. All groups who have participated and helped in sourcing materials will have access to use these stories for their work.
3. If we are able to raise enough resources, translations will be made available in as many languages as possible.
4. The histories will be housed on our website; if funds are available we may create animation videos of some of them. Because histories evolve and the process of seeking out hidden histories is never static, we hope to find a way of making space for new contributions and interpretations, and to showcase these in multiple ways, particularly through the use of the digital medium.



5. Accessibility of the materials generated will be a guiding principle throughout the project. We are thinking of multiple outputs such as audiobooks, short videos, braille books, DAISY-compliant formats, captions on all images when disseminating. Actualising accessible formats will be done in consultation with partner organizations and stakeholders in order to fully understand the needs of multiple communities.
6. We will also ensure that there are ongoing social media campaigns to create conversations and discussions around the issues raised by the histories, and that the work is promoted across the country.
7. If possible, and if enough funds can be raised, we may also think of exhibitions of the work done by young artists.
8. And lastly, the ten sets of works will be published as a set of ten books.



## Current Funds & Future Needs

Our primary funder, the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, has supported much of the initial research of this work. However, an undertaking of this scale, with these many collaborators, will require more support. This is especially so as we are dedicated to the fair compensation of our collaborators as one of our central beliefs — as access and wealth have been the gatekeepers of history-writing in the past, it is extremely important that the participants in this enterprise are fairly compensated for the value of their work, which is immense. Zubaan may be the initiator of this project, but the exercise can only sustain with collective ownership, and a diverse group of creators — whose labour will be realized and recognized in a feminist model that understands the snow-balling societal impact of such contributions.

## Project Timeline

### Phase I - Research

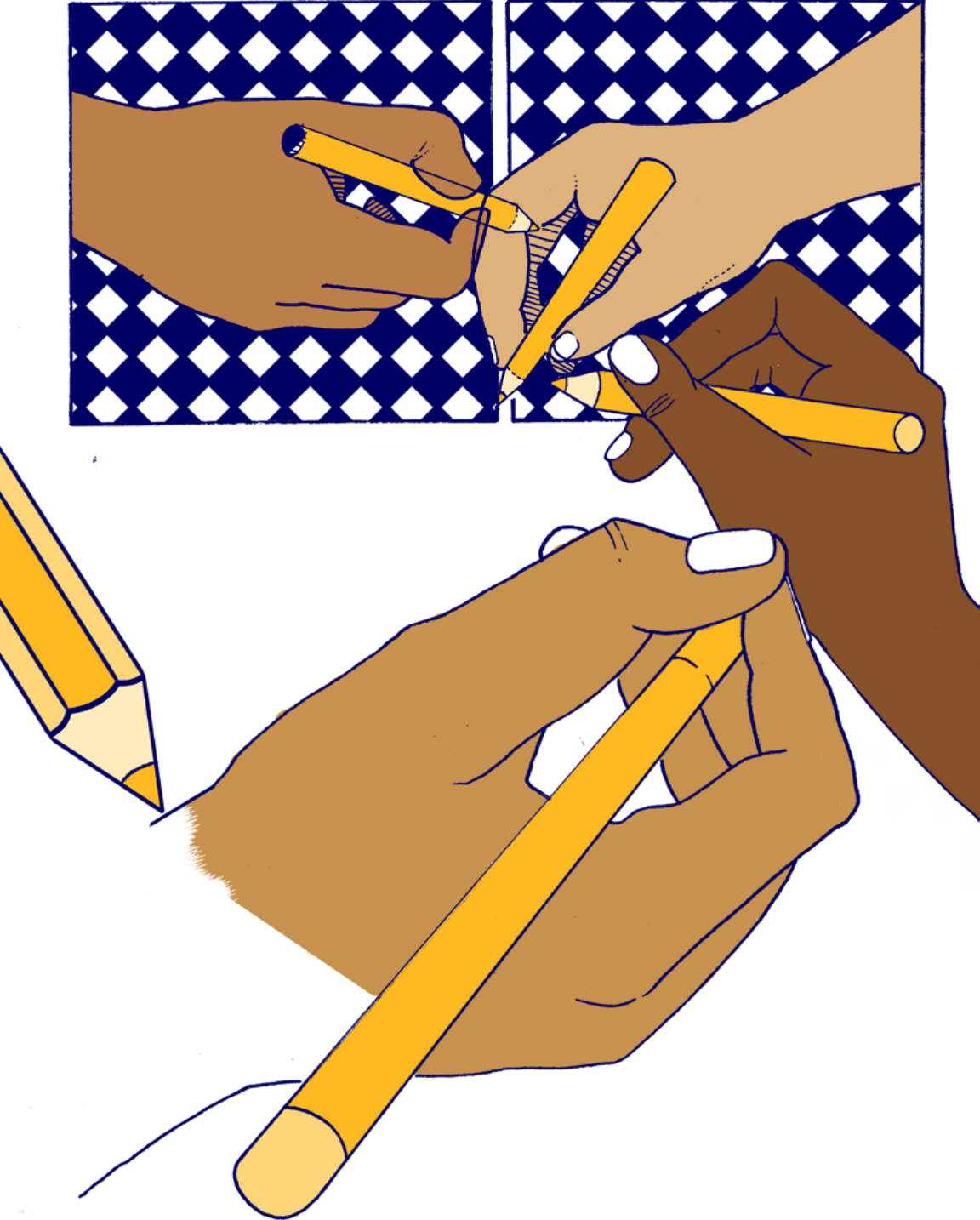
1. Creation of research outline
2. Sharing and discussion with women's movement activists and with individuals from certain marginalized experiences to offset the bias within the respondent group (suggestions of participants/creators can be fielded at this point as well)
3. Creation of a board of advisors & jury/vetting process for collaboration

### Phase II: Material Creation

1. Open call for participants (accessibility, inclusivity and representation as central principles of the call)
2. Parallel outreach to specific contacts based on commissioning notes
3. Selection of final participants of each volume
4. Methodology & curation workshops for each volume
5. Creation and editorial processes
6. Finalisation of all pieces

### Phase III: Dissemination And Further Fundraising

1. (simultaneous with step 5 above) Outreach to all players of histories covered, to inform them of the materials + sharing of selected excerpts
2. Planning for online and offline dissemination
3. Execution
4. Publishing



OSOW is an ambitious and exciting project. It's also daunting – our constant question to ourselves is: will we get this right? Is it even possible to do this? And the truth is, we don't have a real answer. All we know is that we just have to try, and we also know something else that's crucial – that the only way this project will work is if it is collaborative, if it is inclusive, if it is diverse. In the years of feminist activism in India when different groups have marched together in the streets of our villages, towns and cities, we've brought multiple perspectives to our protests and there's been ample space to accommodate them all. For us, OSOW is a bit like these collective activist moments, except that we're creating a commons of collective knowledge, histories that are sourced together. None of this can be done alone, no single researcher, writer, artist, is equal to this task. This is why we need to work together.



**BHIKAJI CAMA**



**BEGUM HAZRAT MAHAL**

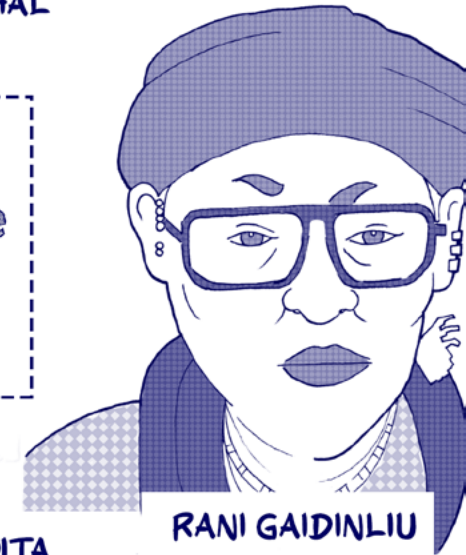


**DAKSHAYANI VELAYUDHAN**



**MATANGANI HAZRA**

**Women  
who made  
Modern  
India**



**RANI GAIDINLIU**

**SISTER NIVEDITA**



**ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN**



**SAVITRIBAI PHULE**

