

# Women Against Fundamentalisms

Gita Sahgal is a writer, activist and broadcaster, originally from India and now settled in England. She has been an active member of *Southall Black Sisters* and *Women against Fundamentalisms*. This year she came to speak at Glasgow University in the *Series on Gender and Globalisation* organised by the International Centre for Gender & Women's Studies. Robin Sen spoke to her there.

Robin Sen: Can you tell me about your work with *Southall Black Sisters*?

Gita Sahgal: I'm not a member of *Southall Black Sisters* now but I was a very active member for a good ten years. They're very important as they're a secular, largely Asian, organisation which have served the community in Southall on issues of domestic violence and all the related issues: poverty, immigration, policing etc. which come out around that. What's particularly important about the group is that while we were secular, we drew people from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, and that's one of the joys of being in Britain, that you can make these cross connections. Now new refugees have come into the area, so for example you have Somali women coming in using the centre.

The organisation has also worked a lot with the local estates where there are a lot of mixed race kids. For instance, there are white working class mothers of black sons who were getting into trouble with the police, and *Southall Black Sisters* have worked with them on a number of issues.

We were also involved in the founding of a group called *Women Against Fundamentalisms* around the time of the Rushdie Affair in 1989. We felt it was important to stress that the group were working in the context of Britain as a Christian state. So the problem is not just of fundamentalisms within minority religions but that the actual structure of the state is Christian—it has a blasphemy law, it protects Christianity, it enforces acts of Christian worship in schools. So we were arguing with other women about the way multiculturalism in Britain was used to police and silence minorities, rather than produce a genuine mixing of people who could challenge the orthodoxies within their own communities.

RS: As an Asian woman, working within a secular feminist tradition, is it hard to find an identity within the Asian community as an atheist?

GS: I don't think so because there are plenty of people like me within it. It's been buried now, but when people came to this country they had politics with them. People that came into the factories in areas like Southall came from the left. They came from nationalist traditions, they came from Communist traditions, every single variety of Marxism was represented in the early *Indian Workers' Associations*.

We clashed with the *Indian Workers' Associations* because they didn't want to recognise domestic violence—they were very socially conservative in terms of family life—but they were politically radical in other ways, so there were things we could relate to.

During the Rushdie Affair we defended Rushdie's right to write as part of our right to critique our own traditions and in defence of our secular traditions—we've come out of radical traditions that we bring with us. People told us that the stand we took would put us outside the

community, but it actually meant more Muslim women came to us, and we didn't lose any Muslim clients.

RS: Do you think religious identity is becoming more fixed?

GS: I think it is. When I was at university in the 70s there were national groups, *Indian Student Associations* and *Pakistani Student Associations* and stuff like that, and we actually were from India and Pakistan rather than British Asians. Now there are many more British Asians at the universities and you'll find many more Muslim groups of different kinds, there will be a *Hindu Students' Federation* which is very active on the campuses—I cannot imagine these existing in the '70s or even early '80s.

RS: One of the things New Labour has done is to support the creation of single faith schools. Do you see anything positive in this?

GS: No, I think it's a disaster. Again there is the influence of Christianity within the state system, the existence of voluntary controlled Christian schools who can pick and choose who they take in has been one of the fundamental problems. I think one of the reports on Bradford [following the 'race' riots in the north of England in the Summer of 2001] pointed this out—that segregation has occurred because the Christian schools have attracted white kids and Afro-Caribbean kids to them and left the local state schools being totally Asian. So it leads to a sort of racial divide within the school system.

Single faith schools are however also partly a response to very active Islamic, Hindu and Sikh organisations that are arguing for these schools to be set up. There's an argument that you can create a more positive identity from within those schools, but I don't buy it. I think the kind of identity developed in, for example, a Muslim school cuts out the lived Islam of the Subcontinent which is actually a very diverse Islam.

RS: There have been a number of issues concerning religion and race relations since New Labour came to power—Blair's discourse on Christianity, the treatment of asylum seekers, the 'race riots' over the Summer of 2001—do you think those things are connected in any way?

GS: I think that Blair has moved the argument from race to religion, so Blair looks at religious minorities rather than racial minorities. I think that movement has come about partly because the minorities are asserting themselves in a religious voice. But that ties in with Blair's own thinking.

I think that the general Christian ethic which is being asserted, and the promotion of faith schools along side that, is a disaster. At the same time that the Government talks of adopting British norms and so on, they're actually dividing Britain up more and more into different religious groupings. I think it is hard for those of us who are atheists and who want to live in a genuinely multicultural society with interracial mixing, to find a space within that.

RS: There's a seeming contradiction between the assertion of 'Britishness' on the one hand and the way the economy is now dominated by multinational companies on the other. Do you think that as the economy becomes more global people feel

the need to draw a sense of national identity closer?

GS: I think in England there really has been a loss, with the founding of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. People don't really know what to be English means anymore. There have been a lot of blind alleys that certain kinds of rather sterile, state forms of anti-racism have taken. The people who originally opposed racism were not merely anti-racists but had a vision of something else.

Mistakes have been made in failing to look at white exclusion. This is a Government—for all its talk—that is not interested in the white working class, or the people who are not working class anymore as they've lost their jobs and don't have a place in the world. And I don't think it cares about Asian socially excluded people either, other than rapping them over the knuckles. It worries about them because it doesn't want riots and [so] it will put resources into them. But the forms through which they try and mobilise around these groups—through community leaders who are already discredited and through religious leadership—are not necessarily effective.

The offset of this is that there is going to be a resurgence in forms of racial and religious identity.

RS: You've talked about left-wing traditions in both the Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities. Do you think there is a possibility of the reformation of these communities around political issues?

GS: I hope there is. We see signs, there was some attempt at having a *Civil Rights Movement* that came out of the struggles of families for justice over issues of policing and deaths in police custody.

But I think that if we don't take on board some of the difficult things within our own societies—and one of the key issues is the religious revival and the growth of fundamentalist movements—then we really won't be able to formulate a new movement.

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