

## Vasanth Kannabiran Oral History Content Summary

### Track 1: [duration: 10:30] [Session one: 5 October 2014]

[00:00] Vasanth Kannabiran [VK] Born to communist family, grandfather's brothers all founding members of Communist Party, India. Describes growing up in political, liberal atmosphere in traditional household. Describes imprisonment of favourite uncle, growing up listening to he and friends talking, earliest childhood influence. Describes lack of interest in school, love of reading, grandfather filling house with books, VK reading all classics by age ten. Mentions Maxim Gorky, Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, William Shakespeare, Alexandre Dumas. VK eldest of four. Describes being first daughter in house after 60 years of boys, feeling privileged and equal. Describes college elections all contested by men, one post reserved for 'lady representative', DK insisting on female contestant for president, acting as campaign manager.

[05:00] Describes results, first lesson learned regarding realistic possibilities, age 15. Describes ensuing trouble from male classmates, upset and disruption at school, VK's 'second feminist action' threatening non-participation in inaugural events where girls critical feature. Remarks that first political action. Describes first awareness of difference being girl, during adolescence as conservative limits imposed by mother and grandmother. Describes father's imprisonment in nationalist struggle. Describes prominent members of Communist Party in and out of house, 1940s, VK running around among them as child. Describes father's wish for VK to study Medicine, quitting after one year, Honours Degree in Literature. Mentions marriage. [pause]

### Track 2: [duration: 26:40] [Session one: 5 October 2014]

[00:00] Describes games played as child, skipping, playing catch in neighbourhood. Describes all family sleeping in one room. Describes mealtimes as staggered, individuals eating according to own schedules. Describes all family members cooking. Remarks on not being asked or expected to help with household chores. Describes enjoyment of cooking from early age, chatter between mother and grandmother. Describes living in town, introduction to village life coming much later with work.

[05:01] Describes being born at home, today living only a few streets away. Describes attendance of Christian school, then Keyes High School For Girls, Telangana, India. Describes 'irrational' expectations of teachers of VK to do homework. Describes syndrome of living in small cantonment town where everyone knew VK's family, 'doing best' to make her black sheep. Describes good knowledge and understanding of Bible at early Christian school, no religious focus at next school. Describes grandmother performing *pujas*. Describes each festival having special sweet made. Mentions Dasara Doll Festival. Describes grandmother's upset at father's chosen path but taking in stride. Mentions arranged marriages. Remarks on concept of appraising parents' relationship as western question not considered by child in Indian household. Reflects on parents' relationship, but as unrelated to her story. Describes passion for reading, enjoyment of good literature as well as more casual texts picked up by father. Mentions fictional character, Perry Mason, Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie.

Describes living in the world of words, English teacher recalling VK's compositions years later.

[10:48] Describes relationship with father, VK favourite daughter, taken everywhere. Comments on being much-loved child. Describes love and admiration for grandmother. Describes study of literature followed by marriage and two children, then taking job as teacher upon husband's resignation. Remarks on university, 'drifting through'. Comments on good atmosphere, teaching and course, good friends made, but unhappy period in life. Describes marriage at 20, husband as major influence on VK's life. Describes lack of interest in boys of own age. Describes marriage as very happy. Describes enjoyment of teaching Literature, and popularity as teacher.

[15:08] Describes classes of 120 students without microphone, intense schedule, never tiring. Remarks on a 'good middle-class contented life'. Describes parents helping with children, remarking that unknown in West. Mentions Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi, 1975. Mentions husband's work as lawyer. Describes repression of Marxist-Leninist groups from 1969 on, cases coming to husband, with reputation as having leftist sympathies. Mentions Defence of India Rules, Maintenance of Internal Security Act. Describes daily arrest of friends, poets, writers, revolutionaries, husband working day and night on cases and writs.

[20:00] Describes dissatisfaction with disconnect between own work and home life at time, ignorance of colleagues regarding Emergency. Remarks on life as 'schizophrenic'. Describes absolute engagement with husband's activities, children raised in political environment with open discussion. Describes people coming to home, seeking help, remarking on continued thanks and praise for husband after his death. Describes danger to husband's life. Describes teaching for 25 years until 1985. Mentions starting PhD on Marxist Criticism.

[24:37] Describes formation of women's group, Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1977. Describes collecting oral histories of women in Telangana movement, published in 'We Were Making History', 1989. Describes inspiration behind group. Mentions women 'fed up' with patriarchy. Describes pertinent issue of time, rape. Describes case of Rameeza Bee, Mathura rape case, group undertaking fact finding missions, writing reports. [pause]

### **Track 3: [duration: 21:33] [Session one: 5 October 2014]**

[00:00] Explains meaning of name of organisation, Stree Shakti Sanghatana, number of founding members. Describes feeling of being born again at that time, everything falling into place, life finding meaning after feminist readings at college. Describes as most exciting period of life, meetings, marches. Describes group as very strong, political, articulate, vocal, one of best known in country. Describes set up, unregistered, meeting at one another's houses, people arriving for help. Gives examples of issues, health, dowry death cases. Explains history of dowry deaths in India from 1970s, identifying as domestic violence. Describes setting up Dowry Death Investigation Committee, as non-radical, non-political arm of activities. Describes experiences of negative community response.

[05:00] Describes case in Delhi, India, expressing disgust at behaviour of lawyers, judge's cutting jokes about victim. Description of campaign and strategy. Mentions books published, 'We Were Making History', and adaptation of Boston Women's Health Book Collective's, 'Our Bodies Ourselves' in Indian context. Describes work with Rural Development Agency, first impressions of village life as 'town bred'. Describes successful work with Deccan Development Society, enjoyment of life there.

[10:00] Describes being only woman in all male organisation working with women, DK first to talk about domestic violence, child rape, holding popular meetings. Discusses community response of denial. Mentions setting up Asmita Resource Centre For Women (Asmita). Describes funding of first activities for Stree Shakti Sanghatana, from own pockets, support from others in kind, lending cars, spaces. Mentions Anveshi Research Centre For Women's Studies. Describes intention behind Asmita, remarks that 'extraordinarily creative space'. Describes greatest pleasure of co-authoring books with daughter. Describes research on women's achievements over 150 year history of Andhra Pradesh state, India, published as 'Womanscape', 2000.

[15:12] Describes women featured in book, first social reformer, publisher, writer, lawyer, doctor, police officer, artist, poet, film maker, musician. Describes work on capacity building, demands for training, evolving to regular courses. Describes focus on justice, gender and land rights, domestic violence, rape, education on The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action. Interest in taking 'global to local'. Describes involvement in run up to United Nations Fourth World Conference On Women, Beijing, China, 1995 [Beijing], identifying groups, calling meetings, team based workshops, defining issues. Discusses funding agencies' interest that grassroots women's voices should be heard, remarking on talented women in co-ordination unit, unprecedented focus across India. Comments that 'very vivid period'. Describes attending United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria, 1993, [Vienna] with husband. Mentions Charlotte Bunch. Describes activities on team's return from Beijing, disseminating knowledge widely. Describes The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) funding translation of Beijing Platform For Action. Describes focus on reaching grassroots when disseminating information, now working with college boys and men.

[20:00] Discusses relevance of Beijing Platform For Action at time, and today. Describes conducting training in numerous countries as gender consultant for with Asia South Pacific Bureau for Adult Education (ASPBAE). [pause for break]

#### **Track 4: [duration: 47:47] [Session one: 5 October 2014]**

[00:00] Describes feeling compelled to write upon becoming feminist. Mentions William Shakespeare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Describes involvement in events surrounding International Women's Year (IWY), 1975, being invited to speak, establishing VK as well-known public speaker on women's issues. Mentions Indian coverage of United Nations First World Conference On Women, Mexico City, Mexico, 1975, attended by Parvathi Krishnan. Describes shifting focus to study,

discussion and analysis of issues, with formation of Stree Shakti Sanghatana. Describes anti-arak struggle in Andhra Pradesh, India as spontaneous movement by rural women against payment of agricultural workers' wages in alcohol. Describes destruction of village economy, lack of food, landlords collaborating with excise contractors benefiting from revenue from alcohol addiction of workers. Describes action by women, travelling with women for sit-ins to stop liquor auctions, burning down liquor stores. Describes documenting struggle in booklet, 'Saramsam', speaking publicly on issue of corruption of excise policy. Describes organizing rally, Andhra Pradesh, 17 July 1997, arrangements for 2,000 women, end participation of 12,000. Remarks that was self-mobilization by women. Describes streets 'riot of colour', total blackout with non-coverage by media.

[07:20] Describes start of writing as response to popularity as speaker. Remarks on best advice given by editor, to not use feminist jargon. Describes paper selling out on day of VK's column, women buying copies to read and discuss together, women in villages and elsewhere acknowledging VK as inspiration.

[10:02] Discusses relationship with husband and VK's refusal to be wife in public, commenting on patriarchal nature of left party of under-privileged. Describes deliberate separation of respective public roles. Describes husband's life constantly at risk, his disposition remaining calm. Describes kidnapping threats to grandchildren. Mentions the Naxalites. Describes children's understanding of activism of parents, lack of resentment, admiration for father. Describes being chosen as one of 1000 peace women nominated for Nobel Peace Prize, 2005 and being overwhelmed by local support.

[15:29] Describes experience at Vienna, being shaken by Charlotte Bunch's speech. Describes later organizing own enquiries on violence. Describes interest in writing ballet, achievement of 'Menakaa', about sexuality and seduction, 'Ahalya', about wifehood, marriage, sexuality, seduction, questioning scriptures, and status quo. Describes as powerful, well received. Describes writing 'Peace On Earth' about contributions of four diverse women in their communities, choosing Esther from Old Testament, Mary Magdalene from New Testament, Rabia Basri and Akka Mahadevi. Describes audience of nuns writing to say most spiritual experience of their lives. Remarks on high calibre of musicians and dancer, collaborating well with VK. Describes fourth ballet written, 'Gandhari', on society's blindness to cruelty and reality of war, killing, murder, greed.

[20:08] Describes current writing of ballet on corruption and evil, preserving the environment, freedom of religion. Mentions Narendra Modi [Modi]. Reflects on surprise of writing first ballet age 70, feeling great triumph, culmination of all learned, lived, taught, and wanted in life. Describes growing up with music, mother singing, commenting that music always played in south Indian homes. Discusses concept of India as secular society. Mentions Indian National Congress (INC), World Bank. Remarks on India being democracy with leadership from popular vote. Discusses how country arrived at current political situation, lack of governance, appeasement of different groups, call for change. Mentions Gujarat massacre. Comments on Modi's performance and impact.

[26:02] Discusses 2012 Delhi gang rape on bus and growth of violence, lack of effective response. Remarks on only criticism of Modi to date as Prime Minister. Describes including men in workshops on development in human rights, covering right to land, national employment scheme, rural employment guarantee scheme, right to information, local self-government, political responsibility. Describes volume of dissemination of information by Asmita, simplifying, translating all, including CEDAW. Remarks on qualified team. Describes recently taking men.

[30:30] Describes set up of paid staff, occasional interns. Describes first funders, Hivos. Comments on difficulty for women's organizations to get building space in India. Mentions Bread for the World, Ford Foundation, Holdeen India Fund. Describes current major project on Disability and No Violence Against Women, funded by European Union. Describes donor-suggested projects, for Leonard Cheshire Disability, Ford Foundation with interest in research on child marriage. Describes frustrations/difficulties over the years, turnover of staff, gap between first generation of activists and approach of staff doing a job.

[35:46] Attributes success to belief in importance of what organisation is doing. Describes new and positive things arising from each undertaking. Gives example of 'Womanscape', leading to educational poster for village discussion, a play. Remarks on creativity of Asmita. Mentions compiling anthology of feminist poetry, commenting that women poets abused in society. Described as second best anthology in last century. Remarks that perspective of senior Asmita staff cannot be faulted. Describes management of differences among working team. Refers to article written for Ritu Menon's 'Interior Decoration: Poems by 54 Women from 10 Languages' as expression of first impressions of women's collective work.

[43:53] Describes partnership with Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). Mentions Pallavi Gupta, first trip to Africa – Nigeria. Describes use of WLP material. Discusses importance of interaction with women of different countries, hearing first hand of struggles. Describes enrichment from contact with Arab countries and Middle East at WLP meetings, relating to Muslim population of Hyderabad, where VK well-known figure for history of activism in area.

#### **Track 5: [duration: 04:15] [Session one: 5 October 2014]**

[00:00] Reflects on most difficult setback as, increasing violence against women, lack of responsibility in governance, insensitivity revealed in society. Describes proudest achievement as ballets written, sensations experience during performances. Describes process from idea to production.