

Women in Red

Portraits of The Red Brigade Lucknow

Jessica Eva

All proceeds of the sale of this book go to the Red Brigade Lucknow

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Thank you





Meeting The Women in Red

By Thomas Marcinkowski

As a feminist artist, the overarching purpose of Jessica Eva's work is to represent women as multidimensional humans. This is in stark contrast to the common representations of women in the media. By portraying women as individuals with power and agency - women as they really are - Jessica Eva is practising photography and realising the female gaze. Feminist journalist Charlotte Jansen describes the female gaze as an instrument for change:

“The photographs women take of women

can be a tool for challenging perceptions in the media, human rights, history, politics, aesthetics, technology, economy and ecology; to get at the unseen structures in our world and contribute to a broader understanding of society”[1]

In Jessica Eva's latest body of work, she applies the female gaze to the socio-political sphere. She has engaged with the Indian women's rights organisation the Red Brigade Lucknow in an effort to use the female gaze to create a visual narrative of a contemporary social movement. In so doing, she draws upon the theory of Indian feminist writer Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who states “Because social

[1] *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, (2017), p9.

movements are crucial sites for the construction of knowledge, communities, and identities, it is very important for feminists to direct themselves toward them”.[2]

Jessica Eva first became aware of the Red Brigade Lucknow after having seen a story on them on the ABC in 2014. She soon discovered who the Red Brigade Lucknow were, and what they were engaged in. This included teaching self-defence to women in India. For Jessica Eva this was an empowering act, giving women the tools to resist gender-based oppression for themselves. As a result of the Red Brigade’s Lucknow activity,

Jessica Eva learned, the poorest and most vulnerable women in India were learning these necessary skills. More than that, as part of the Red Brigade Lucknow those same women would pass their skills on to other women, creating change from the ground up.

Although she was born and lives in Australia, Jessica Eva has Indian heritage, and this only strengthened her sense of connection with the Red Brigade Lucknow. Jessica Eva felt an incredible sense of solidarity with these women, even though she could not even begin to imagine the different kind of lives they must lead. For Jessica Eva, the message of

[2] *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity*, (2003), p248.

the Red Brigade Lucknow was a call to action, not only for the women of India but for women globally. She felt a powerful need to go to India and meet the Red Brigade Lucknow, and do anything she could as an artist and photographer to spread the word about what they were doing. Jessica Eva felt as though she couldn't *not* meet these women.

Jessica Eva was unable to travel overseas immediately, but she established contact with the Red Brigade Lucknow by email. She successfully arranged to photograph the members of the Red Brigade Lucknow at their headquarters in Lucknow, India. Two years after being so struck by their

cause, Jessica Eva flew over to India in order to meet with Usha Vishwakarma the founder of the Red Brigade Lucknow and the Red Brigade Lucknow members. Jessica Eva and I travelled together, and I had agreed to conduct an interview with Usha.

On the morning of February 21st 2016, we left a hotel lobby in Lucknow where we had introduced ourselves to Usha and a volunteer, the night before. Our conversation the previous night had been difficult due to language barriers. But Jessica Eva's mother, Rita, acted as a translator. Usha verbalised the directions to the Red Brigade Lucknow headquarters,

which we wrote down for our visit.

The next day, a hotel driver took us en route to the headquarters. At first we drove through modern, bustling streets of the main city. But in time the asphalt road gave way to an uneven surface of dirt and sand. The streets grew narrower and more cluttered. There were no longer street names by which we could keep our bearings. The driver had expressed concern that we wanted to journey into an area such as this.

Our party were getting further and further away from the more familiar and developed districts of the city. He was

reluctant to continue on, asking us several times whether we were sure that this was the route we wanted to travel on. In order to keep our bearings, it was necessary for us to make several phone calls to Usha while we drove.

We eventually pulled over, waiting to liaise with a Red Brigade Lucknow volunteer in person. He would escort us on the last leg of our journey. The local residents seemed perplexed at the sight of us; this was not the kind of place that Western tourists were expected to venture. Ours was the only car nearby. It seemed displaced among the bikes and cattle that occupied the rest of the roads.

At last, we met with the volunteer on his scooter. We followed him in the car for a distance. Eventually, we left our respective vehicles behind and made our on foot to the Red Brigade Lucknow headquarters. Upon arriving, we were greeted cordially by Usha and other Red Brigade Lucknow members.

Before the scheduled photoshoot and interview of that day took place, Jessica Eva and I were given an informal tour of the headquarters. A striking red and black placard from an older action leant along one of the walls (see image: right). Translated from Hindi to English, it reads:

“Our demands:

Toilets for women to be built in the city.

Free entry for females to these toilets.

1090[3] to be made free.

Self-defence to be taught compulsorily in all schools and colleges”

One of the most important demands of the Red Brigade Lucknow is that of free and accessible public toilets for women.

Earlier, Usha had told us one story about a woman who died from a ruptured bladder because she was unable to find any public toilet in Lucknow. A lack of access to sufficient toilet facilities for women, in Lucknow and in other cities, puts women

[3] 1090 is the number for a women’s anti-harassment helpline.

निर्भया की याद में

यौन हिंसा मुक्त शहर बनाने का अभियान

16 से 29 दिसम्बर लखनऊ

हमारी मांगें:-

1. शहर के प्रत्येक चौराहे पर महिला शौचालय हो ।
2. शौचालयों में महिला प्रवेश मुफ्त हो ।
3. 1090 को निःशुल्क बनाया जाए ।
4. स्कूलों व कॉलेजों में Self Defence अनिवार्य हो ।

EDUCATION is the most
POWERFULL Weapon,
Which You Can Use to
CHANGE THE WORLD.
BALMANCH

स्कूल है शिक्षा का घर
जो सच को
सपने बनाए!!
BALMANCH



more at risk of sexual assault and makes it difficult for them to maintain their modesty. These are major concerns for the Red Brigade Lucknow.

What little space there was on the walls was mostly adorned by posters bearing inspirational quotes. These were written in Hindi and English, and included a famous quote from Nelson Mandela: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

The Red Brigade Lucknow hold true to this emphasis on education, with the headquarters serving as a school for local children by day. The education these

children receive goes beyond the regular curriculum. The children also learn how to recognise and act upon abuse, both domestic and sexual. The same building also serves as a meeting place and a practice area for women and girls learning self-defence. By night, the very same headquarters serve as a refuge for women.

After some time perusing the headquarters, we left the pink-painted corridor for the purple walls of Usha’s office. It is here that my interview with her was conducted. Rita once again acted as our translator during the interview.

On the first day of photography, few of



the other young women of the organisation were present. We had been under the impression that we would meet everyone from the Red Brigade Lucknow that day. Instead, it appeared it was necessary for us to establish trust with Usha herself. In the past there have been foreign western journalists who have acted irresponsibly and not respected the boundaries insisted upon by the Red Brigade Lucknow. We got the impression that Usha was vetting us to make sure we would not act in kind. The first day of the interview was as much a way for Usha to gauge and test our own intentions.

If we were being tested, then we surely passed; on the second day, all of the young

women were present for the shoot. Many of them had been unable to attend the previous morning. Now, they travelled from school and college – some for an hour or more to be photographed. Upon meeting the young women, we found them enthusiastic, cheerful and positive. But they also carried themselves with an unmistakable inner strength and confidence.

It is this spirit that is captured in Jessica Eva's photographic series of the women of the Red Brigade Lucknow. In the words of Charlotte Jansen: "They are not exoticised or eroticised for a colonial gaze but shown as powerful, fleshy and feminine".[4]

[4] 'Female Gaze' in *British Journal of Photography*, Issue 7859, (2017), p41.



Interview with Usha Vishwakarma

21 February 2016

Translators: Rita Sorci and Ricky Cash

Present at the interview: Jessica Eva, Thomas Marcinkowski, Rita Sorci and Luigi Sorci.

Thomas Marcinkowski: Can you begin by giving an overview of the kinds of activities the Red Brigade Lucknow are engaged in?

Usha Vishwakarma: The Red Brigade Lucknow are a women's organisation that works against sexual violence. Our work includes helping rape victims, giving them legal and moral support and aiding them in the activities they want to pursue. Another important thing we do is, if the victim relapses in her trauma recovery, we help fight it and if they need any educational support we provide them with that too. Along with

that we help children against sexual violence and teach them about ‘good touch’ or ‘bad touch’. Our objective is a sexual violence free society.

TM: You have monthly protests. What are the main demands you raise in these protests?

UV: We protest on the 29th of every month and we collect newspaper cuttings on issues such as sexual violence, rape, gang rape or other such offences in different states. We do this to maintain a record of sexual offences in different places. We present this information to the Vidhaan Sabha[5] and the Chief Minister of the state addressing all women empowerment schemes and discussing all possible measures to be taken to prevent offences against women.

[5] The Legislative Assembly of the Indian Parliament.

TM: In terms of the aims of those protests, what would you like the government to do in response?

UV: Every year we have a different issue. Last year our issue was to get CCTVs installed in cities for surveillance for eve teasing[6], rapes and murders, to provide security to the victims. Another demand we had was for the acid survivors: that they be provided funds for their medicines and operations by the government, a sum of 3 lakh[7] rupees. The government had been leaving a lot of things pending so our demand was to get aid for these people. These were two of our most pushed demands out of seven, but our focus was on these two as they are an absolute necessity. The government installed 3000 – 4000 CCTV cameras in the city and provided 60 women with 3 lakh rupees in aid. The case we were handling was given 5 lack rupees. So we have different demands for different times, and if they get completed then we issue more demands. Our demand this time is for women's security and providing them with toilets as there aren't enough women's toilets in the city. We have requested that the

[6] This is a phrase used in India to refer to public sexual harassment.

[7] One lakh is equivalent to 100,000 rupees ($\approx$ \$1982 AUD).

government build more women's toilets on every corner. These are the types of the demands we present.

TM: What do you think the biggest issue is for women in India today?

UV: Women in India demand heavily for their rights. They feel as if they have no rights, that there is no point talking about safety. Their rights are most important to them along with their safety.

TM: What kind of effect does wealth inequality or disadvantage have on women in India? And how does that effect women's issues?

UV: If you talk about women's rights, a poor woman according to our surveys acquires her rights in one way or another whereas on the other hand, the richer we get the more our rights get suppressed because then we care about our status in the society. If

we go against our family then we feel it is embarrassing our lineage. A woman like that suffers in her home while her husband mistreats her. Even if she is a victim of domestic violence, she steps out of her home with makeup on. Whereas a poor woman would engage in violence as well, and sit and have a drink. So if you're talking about rights, a woman who is poor does not care about the society watching her being mistreated whereas on higher levels richer women care more about their reputation and don't want other people knowing about it. Either way, rich or poor women can't get their rights that easily.

TM: How many members does the Red Brigade Lucknow have?

UV: If we are talking about members, then we have 8,000 members from all over India. But from the 8,000 we have 30 girls from Lucknow as active members.

TM: How do men support the Red Brigade Lucknow?

UV: Men cannot join the Red Brigade Lucknow as members, but there are many men that support us from the outside.

TM: There are other groups besides the Red Brigade Lucknow pursuing women's rights in different ways, like the Gulabi Gang. What is your opinion of the Gulabi Gang and their methods, and how does the Red Brigade differ?

UV: We are totally different to them. They actually don't deal with sexual violence but with other social issues. The Gulabi Gang group deals with abusive alcoholic husbands of women. If they know the man beats the woman, they will go and give him a good hiding with their sticks. And if somebody turns the electricity off for a building, they will go and beat up the person who turned off the electricity, and make them switch it back on. So they are totally different to the Red Brigade Lucknow. We formed to help and counsel women suffering from sexual violence and provide them security. There

are other groups out there but the Red Brigade Lucknow primarily focuses on sexual violence by first protecting ourselves, then protecting others. The Red Brigade Lucknow teaches women self-defence so they can defend themselves there has never been a case where women affiliated with us has hit a man without reason for self-defence.

TM: Are there any other issues that you have been involved in that are important to the Red Brigade Lucknow?

UV: If we talk about women's safety then there are a lot of issues. Our current demand is for public women's toilets but there are other things we pursue, such as teaching girls self-defence in every girls college as part of the curriculum. There's always new issues that keep arising and we keep bringing these up. No issue of ours is beyond the power of the government.

TM: What do you see as the solution to gender based violence and sexual based violence in India?



UV: The solution is for women to not be dependent on a male to change their mentality, but instead by being independent, learning self-defence, and learning how to take care of ourselves. If I talk about myself, maybe 10 years ago I did not have that confidence but today I can defend myself against a perpetrator because I have acquired the confidence and knowledge to do so. The biggest problem with women in India is that they are too dependent on their husbands. Women feel as though if they speak up against their abusive husbands, they will be kicked out of their homes and be left to starve. Despite being educated they still stay home and do the dishes. The girls in our group are trained to stand up for themselves and how to answer back if they get yelled at.

TM: Do you have or plan to have a manifesto for the Red Brigade Lucknow?

UV: We are in the planning stages of a manifesto. We believe in social movement, and we will work for change in the thought process of society. Our goals and strategies are built by analysing the difficulties that women face by first facing it ourselves and thinking about how the other women must face that problem.

TM: What is the procedure you adopt to solve an issue?

UV: When we first started, the first thing we learned was how to talk. We divided it into three steps. Number one, if someone says anything bad to us, we learn how talk to them face to face - head on - and ask them to stop. If they don't comply and apologise then the second step is, if we know where he lives then we go talk to his parents about it. A lot of parents listen and some don't and if that doesn't work then we go – number three - to the police. They gave us some useful tips to avoid being harassed by men, and if all that doesn't work then our last result is to shame the man in front of the society. There have been times when we have beaten the men and that caused a great change in the society.

TM: How do you find your relationship with the police is? Is there gender discrimination within the police? What has your experience been interacting with them on these issues?

UV: At first they did not support us, but now they do. They help us immediately now.

We want there to be more female police in charge and more female constables, as there are not enough women in the police force.

TM: Do you have political aspirations in the future?

UV: There are already people who want me to run in the elections but I have refused to do so. While it is true a lot of things can be solved by getting into politics, I'd rather send my people into it than get into it myself. The reason for that is the political system has certain rules that you have to comply with, as there is always someone on the level above you. We have decided to never get into it but rather encourage our people to get into it so that they can help us with our work.



Usha



Afreen



Laxmi



Manorama



Sakeena



Deeti



Ritika



Safeena



Nargis



Jyoti



Kajal



Sangeeta



Farha



Sufia



Mehajabeen



Kashmin



Archana

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.”

Virginia Woolf







