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‘Breaking Silences’: An Interview with Jahajee Sisters

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Abstract

Founded in 2007 and based in New York City, Jahajee Sisters has forged new ground in organizing and attempting to empower a multigenerational constituency of diasporic Indo-Caribbean women in ways that affect their social, political, and everyday lives. They describe themselves as a movement-building organization with a mission of “creating a safe and equitable society for all Indo-Caribbean women.” By building alliances with other organizations serving South Asian women in New York and utilizing the arts to foster leadership, community outreach, and political activism, they have emerged as an important site for considering contemporary forms of Indo-Caribbean feminisms. This interview was conducted with two members of the organization’s Steering Committee, Suzanne Persard and Simone Devi Jhingoor (both founding members of the organization) between February and March of 2012.

Lisa Outar: Can you tell us a bit about the birth of Jahajee Sisters and what you see as unique about it in the context of Caribbean feminism?

Jahajee Sisters: Frustrated by gender-based oppression and the silence surrounding it, in 2007, four Indo-Caribbean women came together to create a space for dialogue among women in our community. We began organizing the first ever Indo-Caribbean Women's Empowerment Summit. During planning for the Summit, in March 2007, 20-year-old Natasha Ramen, a Guyanese woman from Hollis Queens, was slashed to death by her alleged rapist, also Guyanese. There was no outcry from the community, and it seemed like violence against women had become so widely accepted that a crime as heinous as Natasha's murder did not warrant dialogue or action. Enraged, organizers of the summit grew even more determined. On March 31, 2007, the first Indo-Caribbean Women's Empowerment Summit was held, where more than 30 women discussed domestic violence and cultural perpetuation of patriarchy. Such a gathering was unprecedented, and every attendee expressed interest in monthly or quarterly gatherings in their evaluation survey.

After the Summit, on May 10, 2007, 22-year-old Guiatree Hardat, Guyanese, was shot in the head by her fiancé, an Indo-Caribbean New York Police Department officer. After the death of a second Indo-Caribbean sister, it became clear to organizers that continued programming addressing gender-based violence in our community was crucial. As a result, we formed the "Indo-Caribbean Women's Empowerment Group." Later, joined by activists engaged in anti-domestic violence work, we organized the second annual Indo-Caribbean Women's Empowerment Summit, held in April 2008 in partnership with Sakhi for South Asian Women. Following the 2008 Summit, the group was renamed "Jahajee Sisters" to honor the strength of our female ancestors.

Jahajee Sisters is the only organization in the United States and Caribbean organizing Indo-Caribbean women and supporting their leadership development; organizing Indo-Caribbean women against gender-based oppression; and advocating for their politicization. This is what makes us so unique within the context of Caribbean feminism. Indo-Caribbean women are marginalized not only within the Caribbean community, but also within South Asian communities, not to mention the United States, as a whole. We are facing the same social injustices as many women of color in the United States and it is important to have a movement-building organization that not only understands our distinct culture, but also can advocate for and represent our needs.

LO: Why turn to the image of the boat that bore Indians into indentureship for the name of your organization? How do you see what we may call the Indian middle passage as connected to the experiences of contemporary diasporic Indo-Caribbean communities in New York and elsewhere?

JS: During the period of Indian indentureship (1838-1917), *Jahajee Bhai* and *Jahajee Bahen* (ship brother and ship sister) were terms used by our ancestors to unify and support each other in the midst of the tumultuous voyage by sea from India to the Caribbean. Despite adversity, our ancestors who arrived in the Caribbean were able to forge bonds, survive, and thrive. In this spirit, Jahajee Sisters seeks to build community and power to address critical issues challenging Indo-Caribbean women.

Crossing the Kala Pani from India and coming to the Caribbean was a deeply traumatic experience for Indo-Caribbean people. Yet, the fact that we were able to survive the Indian middle passage and the harsh system of indentureship, which attempted to strip us of our identity and culture, is an example of how resilient our people are. It especially shows the strength of our women, who played an integral role in preserving and carrying on the culture in the Caribbean and again in the US.

Reclaiming the word “Jahajee” in our name and in our work is the way we have chosen to honor our history and live into our resiliency.

LO: In descriptions of the organization’s mission, you often mention the importance of ancestral knowledge. Given the multiplicity of ancestors that Indians from the Caribbean can call upon and the heterogeneity of what has emerged as Indo-Caribbean identity, what kinds of ancestral knowledge do you urge Indian women to reach for? Who are the ancestors that Caribbean Indians can and should lay claim to in your view?

JS: The kinds of ancestral knowledge we urge women to reach for is the knowledge of their women ancestors (mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers) and learn their stories, as much of our history has not been written but has been passed down through oral tradition. These are the ancestors that we can and should lay claim to, the ones who are in our own families who spent most of their lives in the Caribbean, worked on the sugar estates, took care of the families, and preserved the many traditions that we now call Indo-Caribbean culture (North Indian Hindu, Bhojpouri, Madrassi/Tamil, Muslim, and Christian traditions). We also recognize that the idea of “family” is often oversimplified, and given the historical fracturing of so many families on plantations—for example, children that were separated from their homes and placed in orphanages or estranged from their biological families—there is chosen family, which is present in the form of community.

We urge women to learn about the ancestral knowledge of Ayurveda, decentering the Western approach to health that is more about treatment of symptoms versus holistic healing and balance. In intergenerational spaces, we invite practitioners to present information on Ayurveda within the context of dialogues on Reproductive Justice and Health, focusing on topics like childbirth, marriage, menstrual cycles, and sex.

We believe in facilitating such conversations with women in our community to begin breaking the silence around subjects that are considered taboo. Through much of our work so far, we have noticed that women do not speak about their reproductive stories within their families, some of which may be traumatic, and this is connected to many of the injustices that do exist in our community such as violence and sexual assault. We believe that breaking the silence around what we call women’s reproductive stories will begin a process of supporting younger generations of Indo-Caribbean women to make the most informed choices regarding their bodies and their sexuality.

LO: What particular moments of Indo-Caribbean history do you think are important for Indo-Caribbean women to retain and mobilize in quests for social justice?

JS: The parts of Indo-Caribbean history that are important for Indo-Caribbean women to retain in their quests for social justice are the heroines like Rajkumari Singh and Kowsilla, who were great activists and revolutionaries. Remembering their stories is a source of inspiration to women in our community who may not have realized that there were women leaders in the Caribbean who raised their voice, stood up for what they believed in and as a result were able to effect change.

The other part of our history that is important to retain is the memory of what our female ancestors endured through the experience of indentureship and working on the sugar plantations, much of which is rooted in violence and trauma. For example, during the early stages of indentureship, there was a shortage of women laborers in the Caribbean. The ratio was 1 woman to 10 men and this significant imbalance often resulted in men staking a claim to a woman whom they marked as theirs. This could be done through chopping off her nose or her hand to make her less desirable to other men. Women were also sexually assaulted and raped on plantations by overseers, while sexual violence was also prevalent in families and in the Indo-Caribbean community itself. This is a part of our history that needs to be critically explored to understand the way historical trauma continues to affect women and families within our community.

Through our annual Women’s Empowerment Summits, Jahajee Sisters has lifted up the stories of these women who are an important part of Indo-Caribbean history. Our first summit honored Kowsilla, who advocated for fair wages on a sugar estate in Lenora, Guyana, and died a martyr for her organizing efforts. Our second summit also honored Rajkumari Singh, Guyanese artist and activist, who is often described as “one of the first Indo-Guyanese women writers to speak to both the ethnic and gender issues facing Indo-Caribbean women.”

LO: Can you talk a bit about what you mean when you say Jahajee Sisters is working to introduce the concept of reproductive justice to young women?

Reproductive Justice is a movement that works to ensure we have the social, political, and economic power to self-determine our gender, bodies, sexuality, and families. It recognizes that all forms of inequality limit our ability to control our reproductive destinies. In sum, it says that we, not people in power who don’t represent our interests, need to set the agenda for the issues that matter most to us.

During the 1990s, the Reproductive Justice movement was started by women of color who felt that the pro-choice movement, focused on abortion rights, failed to address the ways reproductive injustice and oppression manifested in communities of color like ours. For example, the impact of economic disparity, immigration policy, and discrimination based on race and sexual orientation on women’s decision-making was ignored by the pro-choice movement. Reproductive Justice has a more holistic, inclusive vision for women and girls.

Jahajee Sisters recognizes that Indo-Caribbean women are facing many of the same injustices as all women of color—including, but not limited to, sexual assault, harsh immigration policies, and poor access to healthcare. To address all of these intersecting

issues, we began using the Reproductive Justice framework in our work to end gender-based oppression and violence.

LO: What kinds of grassroots organizing does Jahajee Sisters do and where does this occur? What are some of the goals of your community organizing?

JS: Jahajee Sisters organizes women around ending gender-based oppression and violence in the Indo-Caribbean community in Richmond Hill, Queens. We envision a world in which sisterhood is so strong it stomps out patriarchy, ends violence against women, and restores balance. Our journey for justice embodies collective power every step of the way.

It was actually through conversations that arose amongst ourselves and in our Young Women’s Leadership Institute that we realized, as Indo-Caribbean women, we had not received the information we needed to make the most informed decisions regarding our bodies from our moms or from the schools we had attended. As a result, we decided to launch an organizing initiative in the community called the Campaign for Healthy Youth because we recognize the need for young women to understand their bodies and know how to keep themselves safe.

We are also aware that education policy and cultural stigma can prevent youth from getting all the information they need to be healthy. With this in mind, the Campaign for Healthy Youth is an effort to ensure young women are learning about their bodies, how to prevent disease and unwanted pregnancy, what a healthy relationship is, and how to maintain emotional health in the complicated world they are navigating today.

Some of the tangible ways we are implementing this initiative [includes] having inter-generational dialogues between mothers and daughters at monthly Sister Circle gatherings, conducting a needs assessment to explore our community’s values, as well as ensuring the proper implementation of a comprehensive sex-education mandate, which was passed in New York City in August 2011, in our middle and high schools.

Below is our formula for how we approach our community organizing work to end gender-based oppression and violence:

(1) Self-Awareness – establishing a strong identity as Indo-Caribbean women, understanding our history and our ancestors who have paved the way for this work, and realizing that a true revolution happens from the inside out.

(2) Empowerment – fostering sisterhood and solidarity, honing inner resilience, developing circles of support to heal trauma, developing a shared analysis of intersecting oppressions ingrained in the systems that shape our society, and giving voice to our lived experiences and visions for change through art and cultural work.

(3) Community Organizing – honoring the notion of “each one teach one,” we focus on leadership development, political education, and introducing the principles of community organizing. We utilize the arts and activism as a catalyst for change by creating awareness of the issues that affect us as a community and inspiring direct action at the grassroots.

LO: What are the challenges for organizing within the Indo-Caribbean community? What are the particular forms of organizing and outreach that seem to work best with Indo-Caribbean women?

JS: Our biggest challenge for organizing within the Indo-Caribbean community is the very thing we are trying to undo—patriarchy. The historical practice of silence and acceptance is so ingrained in our community, in our culture, and in our women, that it is hard to get women to come out and break the silence. And, we are dealing with a situation where we are seen as being “man-haters” by people in our community rather than folks understanding the need and legitimacy of the spaces we create for women. However, once we do get women to come out, understand the work we are trying to do, and participate in our programming, they do open up and it is the most powerful thing to witness—women sharing their stories, speaking their truth, and excited to become an agent of transformation within their community.

What has been working well for us so far are our monthly Sister Circle gatherings, a base-building effort that was first launched in December 2009. The gatherings have become our key strategy for introducing more women to our work, fostering community building, and providing political education. There are also opportunities for women from our base to step into leadership. Each gathering is organized by a different member of Jahajee Sisters who invites her personal network of friends and family, as well as the broader community. This makes each gathering an exciting mix of older and newly joined constituents, totaling about 30 women each month. And, a coordinator from our steering committee works in close collaboration with each host to create and facilitate the evening’s agenda. Each gathering includes structured activities that incorporate the arts and culture as well as time to network and connect with each other. Recently, we have been using our Sister Circle gatherings as a space to hold the intergenerational dialogues we are facilitating between mothers and daughters as part of the Campaign for Healthy Youth.

LO: Can you talk about the role of the arts in your organization? What is your vision for how the arts can bring about social change?

JS: Jahajee Sisters utilizes the arts in all of our programming from our summits to our Sister Circle gatherings. We recognize the role of the arts (poetry, theater, music, and movement) in supporting women in our community to not only heal from the trauma of violence, but also to serve as a catalyst—cultivating awareness and inspiring action.

In 2010, through our Young Women’s Leadership Institute (YWLI), we engaged a core group of young women, ages 14–23 in an intensive leadership development and political education program around Reproductive Justice. The purpose of the program was to create the next generation of Indo-Caribbean activists and organizers equipped with RJ and gender justice analysis, who could plug in and lead our organizing work.

The young women created public service announcements highlighting various reproductive oppressions they had experienced in their families and lives. We first screened the PSAs at our summit in 2011 and since then at various other community events as part of our Campaign for Healthy Youth. The PSAs have been a great way to

spark open and honest dialogue among mothers and daughters about sex and reproductive health.

In 2009, we also published ***Bolo Bahen! Speak Sister!***, an anthology of poetry produced by participants of a 10-week Arts and Empowerment Program, co-sponsored by Sakhi for South Asian Women. For 10 Sundays, women across three generations from Guyana, India, Jamaica, Pakistan, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States gathered at the Blue Star Center of New York to heal wounds, reclaim identity, and build solidarity. By releasing stories kept sheltered for too long, week after week, we witnessed transformations in ourselves and each other.

During a workshop session on community engagement, program participants coined the following definition of Arts Activism: *Using creative expression in the form of writing, drama, and performance to fight for a cause, battle resistance to change, and inspire community empowerment and equality.*

We will continue to integrate the arts in our work as an integral component of our community-organizing work.

LO: What are the models for feminist action that Jahajee Sisters draws upon? How has Caribbean, American, or South Asian feminism informed the organization’s goals?

JS: Jahajee Sisters has drawn from models of feminist action that are rooted in decolonizing feminism, while resisting normative notions of Western feminism, and acknowledging that even the term “feminism” might be problematic for some of our constituency. As Patricia Mohammed has said, Indo-Caribbean women have historically been viewed as marginal to the Caribbean feminist movement, so Jahajee Sisters is revolutionary and reactionary in our stance to centralize Indo-Caribbean women at the heart of our struggle. Feminism in the Caribbean assumed a very different trajectory than in the West, and when speaking about feminism, we think it is important to recognize what we might deem “feminism”—the shortcomings of language, cultural differences, and Eurocentricism—should not delimit our work; for example, our great-grandmothers might have been the epitome of feminism, though they might not have called themselves “feminists,” and acknowledging this is so important to resist dominant narratives of what exactly constitutes feminism. For Jahajee Sisters, feminism is rooted in the self-empowerment and self-determination of Indo-Caribbean women.

We organize grounded in the truth of M. Jacqui Alexander’s theory of the Caribbean nation-state as expecting a kind of “servile femininity” whereby women are always expected to be the caretakers and domestic heads of household, whereby heteronormativity is the “norm” for our women and our community, and we call out the deleterious effects of cultural, historical, and religious systems that have perpetuated heteropatriarchy in the Indo-Caribbean community. We organize inspired by the traditions of Afro-Caribbean women, who have, for hundreds of years, developed their own survival strategies and deployed female networks as modes of self-preservation in

the face of colonization. In the tradition of Audre Lorde, one of the most famous Caribbean poet-feminists, we affirm that our silence indeed will not protect us, that “when we are silent, we are still afraid so it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.” It is in this spirit of breaking silences that Jahajee Sisters survives.

LO: What kinds of alliances do you have with other Caribbean or South Asian groups here in the US or elsewhere? In your community organizing, how do you deal with the misrecognitions/stereotypes/tensions that sometimes pop up between South Asian immigrants direct from the subcontinent and Indo-Caribbean immigrants?

JS: We have built alliances with South Asian groups, including Sakhi for South Asian women, and SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), Chhaya CDC, and SAYA (South Asian Youth Action!). Since Sakhi is a direct service provider for women in domestic violence situations, we refer women who are in need of direct services to Sakhi; Sakhi has also been very intentional about their desire to reach more Indo-Caribbean women, which is a significant endeavor since there are no direct service providers for Indo-Caribbean women in New York City. The historical tension between the Indo-Caribbean and South Asian communities is very real, but we have been able to forge genuine alliances with these groups, many of which have been intentional in their inclusion of Indo-Caribbean individuals in their own community spaces. Of course, because of the historical differences between migration and indentureship, as well as discrimination Indo-Caribbean people have endured in South Asian communities, there has been a definite attempt by Jahajee Sisters to educate these communities about Indo-Caribbean culture and our community, and calling attention to the ways in which we have been marginalized in particularly South Asian communities. We have noticed a generational shift, too, noting that the Indo-Caribbean and South Asian youth today are more likely to work and learn alongside each other, respect each other’s differences, and unite under the banner of common cultural threads, in a way that was definitely less likely, and often impossible, for our parents’ generations.

LO: Retention of Indian identity in diasporic communities is often bound up with certain expectations of women and female bodies. What are the prevalent expectations of Indo-Caribbean women and girls that you see among your constituency? How is the organization attempting to intervene?

JS: Our constituency is mostly composed of women from Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, who are multi-generational, come from several religious backgrounds, include members of the LGBTQ community, and have many different ways of relating to Indo-Caribbean identity. There are definite expectations that Indo-Caribbean girls are particularly challenged by, including the pressure to live up to traditional heteronormative roles of getting married (to a man) and having children; pressures to conform in their gender identities; pressures to “preserve” their religion and traditions; pressures to be “pure,” to not talk about taboos like sex and sexuality, to not engage in conversations

about subjects like domestic violence and gender. Within so-called “progressive” Indo-Caribbean spaces of religious and civic engagement, young men are nurtured and recognized as the leaders of tomorrow in ways that young Indo-Caribbean women are not. Additionally, in the Indo-Caribbean community, the experience of being a subject of the diaspora is especially complex because there are so many markers of Indian authenticity that our generation is expected to retain and preserve and, often, these markers of authenticity are oppressive. As far as interventions, the work we do is a clear way in which we are attempting to shift the paradigm of the traditional expectations thrust upon Indo-Caribbean girls and women, to support and nurture their leadership potential, to provide opportunities for them that might not necessarily be supported by their own families or religious communities, and to emphasize their empowerment through self-determination.

LO: Do you do any outreach to Indo-Caribbean men?

JS: We have been asked this question a lot in the last five years that we have been doing work in the community. Our work centralizes the experiences and struggle of Indo-Caribbean women, and although we are an organization for women, we see men as allies and, consequently, a population that our message is central to. The first day of our annual women’s empowerment summit is open to all community members, including men, but most of our other programming focuses on Indo-Caribbean women. We believe that men must recognize the power they have as allies to women in their families and communities, and ending gender-based violence and oppression is not just a women’s issue—it’s a cultural and societal issue. Men play such an important role in transforming gender-based oppression and decentering patriarchy. The work begins by Indo-Caribbean men speaking to their fathers and sons and brothers and uncles about violence against women, about domestic and sexual violence, and having conversations about challenging male supremacy in families, Indo-Caribbean culture, and ultimately society. In fact, a phenomenal collective called the Challenging Male Supremacy Project emerged in New York City a few years ago to challenge heteropatriarchal paradigms and to serve as a space for men who want to become involved in this work.

LO: Performances of Indo-Caribbean identity both in the Caribbean and in the diaspora tend to highlight heteronormative, traditional, Hindu images. How does Jahajee Sisters take into account the sexual, religious, national and socioeconomic differences within the Indo-Caribbean community in your pursuit of your goals?

JS: Jahajee Sisters has recognized the role of Hindu hegemony in Indo-Caribbean culture, as well as the role religion itself plays in forging authentic yet sometimes oppressive links to our community and heritage. We are a secular organization, with members who have no religious beliefs or affiliation, as well as members who are Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and other religions. We have tried to navigate the delicate lines of religion and tradition—though these lines are often blurred in Indo-Caribbean culture. Our annual summits have ranged from our conducting Hindu religious rites out

of respect for a spiritual healer, to centralizing the experience of Muslim women at our upcoming Muslim Sisters' Leadership Institute. We have also repeatedly engaged in dialogues about the importance of not alienating women with no religious affiliation in our spaces, noting that because of the close cultural-religious lines our community straddles, some of the symbols or representation or attributes of our work might belong to a particular religious tradition but we are a secular organization. At our annual summits, we assert the fact that we are a secular organization, so that the cultural aspects of some of our programming aren't simply read as our privileging of one religion over another.

As far as the heteronormative branding of Indo-Caribbean culture, we are inclusive of all women-identified individuals, which include queer women, transgender women, and gender non-conforming women. We are LGBTQ-inclusive in our domestic violence and sexual violence work and intentional about this inclusion, so the LGBTQ Indo-Caribbean community is included not as an after-thought but a central part of fighting patriarchy and violence.

With regard to socioeconomic differences, we have seen few hurdles among the women with which we organize, as violence affects all of our families and communities, regardless of socioeconomic standing, and has served as a common trauma uniting the women in our organization.

LO: What does Jahajee Sisters contribute to the larger conversation about immigrant identity here in the US? Has there been an impact on the constituency due to forms of racial profiling that have increased since 9/11?

JS: Jahajee Sisters organizes within a population of Indo-Caribbean women that are mostly first-generation US immigrants. Some of the challenges immigrant women within Jahajee face include having to work, sometimes more than one job, and care for their children, run their households, etc., so it is difficult for them to organize in the community when their time and energy are scarce. This, essentially, reflects the intersectionality of being an immigrant woman as well as being Indo-Caribbean and working class; Jahajee organizes within an "intersectional" framework, meaning all our oppression is interconnected: immigrants' rights are related to women's rights; racial justice and LGBTQ justice are related. As Indo-Caribbean women, as immigrants, as LGBTQ women, as a marginalized people in the United States, we live at the "intersections" of multiple identities and have many systems to navigate, in addition to gender-based oppression. Post-9/11, there has been a definite increase of racial profiling, particularly within Muslim communities in New York City, and especially for young Muslim students. At our Muslim Sisters' Leadership Institute this summer, we will be discussing the impact of Islamophobia on the Indo-Caribbean and South Asian communities and, particularly, how this racial profiling is linked to patriarchy, reproductive justice, and gender-based oppression.

LO: Does Jahajee Sisters attempt to coordinate efforts at organizing women in the diaspora with those in the Caribbean?

JS: Jahajee Sisters has focused on organizing women in the US, though we have been in touch with women organizing feminist movements in the Caribbean and some women who have been a part of our constituency have returned to the Caribbean to organize around social justice issues. Other women who have been a part of our constituency have gone back to places like Guyana and Trinidad and expressed a desire to have an extension of our organization there, though we have not directly been involved with any specific transnational activism. We've all spoken about returning to our respective homelands in the Caribbean and having a presence for Jahajee there, but transnational organizing is a complex issue, particularly because we are all living in the US and we are wary of replicating a narrative of West-Global South narratives whereby we would somehow be transporting our brand of organizing to the Caribbean. While we are all Indo-Caribbean women, the nuances of geopolitical activism are challenging to navigate and we recognize this. Needless to say, we are definitely open and always excited to engage with regional Caribbean activists and their own work and successes back home.