

Sharir ki Jankari: Feminist Embodied Knowledge and Collective Bookselling

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Abstract

This paper will analyse the circumstances and implications of the 1989 publication of *Sharir ki Jankari* (The Knowledge of the Body) by the feminist publishing house Kali for Women and a group of 75 women from villages in Rajasthan, India, who served collectively as authors, distributors, and sellers for the title. These author-booksellers visualized *Sharir ki Jankari* as a guidebook around women's sexuality that shed light on taboo topics of women's reproductive health, the female body, and sex education. This impulse led to a unique instance of bookselling, and this paper will examine the several kinds of resistance that this publication posed in its focus on community-led knowledge production. Through interviews with the publishers, an analysis of the text, and an overview of its reception through the documentary *The Books We Made* (dir. Chopra and Tanaku), this paper will reflect on how the collaboration of seventy-five women who each identified as the author of the text and were listed as such led to an instance of collaborative knowledge production which destabilized traditional, Western notions of copyright and individual intellectual ownership. These authors were also, significantly, the sellers of the book, raising money for production through crowdsourcing, distributing it in the villages, and getting it printed despite difficulties. Thus, they collapsed boundaries between authorship and bookselling, resisting patriarchal censorship of the circulation of this material, and devising alternative methods of bookselling. For example, when printers refused to print copies of the book, citing that male printing apprentices were "getting excited" by the sight of a female nude body, they collaborated with female printing press owners (Chopra et al). The author-booksellers also circumvented censorship of the book's material by creating lift-up flaps painted with clothes that revealed the diagrams of the body when lifted. Thus, this paper will discuss how these booksellers successfully sold 70,000 copies of these books, enabling community formation, and resisting traditional market norms and censorship. The paper will explore how this bookselling process was made possible by the inherently radical nature of the book—these women were unlettered, and the book is entirely graphic, depending on a politics of feminist embodiment and pedagogy. While in the 1980s in India, feminist publishing was a nascent, countercultural enterprise, the publication of *Sharir ki Jankari* provides a model of bookselling that resists market laws and mobilizes community resources to create and sell books that are collectively conceptualized, produced, and valuable.

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