

Nari Shakti

Mandrika Rupa met Leila Keshav in 1984 at the Community Addiction Services in Auckland. As their recovery progressed they helped run community groups with C.A.S. until 1986, when Leila became a social worker and Mandrika did her placement as a social worker in London. At the Whare Hui in Auckland they had their first Indian women clients. Their work rose from their female strength which gave birth to the name, Nari Shakti, in 1986.

In the following years Leila and Mandrika ran groups for Indian women to explore their issues within the Indian community of New Zealand. In the early 90's, they asked four other women to join their group. That group provided valuable information on Indian women for a five poster project entitled, "What Working Women Have Done 1840-1993."

Posters were distributed throughout New Zealand schools. Nari Shakti developed a questionnaire as part of the initial research and mailed it to Indian women in both the North and South Islands. It became clear there was a complete lack of oral and written historical information on Indian women in New Zealand. Nari Shakti set out to address this scarcity and to develop an archive of historical and contemporary material on Indian women in New Zealand.

Nari Shakti Oral Histories, another project, was formed from fourteen Indian women, to draw together their achievements since arriving in New Zealand. We aimed to cross class/caste barriers and create visible links between the early settlers and women today. We intended to enable these women to tell their own life stories, in their own words. Some are in English and some are in regional dialect. There are stories of their families and past generations, their thoughts on the role of Indian women in contemporary New Zealand society, which document the richness and diversity of their experiences.

The Oral Histories do not necessarily reflect the views or the politics of the Nari Shakti members. They cover a broad range of issues, such as: cultural expectations for women, marriage, religion, role models, class issues, the caste system, careers, links back to India or other homelands, racism, traditions, motherhood, achievements in the Indian community and wider society, business and work experiences, access to legal services, health and education.

Some of the issues we addressed in the interviews are as follows: how women have experienced arranged marriages, and cultural expectations of this, both Indian and Western; how Indian women have struggled to survive in a new cultural environment and worked to maintain their identity; some of the interviews deal with women of three generations and the ways that these women have constructed their identity across time and locations; how Indian women have integrated their lives with the lives of pakeha, other ethnic migrant women and tangata whenua; how the Indian community and women within this perceive themselves, and how wider New Zealand society positions ethnic communities both historically and now.

The Interviews of the Nari Shakti Oral History project are held in the Oral History Collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, under the title "A History of Indian Women in Aotearoa". Reference number: OHColl-0063. To find out more information about the project, please email atl@natlib.govt.nz, or write to the Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library, PO Box 12349, Wellington, or phone 04-4743162.