Feminist Oral Histories of the University of Washington

Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies, University of Washington
Seattle, WA

Priti Ramamurthy

Interviewed by
Yingyi Wang

April, 19th, 2019
B110 J, Padelford Hall, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Narrator
Dr. Priti Ramamurthy is a professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. She has chaired the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies (2012–17) and directed the South Asian studies program (2007–12). She earned a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) degree in economics from Lady Shri Ram College in 1976, a PGDBM (MBA) from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, in 1978, an MA in regional planning in 1982, and a PhD in social science (with distinction) from the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, in 1995. She has published in *Journal of Peasant Studies, World Development, Cultural Anthropology, Feminist Studies, Gender and History, SIGNS, Women's Studies Quarterly,* and *Environment and Planning A*. She is a co-editor and co-author of *The Modern Girl Around the World: Modernity, Consumption, Globalization* (Duke, 2008). Her research focuses on the politics of social reproduction and cultural production in rural and urban India. An ethnographer, she has spent over three decades in villages in South India mapping lives and livelihoods in smallholder, especially Dalit, households as they embrace green revolution, hybridization, and GMO technologies and aspire for dignity. A recurrent thematic, pursued through her analytic of feminist commodity chains, and the method of connective comparison, has been how global political-economic conjunctures manifest in local, familial, and intimate relationships. She teaches courses in feminist political economy, gender and development, globalization, and gender and sexuality in India, and social movements in India.

Interviewer
Yingyi Wang (b.1989) is a feminist, bisexual activist, and a PhD candidate in the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies. She holds a MPhil from the Department of Social Work and Social at the University of Hong Kong, and a BA from the International School of Business & Finance at Sun Yat-sen University in China.

Abstract
In this oral history Professor Ramamurthy discusses how her experiences of witnessing profound inequalities between the lives of urban and rural people in India led her on a path to the life-long research and concern for India's rural transformation, and more recently the informal economies that structure precarious lives within rural-urban entanglements in India. Professor Ramamurthy joined the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies in 1997. She recounted how major events (e.g. the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, protest against globalization in 1999 and 911 in 2001) shaped departmental politics and concerns, and how she fought for increasing support for the department from the university while she was the chair. She talks about how her transnational experiences of migrating to the US, crossing boundaries as a feminist political economist and teacher, influence her position as a post-colonial feminist scholar that strives to constantly de-center the US in critical feminist knowledge production and pedagogical approaches.

Interview recorded by Yingyi Wang on Panasonic HC-V770K Full HD Camcorder and Sony Digital Flash Voice Recorder (ICD-PX312).

Files
Audio: 19_Ramamurthy_Priti.mp3; Video: 19_Ramamurthy_Priti.mov

Transcript – 16 pages. Transcribed and proofread by Yingyi Wang on April, 29th, 2019.

Yingyi: Thank you so much Professor Priti Ramamurthy for agreeing to be on this interview. Today is April the 19th, 2019. It's a Friday afternoon. My name is Yingyi Wang, I will be interviewing Professor Ramamurthy.

Yingyi: First of all, I'll ask you something about your personal history and education. What do you call yourself? What name do you go by and what pronouns do you go by?
(00:00:31)

Priti: I go by Priti Ramamurthy. That's my preferred name, Priti. I use she/her pronouns. I should note that even saying what pronouns is quite new. And it's a practice that we started in our department. But it also shows that this is probably not a question that's asked probably even three or four years ago. And it's a movement that I'm very much for.

Yingyi: great, thank you. When were you born?
(00:01:16)

Priti: in 1957.

Yingyi: in India?
(00:01:20)

Priti: in India.

Yingyi: can you tell us something about your family and parents? What kind of work did they do and who was in your household when you were growing up?
(00:01:25)

Priti: my father was an officer in the India army. He actually served in the British army. So when he got married he was quite a bit older. By the time I was born, he had moved to-- into an administrative position and started a defense research laboratory-- in Secunderabad, which is my mother's hometown. So I moved there when I was seven years old. My father was very progressive for his age, he encouraged his daughter, treated her just like his son. I really value that. My mother was a teacher for all my life and continued to teach in the school that I went to for thirty-three years. She's a very well-loved teacher and principal. I never thought that I would follow in her footsteps, but here I am. I always try to be like her. She put me in a school that was not a missionary school, out of choice. The motto of the school was actually "think anew, act anew", and they would try new things with education in India. I had a wonderful range of teachers and kids that I grew up with. Everybody was doing different kinds of things.

Yingyi: it looks like your father and mother had a huge influence on the path that you take in the future.
(00:03:03)

Priti: I guess so, yeah. My grandparents and my brother also lived with us. We moved into my grandparent's home in Secunderabad (it's a twin city with Hyderabad) in the south of India. My father was in Delhi when I was born and then we moved to the south when I was seven to my grandparent's home. And my mother and brother are still living in that home, so they've lived there for like 70 years. So it's a very big part of who I am. But I also have lots of aunts, uncles, cousins, so I belong to a very large family and I'm very close to all of them.

Yingyi: I see. So you mentioned that your father treat you just like his son. So have you ever experienced any kind of differential treatment over your brother and you?
(00:03:52)

Priti: yes, I think. My grandmother was always a little partial to my brother. She didn't have any sons herself, so when my brother was born she was very very happy. But also wider society in India taught me very early that there's a lot of discrimination against girls, and I also fought that. I remember fighting it when I was very little. The neighborhood boys once got around and surrounded me because I was on a bike and in shorts, when I was maybe 8 or 9. And they got (shocked). I just got off my bike and asked them what their problem was. Because they were trying to bully me, and I stopped the bike and asked "what's your problem" kind of thing. So I think in India, maybe in China as well, you learn you feminism very personally, and very young. I think I only got the term feminism much later.

Yingyi: yeah I think that leads to some of the next questions. What were some of the big social issues during your teenage years? When and where did you go to your high school? What was like in that high school?
(00:05:16)

Priti: so as I said that I grew up in Hyderabad, and at that time one of the big issues in my last year in school actually was that…there was a big movement to form the state of Telangana out of the state of Andhra. In our school, my mother and I got caught in the middle of one of the big protests. In fact, my high school exam was in a different building, because it was in the middle of the protests and riots. So I have a very vivid memory of that. That was in 1971, and in 2014 the state was actually formed, of Telangana. So the protest movement lasted like 40 years. Some of the other issues I think when I was growing up and in college were the issue of poverty, always in India. It was not that long after Independence, and looking back on it now…you know I teach development studies, and now I can see how India had so much hope after Independence from the British, that it would do a lot in terms of development. So it was very…you know I come from a middle class background, but money was always not easy, it was tough for my parents make the ends meet. We did lead a middle-class lifestyle, I'm not denying that, but I can remember that money was not that easy and we had really to think about how money was spent in the home. So that was the sense of need and scarcity while I was growing up. I remember that I wanted an atlas once, it was one of these Reader's Digest atlases and my father couldn't afford it and he felt so bad. So I have a sense like…we're surrounded by these books (in her office), this is huge, because I would had never been able to afford it growing up.

When I was in college, I went to Delhi for college in 1972. Right in front of my hostel, there was a slum clearance, and overnight the people in the slum were removed. I remember just waking up

and feeling the kind of violence of that, and not being able to do anything about it. So that's always sat with me. And I worked with the voluntary organization between the end of school and the beginning of college for 6 months. That was the first time that I'd gone to a village, so I was actually a very urban kid. So when I went to the village, I didn't know what they were like. And this person who was running it (the NGO) just told me to go do a survey, I was just 15 years old. But I went house to house, to ask why women and their children were not participating in this food program. It was actually US AID grain being distributed, and some people were still not participating. Some of those children were not allowed because they were girls in families that didn't want them to cross the main road. Some of them were so-called untouchable caste so they were not allowed to participate. It was really a shock because their social and economic worlds were so different than mine. That's partly why I think in the end I ended up doing the work that I do.

Yingyi: yeah, like starting from a very young age that you grew interested in (these issues). Can I ask a follow-up question? Because you talked about class, and how the concepts of caste structured your life and your social network when you were growing up?
(00:10:00)

Priti: like I said, it was a progressive secular household. I actually did not know my caste until I went back to Hyderabad, and I must be like 10 or 12 before the whole thing even came up. In a way, only if you're very privileged you cannot have a caste in India, right? But it was also the marking of the time really, it was just not an issue for me. But then I found later that these uncles and aunts, some of whom I was and am still very close to… some of them didn't go to my parent's wedding because it was an inter-caste marriage. Yeah, I know, it was a huge shock.

Yingyi: at the age of 10?
(00:11:08)

Priti: yeah 10 or 11, I must have been, before I found out. Caste still does not matter a thing to me and my family, but it did matter again when I got married because my husband was of a different caste, and a different language group. It mattered to his father, but not however to his mother. But then you know, they got over it. My spouse always says if you're successful in life, people forget these things.

Yingyi: same in China.

Priti: yeah so it did never bother him, and it never bothered my mother-in-law. She was very proud of whatever I did. She would sit next to me and see that people didn't dump a lot of food on me. The way you show you care about people in India is that you give them a lot of food to eat. And I could never eat as much food, so she would always sit next to me, and tell them "serve her less food, she can't eat it".

Yingyi: wow, that's a perfect mother-in-law.

Priti: yeah, that was her way of caring.

Yingyi: that's really fascinating. The next set of questions involves with feminism. When did you become involved with feminism or social justice activism, and when did you first identify yourself as a feminist?
(00:12:35)

Priti: so social justice activism, if you think broadly about the work that I did with the NGO, that was probably the start of it, and I continued to be interested. I did economics in college, and definitely one of my professors who taught development economics was my most influential professor. Then I went and I did an MBA because I got in. It was very difficult to get into the Indian Institutes of Management, that was like, of 100,000 applied and 150 got in, only 8 were women. So when I got in, I could not tell my middle-class parents that I was not going there, they'd be very shocked. So I went. There was a group of people who did some development work in some of the villages, so I was kind of involved with that. But it wasn't before I came to the US that I shifted completely into development studies. I did some work with a government development organization in India before I came here, so I worked three years, and then I came here. When I came here, I was completely free to do what I wanted to do. Then I shifted to development studies. At Syracuse University where I did my PhD, you couldn't do GWSS, so I did a couple of courses on women and something. Those introduced me to a bunch of feminist readings. A lot of it was self-taught, talking to other graduate students. And through my fieldwork, I got very much into feminist studies, thinking about gender, poverty and labor. And that's when I think I made the shift.

Yingyi: before you came here, have you decided development studies is the major you wanted to pursue?
(00:14:49)

Priti: no, I got an international fellowship and I actually could've done whatever I wanted but I luckily found that in Syracuse there was a development planning program, so I switched into that program. I had that fellowship for a year so I could spend it however that I wanted.

Yingyi: can you tell us more about that year? How did you spend that year exploring around?
(00:15:25)

Priti: it was very liberating to be in an American university where you can do any course you want. I had some set courses that I had to do for the urban planning degree. I found that very nice because it was an international program, there were people from the Philippines, Peru, South Africa, China. So coming here I had an international community that I never had before. We became very good friends and we just navigated things together. I lived in an international student dormitory, with people again from Ghana, the Gambia, Kenya, so you just get a different sense of the world, because some of them had been colonized similarly, positioned in relation to the US. But you're living with them, so you really get to know them and see them and become friends. So I found that very fascinating. The professors were very good, and they forced you to think in new ways. The library was full of books. I found it to be a very good experience. I missed home. I knew I wanted to do my research and give back to India in the end.

Yingyi: was that the time that you first identified yourself as a feminist?

(00:17:13)

Priti: yes, I would say that was the time that I identified as a feminist. It gave me a language, which I always sort of knew at the back of my head, but I didn't have the concepts, and the theories. Also, I think what was very exciting was to do ethnographic work, anthropology which I had never been exposed to before. My advisor eventually was Susan Wadley who was an anthropologist who had done many many years of work in India. I love her work, as well as others'. And she always let me be on my own so I did whatever I wanted to do basically.

Yingyi: so your advisor was from the development studies?
(00:18:08)

Priti: she's from cultural anthropology. She's done a lot of work in the same village for 50 years. She just retired two months back, I went for her retirement celebration. So it was an ethnography of the transformation in one village in north India for a very long period of time.

Yingyi: how was the composition of the development studies that you went, is it people doing more of quantitative work or ethnography?
(00:18:35)

Priti: I only actually did the master's in development studies. The PhD was an interdisciplinary degree called social science. And you could basically invent it. I invented what I wanted to do so I worked on political economy of irrigation. I did a lot of my work actually in Cornell, because there was a very wonderful interdisciplinary group of scholars working on irrigation in the Global South at Cornell, which was quite close to Syracuse, I used to drive down there and do seminars and independent studies. All of the PhD students there had worked abroad for three or four years, so they were great to have conversations with. Like I said, my advisor decided that I knew what I was doing and pretty much left me to do it. I had a great time.

Yingyi: that's wonderful. It sounds like a very rich intellectual community that you had.
(00:19:43)

Priti: yeah, by then I had got married, I had my son there. We had very close relationship with other PhD students, some of them are still my friends. It was a very good community to be a part of.

Yingyi: you met your husband when you were in grad school?
(00:20:05)

Priti: yeah, when I was in grad school in India.

Yingyi: so let's talk about the University of Washington. When did you come to the University of Washington, and how did you get involved with Women's Studies?
(00:20:17)

Priti: I was hired in 1997. I came here for my interview in '96, straight out of India actually. I was doing fieldwork in India, and I just flew for my interview. That was quite good. I was hired in the department so I have never known any other departmental home than the Women's Studies in the University of Washington. I'm always closely connected with South Asian Studies here. I remember at my job interview there were maybe half South Asian Studies faculty, half GWSS faculty. That continues to be; both my intellectual homes and my friendships in both departments. But this has always been my home. This is where I came in, where I got tenure, promoted, chaired. This is it.

Yingyi: did you have to choose between South Asian Studies and Women's Studies, and why would you choose Women's Studies?
(00:21:26)

Priti: I have always been very committed to Women's Studies as an intellectual and a pedagogical project. Even if I had a choice, I would continue to be here as my primary focus, because I think there's so much more work that needs to be done, bringing feminism to everybody at the University of Washington and beyond. So this would be my intellectual and political choice.

Yingyi: I see, so what was the important political issues around that time?
(00:22:04)

Priti: late 90s and 2000s there was a lot going on. I teach development studies. In 1997 the Asian financial crisis had just happened. In 1999, there was a huge protest against globalization, the "Battle for Seattle," which we all took part in. Shortly afterwards 911 happened, there was a huge protest against the war which we knew was coming so all of us took part in that as well. The continuing issues of structural adjustment policies, the ways in which global politics was playing out at the time. In the department, we also felt some of these pressures. With the move of feminism to globalization and transnationalism, our department had, before the curve, shifted to hire a cluster of transnational studies. But there were tensions because some people felt that women of color was not being given enough attention and resources as the transnational. Those were some tough conversations that we had to have. Then we lost a few people who had been hired under the transnational cluster. But, luckily, we got great new people as well. And then we were able to move into sexuality and queer studies, and we also brought in different people who were doing work on performance, who were doing work on art, you know, with the last two hires work in black queer studies and black sexuality studies.

Yingyi: can you tell use more about the contention between the transnational studies and the women of color (faculty)?
(00:24:20)

Priti: yeah, this was at the time when the larger conversation at the NWSA and also in the field was about liberal/White feminism, and women of color feminism not being given enough attention, or not being acknowledged, both in activism and theoretical production. And in a way that was reflected in the department, because there was only so many resources you have, so what do you use those resources for? I can see some of that as a reflection of the scarcity of

resources, playing out in terms of which direction, or which hiring mode one could go in. The other big fight was the post-structuralist. It was a fight over the use of the word of gender instead of women in the naming (of the department). Because if you think of woman as an identity that is still exploited and oppressed, which people are but then you also think about gender as a sign, gender as an analytic of power, those were two views which were coming into contestation in the department. When I walked in I felt like, "I'm a new assistant professor, what's going on?!" so I stood back a little and tried to link it to resource issues, the larger politics of women of color and transnational, then the post-structuralist, post-colonial versus woman as an identity, so that took a little time to figure out.

Yingyi: given what you've just shared, and what I've learnt from the class that we took last week, that our department was founded by social scientists, so have you sensed that kind of tension between social scientists from different disciplines within the department when you were hired at the time?
(00:26:30)

Priti: no actually, because my position was defined as women and international economy development, so they wanted a political economist. There might have been tension but I didn't quite get those by the time I came. I think actually my hiring brought a number of different constituencies together. The post-structuralist, the people who were doing identity politics, and I was identified as a woman of color, so there were different groups that seem to come together with my hire. And then I definitely found that when I became chair, that everybody was most welcoming to me. It was like everybody wanted me to be chair, so I started with a huge advantage, because then we were a very good community. And then when I was chair that's what I tried to keep and build, because there's so much we can do when we're thinking together, working together, rather than having different view points, or having antagonisms of different kinds, whatever the reasons might have been. Because some of the bigger things translated into personal fights, and I always tried to take those apart. So people can see, that you might want to personalize this but this is a part of the bigger fight. And if you can see the bigger fights, you don't have to personalize it.

Yingyi: I'm really interested in your experiences of becoming the chair. Can you share more about that? When was the time that you were selected as the chair, what kind of excitement or difficulties that you found?
(00:28:34)

Priti: I had been the chair and the director of South Asian Studies for six years. In 2011 I got promoted. One of the things that you have to be the chair of a the department at UW is usually that you are a full professor. Once I became full professor, I could become chair. We had a chair, David Allen at the time, who was supposed to continue for another two or three years. But he got another job so he moved. And then the chair position opened up so then people asked me if I wanted to do it. Before I told the dean that I wanted to do it, I talked to every professor, every staff member in the department. So I got a sense of where they were coming from and got their ideas, got a sense of what we needed as a department. And then I met the deans, there was a chair search committee and I met them. So before I took the position, I got a bunch of stuff for the department. We used to not have an advisor-- the graduate students used to do the advising of

the undergrads --so I got the dean to give us a permanent line, so Laura's (GWSS undergraduate adviser) position, we never had that.

Yingyi: so you advocated for that.

Priti: yeah. I also got the director of graduate and undergraduate studies to get one month's summer salary. So they get compensated for the work they do. And I finally got us to do a four-year funding package. We used to have no funding packages. Everybody was like, oh god, they were so tense, because they didn't know if they were getting funded next year. I just went and looked at our budgets, and we were funding students anyway, so I said this is crazy we are funding students, we just should tell them at the beginning that we're going to fund them for this (number of years) now. And what that did was, because students now know that after four years, they cannot absolutely rely on funding, they do very good proposals. And we're getting more outside funding than we ever used to get before. So those were good things. And we increased a number of entry level courses, because by then we've moved to this ABB model, which was that the deans keep a careful eye on the number of students each department is teaching. Student enrollment numbers became really important. So we opened up a whole lot of new courses, gender and sports, gender and art, gender and popular culture, which got our numbers…one of the few units in the social sciences where the enrollment number has been going up steadily. A lot of that was due to Nancy Kenny, who is an amazing...has brought in, I think 500 students a year. So when she goes, we're in deep trouble.

Yingyi: for myself, I'm definitely very grateful for the four-year package that we have right now. Can we talk about the courses that you first started teaching here?
(00:32:16)

Priti: 345, Women and International Economic Development. I've taught that ever since I came. I was hired to teach that course. So that's been standard. I've taught the Gender and Globalization course, Social Movements in India which is structured around ecology and women's movements. I just started that Gender and Sexuality in India course which I really liked and I'm going to teach that again. It was a grad and undergrad course, a great course. At the graduate level, I've taught the Feminist Methodologies course, 503, and the Feminist International Political Economy course. I think that's about it. I taught the 300, Gender, Race and Class course when I first came, as well as a course we used called Feminisms Around the World, which now is not even on the books anymore.

Yingyi: interesting. So this (question) is in relation to your sharing of being the chair and the course that you taught, about the Women and Race. I've always wondered as someone who's not born in the US, how do you navigate the departmental dynamics, and this multiculturalism in the US academy?
(00:33:45)

Priti: I don't think it's easy. If you're a person who's migrated, as an international person, then it's always up to us to learn about US racial politics. Partly because we're racialized, and partly it is because the history of the country which we now inhabit. The history of what happened with the indigenous population on this land, the history of what happened with Black, African

American population on this land, these are the histories we cannot go away from. We have to educate ourselves on those histories as well as the current dynamics. Because many times there are traces today which are still very very problematic. At the same time, we have to think about the US as a global hegemonic formation, which asserts so much power around the world. So I've constantly trying to get a transnational perspective into everything we do. Because it's so necessary to decenter the US. Sometimes I think we take up marginalized people's issues, people of color issues, and there's still the need to be talking about international issues. So there's always the kind of tension. I don't look at myself completely in South Asian Studies or international studies, precisely because I think it's important to be accountable to the history of the US.

Yingyi: yeah, I definitely feel the tension of the transnational with the people of color, even with the syllabus that we now have, because I think a lot of the syllabus is still catered to, the understanding of international within the US. So have you seen the change of the syllabus that we produced over the years? What kind of changes have you seen?
(00:36:10)

Priti: One of the major changes that I've made, for example in the Women and International Economic Development one, is the inclusion of sexuality and trans issues. I'm not sure of how to negotiate those still. Because much of the world still holds the category of women stable. The exploitation and oppression of women, the violence towards women, whether it's the physical violence, structural violence and emotional violence, that's a big deal which needs to be taken up. I'm still trying to come to terms with how I negotiate issue of transness in classrooms, I don't want trans students to dismiss my classes because they don't see themselves in every single thing that they read or engage with. But I think we all need to talk more about that.

Yingyi: yeah, it's like a constant feminist practice to rethink our syllabus and pedagogy.
(00:37:54)

Priti: I had a very good experience with the Gender and Sexuality in India course. And one of the best undergrad students that I've had came up to me at the end and said, I didn't realize how US-focused my thinking, as well as my education has been. This is a queer student of color who has done a whole bunch of classes with the most radical professors on this campus.

Yingyi: that's very powerful.

Priti: yeah just shifting the focus completely to do the Gender and Sexuality in India course, they read only South Asian scholars. But it was a very intense set of discussions, you have to take yourself out of this frame.

Yingyi: I see, so that's one of your pedagogical moves to de-center the US.

Priti: yes, and it's also to constantly use non-US, or US scholars maybe, but they've done all their work somewhere else, China, or Latin America, India…to get students to read people.

Yingyi: what are the other kinds of feminist pedagogical praxis that you've developed over the years except this one?
(00:39:18)

Priti: I think I try to be as clear about the design of the courses as I can, what am I trying to do, in the arc of the course. I'm constantly rethinking that. This time I'm teaching the Feminist Political Economy course, and after working with you and other students, I want students to do and be able to do an exam in the field after they're done with the course. So I set up the course more deliberately this time, to track intellectual trajectory of how things developed, and students are frustrated sometimes with that because they are so good at critiquing. But now I'm pushing them to see the historical development of these arguments. So that then they can see themselves, you and me as produced over time through some of that intellectual work.

Yingyi: this is very hard practice.

Priti: yes very hard, I realize that. For the undergraduates, giving them some tools, concepts and theories, I'm very into giving them theories and theoretical ways of thinking, so that they can see how facts are framed. If they can do that, they can also go ahead later on in life, because the theories they use would change, with time, and with empirical material. So if they can see the kind of dialogue, that's good. So some theories, and also some practical implications, as well as when they're thinking about politics, to be very careful and nuanced, to try to be very specific, about where their political ambitions are coming from, to know that politics itself, as Stuart Hall says, is without guarantees.

Yingyi: about the practical stuff, I really like how you organize 345, because you bring in a lot of experts on the field to talk about real life. It definitely is not just about theory, but how theory can apply.
(00:41:45)

Priti: yes, and I think that's a good example, right? They've done the theory, they can see, now they can make a critique, some of them don't get it still, which is fine. They can both appreciate what they're doing, but also stand back and say that, "you know, there are these problems with this", or "this is a problem with the larger system which they're reproducing.

Yingyi: that's very powerful too. Another thing that I really like about your teaching is that you can call out students, without any mercy, not in a bad way. I think it's really wonderful the last time I teach 345 with you, and you just spent the whole class in addressing the issues that one of the students of color brought up, like, how can we recognize race in this classroom.
(00:42:26)

Priti: I think I've got more comfortable with doing things like that. As you get more gray hair, you think, oh this is where they're coming from, so let me address this, instead of hide it, or grumble to my spouse about it. I think you get better. And it's not easy still, I mean it's hard. Evaluations are hard. You know, I'm proud that I got this distinguished teaching award, but that was a long time ago. I think, "oh gosh, are you still a good teacher?" you ask yourself.

Yingyi: of course you are.

Priti: well, don't be so sure, we'll find out at the end of this quarter.

Yingyi: so how do you manage that. You said that it grows with age. Because I have a hard time calling out students, or simply affirming what you have to say as a teacher. How do you grow this kind of confidence over the years?
(00:43:55)

Priti: some of it I think just comes with teaching again and again. Some of it also comes with being in the department that values good teaching so highly, right? I mean, look at our teachers, Shirley, Amanda, Sasha, Regina, these are all phenomenal teachers. So we are all the time talking about teaching. One of the things that I tried to do as a chair was also to talk about research a lot, because we want students to recognize that we're producing great research. The research colloquia, workshopping papers, that's something that I wanted us to do. But teaching, all of us talk about teaching quite easily. It's been a good department because teaching is very highly valued here. Like Nancy, we've had very good teachers. Tani Barlow was an excellent teacher, but she was also a tough teacher. When I first came, I learnt a lot from her as well.

Yingyi: so the evaluations does have an effect on the professors?
(00: 45: 23)

Priti: yes, oh yes. First it has a real effect, it goes into our annual report. Each year we submit a report to the chair, the chair then sends (abstracts of) the reports to the dean, so it definitely is a part of our merit calculation. But, more than that, if you want to be a good teacher, you pay attention to that.

Yingyi: do you feel that the GWSS classes have an alternative way of engaging with the students than the other departments? How does that show in the student body etc.?
(00:45:54)

Priti: I think that we're well-known to be a place where students approach material differently, sometimes it becomes too much for them. I have some students come and tell me that "I love your course, but it was too much and I'm not doing anymore GWSS" or whatever. More often than not, they will do more courses. I remember when I first came, I used to teach these courses with much smaller numbers, 25. And then they used to go and do their GWSS, the international studies courses and Task Force, and there were a group of students that were known as the "Ramamurthy students", because of their questions. They questioned all the faculty on the gender stuff, and they went to the Director (of JSIS) and said everybody should do this course. They were very vocal. I don't think that happen as much as now, but definitely when I came, there was a lot (of that). So yeah, I do think they get a different way of looking at the world.

Yingyi: that's very impressive, a group of students called the "Ramamurthy students". So you've been here for more than 20 years, how have you seen that UW changed? Or how does that change affect our department in particular?
(00:47:16)

Priti: so, ABB, one thing that I've talked to you about, which is activity based budgeting. Budgets follow tuition dollars, it hasn't come down to the department yet, and our budget stayed about the same. Definitely the deans pay a lot attention to the student (course enrollment) numbers. So compared to other social sciences and humanities department, we've done very well, because our numbers have been growing. As I told you, I worry about it, because Nancy is leaving. We have retirements, we had Luana retired, with Nancy retiring. Just at the time when indigenous studies is taking off, we don't have anyone doing indigenous studies in our department, which was a huge gap that Luana filled, and Sue Ellen-Jacobs before her, which I feel that we need to do something about that.

The students have become more STEM-focused, which is showing in these declining social science and humanities numbers. Our department has hired fantastic graduate students, you're a case in point. But I think I worry about the ethics of us getting more students, firstly we don't have enough funding, and secondly, I don't know if everyone who gets a PhD will get a tenure track job in GWSS. If they don't want to do that, that's ok. But if they do, then I worry about it, about what it is we're asking you to spend 6-7 years of your lives doing it. If the state of university themselves, at least in the US, is not going to make use of all the work that you've done. So I worry about that. But I think, in general, graduate education in the University of Washington needs more support. We need more support in terms of your funding packages, the amount that you get paid as the stipend, Seattle is such an expensive place to live, and more support in terms of research, so those are the things that concern me.

Yingyi: how do you see the job market now? Is it better than 20 years ago? Because you're still concerned about it.
(00:50:16)

Priti: I am still concerned about it. But definitely more universities have gender studies programs and departments. I think there are under 20 still which have PhD Programs. So if under 20 have PhD programs and they're all producing 40 PhDs a year, there's no way that those people are going to get jobs in those 20 departments. So you're going to have to go to liberal arts colleges, which is what has been happening, or community colleges, or elsewhere. Those are shifts that I think we need to take into account when we're preparing you all and training you all.

Yingyi: the last question for this part is, can you share some of your joyful, proud, or some of your favorite moments of the department?
(00:51:29)

Priti: I think graduations are fantastic, we always have a lot fun, and they're very moving. That's always a nice time of the year. When our PhD students graduate, that's a very joyful moment. There's usually a shift, right at the time when they're defending their PhDs, when you know that they're on their own now. For me, that's a really lovely moment, because they're off. They're their own thinkers. It's a very special time. Especially (because) our PhDs don't do the work that we did. In other departments, maybe they repeat what their professors did. But in our department, no one repeats what their professors did. So that's very exciting and very fulfilling. Other times-- we have celebrated retirements, we are celebrating our 50th anniversary. This

project (the GWSS oral history project) has been a very good one for me, I kind of inherited it. When I was chair, I diverted some funding towards it, and it's become something that I'm very keen on, so this has been one of the joys I guess as well. I've had very good relationships outside of the department as well, collaborations, the Modern Girl project, South Asia faculty, I've done a couple of service things for the university. That's been good.

Yingyi: it's a very nice segue way to the next set of questions about community and activism. You mentioned that there are communities other than the departments in the university that you're a part of, can you talk more about that? How they gave you support?
(00:53:14)

Priti: I guess South Asia Studies has been one of the major ones. When I was the director of South Asia Studies, we hired 6 young assistant professors. All of whom are associate professors right now, so we have the best South Asian Studies in the whole country. That was great because it really opened up my eyes, we have historians doing work on 200 years BCE, work on Indian languages, literary scholars…it's just mind-blowing how wonderful this university is to have faculty who're doing such a range of things on South Asia. That's been very fantastic. The Modern Girl project was a really amazing experience. It was Tani Barlow and I, who were in this department. Lynn Thomas, Alys Weinbaum, Uta Poiger, and Madeline Dong Yue, it was a great project. We did work together, we looked at advertising, we looked at film, we wrote together, we had a whole series of people coming in, we presented at 10 or 12 different places, literally around the world. We went to Canada, Japan, we went to Duke, UCLA, Harvard…yeah, we went to many places. So that was a great project. Who knew that the book would still be around 11 years later. We still get our little royalty check and we would go and have a nice dinner (every year).

And wider communities, I've done work on the rural migrants over the last four years now, since 2015. I've gone back to the two cities, Deli and Hyderabad that I grew up in. But I've never worked in the urban areas, I've always done agrarian work. So I've just learnt these two cities completely newly, I've been to various settlements, slums, from the outskirts to those right in the heart of the city, to hear these stories. That's really been a mind-blowing experience. But I've also been working with universities in both those places, and graduate students, and faculty, as well as advocacy and policy groups. So those people have become my very close friends and I work with them a lot. In fact, yesterday one of my PhD students in India defended. I'm very proud of him.

Yingyi: so you're traveling between different countries, crossing so many boundaries, how do you position yourself as a feminist researcher in terms of feminist knowledge production and community engagement?
(00:56:21)

Priti: I think it depends on where you are right. In UW, I position myself in this department, GWSS, but also as a South Asian feminist, scholar. My work has only been in India, now rural and urban India, so that is very much where I ground my work. I was influenced by Marxist feminism, feminist political economy, and transnational feminism. I position myself as a post-colonial feminist rather than a de-colonial feminist, even though I question the boundary

between the two. We did a special issue on Feminist Studies because I suggested we do it, we talked about how both de-colonial and post-colonial are anti-capitalist, and therefore there are very good ways in which you can think about both of them together. De-colonial in the kind of way that Chandra Mohanty and those people taken up earlier, that's very much part of being post-colonial feminist as well. For me, those differences seem to matter in different ways to other people than they do to me. If you want to put me in a box, that box will be post-colonial studies to think about the ways in which knowledge formations leave traces longer into how we think, the way we CAN think with the concepts that we inherit.

When I was in India sometimes it becomes difficult because people want to put me in the box of the US hegemon. And I'm like, "get over it". But you can't help it also, because again we do come from the US, as my home now, academically, intellectually, and in terms of resources. I accept that. But at the same time, I think I do very grounded work. Some of the feminist there don't do as much fieldwork as I do. I don't think they've been to (slum settlements or) villages in years, or ever. So I feel like, I do the work. And right now I've been trying to do work which is thinking through rural-urban entanglements. I had three workshops which I organized, when I was in India last year. So I have a broader network of faculty and students. The advocacy group is in Hyderabad. There's a policy research group in Delhi that we work with. And I have close relationships with the people who were my research assistants, who are also very good friends of mine now. But I try to keep supporting them, because their jobs are part of the precariat that we were studying.

Yingyi: it's very inspiring to hear how you position yourself, in terms of doing grounded work. That's the most important thing I think.
(00:59:51)

Priti: yes, in case you get arrogant, it knocks you down. But people are also so kind, I've been to ten villages last year. People have nothing, but they are still feeding you, making you comfortable, wanting to talk to you.

Yingyi: yeah that's the beauty of ethnography.

Priti: yes, and also going with people who want you to go to their homes. How many people just say, yeah, come to my home.

Yingyi: very impressive. So the last set of questions is about the future generations. What do you see are the most pressing feminist issues today? How do you see feminism evolving in the future?
(01:00:46)

Priti: I would've been surprised if twenty years ago I had tried to anticipate how we moved. Partly we don't know how it will move, and that's part of the beauty of being in GWSS, because the boundary is always shifting and morphing. Trans issues couldn't have been foreseen, sexuality and queer studies being so central to what we do, we couldn't have foreseen that either. It's going to shift, I know that, how exactly, I don't know. But one of the things I think that we should be taking up is the kind of authoritarian populism, and religious nationalism the world

over, those seem to be a very critical issue that we should be taking up. For my point of view, I hope the department continues to have somebody doing work on political economy, addresses inequality, material poverty, development issues, that would be important to me. Everything else everybody is doing is great, but we also need to just be grounded in some of the real ways that people are marginalized, economically and socially. I think the move towards data, science, medicalization, that will be a move that's coming, it's also a move that the university is making. So for us, in our department to be where the university is going, the society is going, that will be a good thing. So more on feminist science studies, data analysis, and maybe also health, those kinds of thing. Also, maybe important I'm seeing that more and more of our students have these mental health issues, which really I've found has increased so much. We're not actually qualified to be counselling students. So we just send them off, or we make adjustments in the classroom, but they're never adequate, right? I'm still working with students that we had in 345 in fall, and again I have students who I've been checking up on who I had in winter. But, it's a larger issue, so I worry about that.

Yingyi: So it seems that we need more resources to address these kinds of issues.
(01:03:52)

Priti: but we're in good hands. We have a great bunch of young faculty. I think they will do wonderfully well. It will be a strong department in the foreseeable future. And it's got all of you, great students. So I'm very confident that it will be good in the long run.

Yingyi: so maybe the last question is how you think the GWSS department can attract more young students into addressing the kind of issues that you just talked about?
(01:04:32)

Priti: we've talked about this ever since I got here, which is the need to go into high schools, and pre-college education, because there's still so much uncertainty about what feminism is. People seem to think they know what it is, which is a mysterious thing, we still deal with it in our classrooms, as you know. But things shifted, with AIDS we could talk about sexuality, with trans, popular culture taking up trans issues, we could talk about trans issues. There will be shifts, but I think we do so much which is so relevant. Me-too sounds like a great time to be doing our work. I don't think we capitalize on that. So some ways in which we can be more public facing, and get younger people interested. I think that would be good.

Yingyi: it gives me a lot to think about how academic feminism can attract students while at the same time still engages them in the community.
(01:05:50)

Priti: I think so. I think there's a lot can be done to engage younger students in the community. Just sort of to translate what academic feminism is at a younger level. And also to make a difference between…you know, I see my nieces in India, they have so much more freedom than we all did. But whether it's feminist or not, I'm still not sure. You have the choice of what you wear, you have the choice of what you drink, and you have the choice to move around, and maybe date, but whether they have the sense of themselves and their bodies and pleasure, in a way that's through a feminist lens, I don't know. And that's what I think we could do, to say that

these freedoms of choice, are not necessarily grounded in a politics that's very sure about who you are, your body, your pleasure, sexuality, all of that. So I rejoice in the fact that my nieces and nephews are leading a life that is much more open, on the face of it. I also wonder, how deep that is.

Yingyi: that's really interesting, especially (concerning) how consumerism takes up feminist discourses.

Priti: yeah, and it also kind of fools you, that you have it all now, that you don't to do some thinking, or reflection or whatever.

Yingyi: yes, we all still a lot do to.

Priti: yes, you all have a lot do to. But I'm looking forward to that since you're all doing such fantastic work.

Yingyi: yes, do you have other things to say?
(01:08:05)

Priti: I don't think so, we've covered a lot.

Yingyi: thank you so much for your time, I learnt so much.

Priti: thank you so much for interviewing me. I'm glad it was with you, because we know each other, and respect each other. Thank you.

Yingyi: yes, thank you so much. I'll turn this off first.