

# Building Bridges Electronically

## The Spinifex Experiment

by Bandana Pattanaik and  
Susan Hawthorne

*Les auteures retracent la mise sur pied  
de la page d'accueil de la Feminist*

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*We wanted to create a  
resource of politics,  
feminist networking,  
increasing the profile of  
feminist publishing.*

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*Publishing d'Asie,  
les frustrations et  
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les possibilités de  
projets électroni-  
ques féministes tant  
pour le Sud que  
pour le Nord.*

### Susan Hawthorne: the beginnings

Spinifex Press, an independent feminist press based in Melbourne, Australia, was established in 1991 by Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne. The first six years have seen us publishing around 50 titles, many of which have been translated or co-produced with publishers in other parts of the world. Amongst these have been books which have involved working with feminist publishers in Asia, including Kali for Women from India<sup>1</sup> and Narigrantha Prabartana (NGP) from Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> We have also made contact with publishers, authors, activist groups, and some women's studies programs.<sup>3</sup> In 1990, prior to setting up Spinifex Press, I had attended the Fourth International Feminist Book Fair in Barcelona and spoke on a panel about publishing simultaneously around the world in the English language. At this session a whole range of issues were raised, among them problems of publishing cross-culturally, in-built and ongoing problems of cultural imperialism, and the economic and financial feasibility of publishing simultaneously in several countries in the English language. I was also concerned about the stangeness, for me, of the North-South gap. For while Australia is cul-

turally a country of the North (or the West), geographically we are located in the South and within the publishing industry face many of the same problems as other countries in the South due to the domination of our industry by the North—the U.K. and U.S.A. Many of these questions of cultural sensitivity, of trying to promote the work of writers and publishers from the so-called margins, were to concern me over the next few years as I gradually came to grips with building a list of titles in a small and independent press in Australia.

In early 1995 I began to explore the possibilities of the new technologies: multimedia, email, the World Wide Web and publishing of books related to these developments.<sup>4</sup> I was aware of the potential for these technologies within the publishing industry. I embarked on a funded research project to look at the impact information technologies were having on the publishing industry in Australia. Simultaneously, a group of us joined together to form a feminist consortium in order to apply for government funding to produce a feminist CD-ROM. And, in October of 1995, through government funding of a group of independent publishers—Publish Australia—Spinifex was connected to email. By January 1996 we had the beginnings of a home page on the World Wide Web.

The conjunction of all these events meant a heady year, a year in which I began to see new possibilities for publishing and new means of getting to our very widely dispersed audience. In 1994 we had been very involved in running the Sixth International Feminist Book Fair, with its theme of Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Writing and Publishing. At the same time, there were government initiatives which were pushing for commercial connections to be forged between Australia and the Asia Pacific region.

Amongst them was one funded by the Department of Communications and the Arts: the Publishing Industry Export Scheme. They were offering to fund projects which had an export basis and a focus on Asia. As a political activist, I saw this opportunity and wondered just how Spinifex might use it as a means of developing networks between ourselves and sister publishers in the region.

The difficulties faced by feminist presses in the South have been pointed to by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon of Kali for Women. The usual problems of finance, energy, and sheer survival that presses in the North face are compounded by significant additional problems in marketing as well as the constantly vexing problem of distribution channels, or rather the lack of them, for presses in the South. As they point out:

The very first problem arises with lack of information on what is being produced and by whom, and where; currently there is no source of information on this, either within each country, or regionally. (Butalia & Menon 60)

In late 1995, after consulting with a number of individuals on the possibilities for an electronic network which included Asian feminist publishers, I prepared an application for funding for the project. I was not optimistic about its success, but felt nevertheless that it was at least, historically speaking, the right time to try. The funding application was couched in terms of export, trade, commerce—but what we wanted to create was a resource which would include politics, information, feminist networking, increasing the profile of feminist publishing, and as a side effect, increase the sales of books we all produce in order to help us survive in an era of globalization and

trade blocks which help the big and powerful.

In setting up the Feminist Publishing in Asia Home Page, our original intention was threefold. First, to provide a home page with information

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*What was important to me, was to include presses who were least likely to have access to the resources we had.*

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about feminist publishers, including scans of book covers and details on what books were being published, how they were distributed and a short history of the press. Second, to

provide a forum for discussion of common issues for feminist publishers through a listserv (an automatic mailing list server through which one can subscribe to on-line mailing lists). And third, to develop a network of women associated with publishing—presses, bookshops, women's studies courses, resource groups, NGOs, and community groups—which would promote the selling of books and access to books throughout the region.

Not all of these intentions have come to fruition. We realized that a listserv would not be possible at this stage. First of all we needed to have someone able to coordinate the list, and we didn't have the resources or facilities to do that, and secondly access to the technology was not yet widespread enough to make this a viable option. Many presses would simply be left out. The network, again, is not something we could start with, but rather an outcome of the project that will continue as it develops over several years. We decided therefore to proceed with developing a home page with information about the presses and their books.

What was always important to me, was to include the presses who were least likely to have access to the resources we had. For this reason we

have not included large commercial publishing houses with feminist books, nor have we approached university presses, although these too, often produce books of interest. Instead we have focused on publishers who are independent, or who publish as activists to produce material in support of political campaigns. Among the publishers represented are some who produce only occasional books, but there are also others whose books reach international markets.

Because we are small, and because we market ourselves to a particular niche, we have a flexibility and adaptability that the larger players don't have. It's one of the few advantages we have, and in order to make it work for us, we need to build things together. We are—as Suniti Namjoshi, the author of *Building Babel*, would say—building culture on the Internet. Since cyberculture is only as diverse and interesting or as boring and violent as the material on it, it is an issue of critical mass. As feminists we need to be there contributing our weight to our side of the mass.

There were some successes which surprised us. We were incredibly fortunate that Bandana Pattanaik appeared one day in May 1996, interested in doing some work with Spinifex. Here was someone who understood the politics of the project and the importance of networking for feminists. She also had contacts and an understanding of literature and feminism, and had computer skills, although at the beginning Bandana did not have any knowledge of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), the text-based code used to create webpage documents.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Bandana Pattanaik: Spinifex notebook**

One of the ways to get talking about this project would be to go

back to my Spinifex notebook. The entries are not regular. There were days when I was waiting for things to happen, words from other people. Days when I was in despair because nothing was happening, other people's silence. I look at the blank spaces today. One moment it looks like an abyss. Another it becomes a rainbow bridge. I am not sure I can talk about it, nor capture the terror and the beauty, the frustration and the euphoria.

First week of August 1996: We talked about the project and I tried to do a letter. We went over it again and sent them. The project sounds fascinating.

October 1996: The letters have been sent and I am waiting. I do a mail out with Libby and wait. I help Sue Hardisty with her Frankfurt folders and wait. And wait a little more. I learn to operate a photocopier, to feed a printer, to take telephone calls. There isn't much I can do here. Waiting isn't doing anything. Do they also serve, those who only stand and wait?

I mess up the telephone calls. Forget which button to press. Forget to say "good morning, Spinifex Press." I

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*Since cyberculture is only as diverse as its material, feminists need to contribute to achieve critical mass.*

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can't remember how the photocopier works. I can't figure out how to develop a database. I don't even know which way to turn the key and open a door.

Mid-October 1996: I hate the weekly meetings. There is nothing to report. Nothing is happening. I resent the efficiency of people around me, their concern and sympathy. Have

I failed the project? Like a patient who fails her therapy? Would someone else have somehow done it differently? Make things happen? Someone says I should be proactive. How? Why? In a different place I would have quit the project. Here I can't because I need the money. But why can't I really? How does another MA matter? Why can't I just buy a ticket and go back to a place where I can do something? Would it be a defeat? Who/what am I fighting? What am I trying to achieve/prove?

Never before have I felt such a strong sense of futility, never needed so much reassurance. Never before has anything taken hold of my life so completely and yet not made sense. What is being hurt? My self-esteem? Linda says it might be my pride.

Late October 1996: Sue and I had a meeting and she suggested that I could put up information which we already have. I start designing an HTML page on Kali for Women and quite like playing with colours. I send frantic fax messages and emails to anyone who might have some information. I spend hours in the computer lab surfing the Net, talk to everyone I meet about the project that is not happening. I sound defensive, a little apologetic even. I am not sure why we should put up information which exists in hard print anyway. For whom? Whose purpose will it serve? Is it only to fill my days at Spinifex with something to do? I wish I could quit. I hate myself because I can't.

Late November 1996: Something rankles inside me. Somehow it seems arrogant putting up information about people. What gives us the right? Granted we are only going to talk about people we have worked with or have had something to do with in the past. But what is the relevance? Is this another colonialist project? Sit in front of a computer terminal in a developed country and set up an electronic network for people who have the time and resources to surf the Net. A first world feminist agenda? Some people in the U.S. are weaving an India on the web. Diaspora coping with nostalgia. What am I doing?

Grabbing the only available job and writing stories which I can change if I like. Networking with people for whom the Net is a non-existent issue. Where do I position myself? Whose side I am on?

Susan—And whose side am I on? This was a question which hounded me. Here we were attempting to get off the ground a network which I utterly believed in. But where were the responses? Why didn't anybody else seem to think it important? In my discussions with publishers from different parts of Asia the problem was always getting the information out. It was making Americans see that publishing happened in other parts of the world, and feminist publishing, too. It was trying to break through that barrier of silence and disinformation. Here was a technology being used by the makers of cultural imperialism, but where was the permission to start breaking through that wall, to start building the bridge?

Bandana was clearly frustrated by the process. I tried to reassure her that answers would come. Privately I worried that they wouldn't. I began to think that all the feminist publishers I knew of in Asia had dropped into some kind of black hole. I knew this couldn't be true, but it could be possible that their circumstances had become so difficult that day-to-day survival was more important than responding to some crazy letter from a publisher in Australia suggesting an electronic network that they couldn't even gain access to.

Bandana—December 1996: More sleepless nights. There are essays to write for the course at Deakin. That's the kind of thing I know something about. But the project at Spinifex? I feel awful about it.

Mid-December 1996: A friend has asked me to describe the project to her. What did we want to happen? What exactly have I/we done so far? What can be done now? I try to describe it for her as well as for myself. Somewhere along the line things

changed. Not the facts but the perception of them. The magic moment when an abyss becomes a sunlit room. When realizing the smallness of your life/project you know how significant you are/it is.

A description mostly: we had sent letters to four publishing houses on August 16, 1996—Kali for Women in India, Narigrantha Prabartana (NGP) in Bangladesh, Jojo in Japan, and Penempuan Yogyakarta (SBPY), an organization that networks on behalf of women in Indonesia. We hadn't heard from anyone by October 1996. In late October we decided to get started by putting up information that we had. The first two groups to go on the site were Kali and Narigrantha Prabartana. Once the pages were done we faxed the print-outs on Kali to Urvashi Butalia. Sue and Renate were going to a conference in the U.K. where Farida Akhter was also presenting a paper. They had a brief talk with her there and gave her the print-outs of NGP pages. There they also ran into Nighat Said Khan of ASR Resource Centre for Women (Pakistan), who gave them some brochures about her organization.

By the end of November we had Kali, NGP, ASR, and Streelekha (a feminist bookstore in Bangalore, India) on our webpage. We knew information on Awakening, Taiwan was on its way. I also knew that information on Isis International and the Filipino national women's coalition of organizations—the General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action (GABRIELA)—will soon reach us. So there was work to keep me going until the third week of January 1997 which was when the project would wind up. It felt as if my work had no rationale except doing it so that I would have something to fill my time. There had to be a better purpose than that. But was there? I knew anyone anywhere in the world with access to Netscape could reach our webpage. But would anyone be interested? We wanted to network with women's publishing houses. We wanted women to respond to our letter, send

us their opinion on a project like this, and contact details of other such groups if they thought this project had any relevance. That would have opened up a common forum for discussion and action. And that was not happening.

Christmas. Time to take stock of the year. At the Spinifex annual meeting I say the reasons for the failure of this project are outside me/us.

Susan—In spite of Bandana's sense of failure, I am still crazily optimistic. I have watched as she has uploaded information on the first half dozen publishers. It is small. But it is a beginning. I think, perhaps we were too optimistic. Perhaps we are simply too early. The technology has reached us, but has not yet taken hold in Asia. I think, perhaps no one is keen for others to put up information on them. What's the point?

But I have also watched with a sense of wonder as Bandana has designed the first pages. I'm astounded at the colours she has chosen for the pages: magenta, lime green, mustard yellow. But also delighted. They are colours that would not have occurred to me, and they are so different from the muted home pages I have visited. They instantly stand out, attract by their differentness.

Bandana—Late December 1996: A year is coming to an end. By the time we closed for Christmas there were details on seven publishing houses on the site. Urvashi Butalia has written showing her appreciation of the project and has sent updated information. Yenlin Ku has responded from Taiwan thrilled with the idea and has sent information on *Awakening*. Chat Garcia from Isis has also replied enthusiastically.

I am trying to put together papers collected over six months to write a report. Sue hasn't asked for one. But I might write one anyway. Papers/addresses spread out on the dining table, emails from strangers, contact telephone numbers/website addresses scribbled on the back of notebooks. Susan Chacko from the South Asian

Women's Network (SAWNET) says she doesn't know much about feminist publishers. Sushma Joshi from Brown University writes that she always wanted to know more about feminist publishing. She hopes to do something in this area someday. But how does one get in touch with feminist publishers? She has no clue. Kristin Ramlan from Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC), Malaysia says there is no feminist publishing in Malaysia. Hasn't APDC brought out some wonderful books on women's issues? Shyamali, who has been living in Melbourne since 1971, says she would like to get in touch with women's groups in India. She wants to know about Kali books.

A story takes shape. A purpose emerges. Quite a bit of work has already been done. Lots of people have already been involved. Women's publishing is still an unexplored area. Information which exists in hard print does not exist in one place. Anyone who wants to get in touch with women's publishers in Asia will face similar difficulties. Collating information and putting it up on the web will help fill a gap. And the process of information gathering also needs to be talked about. Why in this age of information overload can we get information only about certain people and certain places? As I put together something like a directory and recall how I chanced upon bits of information, the issues at stake become clear. This isn't doing something to fill time. The personal, political, and the commercial are so closely intertwined that it's difficult to separate one from the other.

Questions come up in my mind: What does feminism mean in the Asia-Pacific context? Some women's organizations are not comfortable with the term "feminist." It's a borrowed term from the West for some. A term that does not translate well into languages other than English.

Who are the women who publish? There aren't many independent women's publishing houses. Most politically relevant women's publishing seem to be happening in NGOs. There-

fore publishing may not have an overtly commercial agenda. The money invested does not need to be recovered. Could it be made more niche-market oriented? Are there possibilities of setting up distribution groups across countries?

What do women publish? What are their concerns? I am delighted by the fact that Kali for Women and ASR have done co-productions even though the political relationship between India and Pakistan is unstable. Sisters in Islam, Malaysia, and Kalyanmitra, Indonesia deal with strikingly similar issues. For example, women in Singapore and India ask why women constitute 70 per cent of world's absolute poor.

And the Internet isn't just an issue for the first world feminists. If sisterhood implies shared responsibilities then this is the time to protest. Are Filipinas only sex objects for white men? What are the women in the Philippines doing? In fact any feminist who is using the web and ignores these issues is shirking her responsibilities.

Boundaries of North and South, developing and developed, are constantly shifting. I don't know where I am because there is no fixed position. Agendas/paths overlap, crisscross. Recognizing differences does not rule out possibilities of a community.

Most of the pages are done. I am doing a section called Search Results: Women+Asia+Publishing to tell the story of search for book-women in Asia.<sup>6</sup> It does not exist as a search category yet. I am thinking of scanning scripts in various Asian languages and also using postage stamps from the concerned countries. I am waiting for Sue to get back from her holidays.

Susan—On my first day back at work, a hot midsummer's day, I am greeted with an underplayed request from Bandana to look at what she's done while I'm away. I sit down with her at the computer and she begins to show me the report which has turned into a huge electronic resource. As we move through the information she

has pulled together in a few short weeks I can barely hold back my excitement. Here are the publishers I knew existed, but didn't know how to contact. Here are publishers I've never heard of. And there are more, from almost every part of East, South, and Southeast Asia. Bandana has come up with a design which holds the information together, one that picks up on the diversity of languages and cultures. I can be heard saying, "Wow," with speechlessness as we move through the pages.

Bandana—Late January 1997: Surprise. Laughter. Colour and images. Words. A project has been completed.

Projects are bound by money and time. But it has made me aware of issues I hadn't thought about earlier. I might find a way to engage with them later. Someone somewhere else might pick it up and do something about it.

We have sent letters and print-outs to all the organizations. Some of the letters may not reach. Some may not be replied to. But a few have already written to us, suggesting modifications, giving updated information, pointing out errors. A beginning has been made. A seed has been sown. It may or may not grow into a plant. We hope and dream. Not all dreams become real. And mature hope does not depend on its own fulfilment.

Susan—I think back over the process of the project. There has been a huge learning curve in this for all of us. When I first put in the application for funding I barely knew the jargon of the technology. But I knew from my years as an activist what the concept could do if it worked. As an activist, access to information about like-minded people and organizations is critical. That experience of the local network expanding—like the ripples of a stone thrown into water—to encompass the regional and the global is an important one in our contemporary world. What I didn't anticipate was the way it has sprung back and helped to create new networks in Melbourne.

There has also been a huge perceptual change across the cultures this network touches. Different parts of Asia are plugging in. Organizations we sent letters to nine months ago, now correspond with us by email. In Australia there is something of an Internet backlash taking place. But even with this we know that there are an increasing number of women getting on the Internet, and our home page is being hotlinked to others in Melbourne and around the world. It is becoming the resource we had envisioned. More importantly, however, word is getting out that feminist publishing is alive and well in Asia.

The home page as it is now, will change. At this stage we don't know how. We have begun to receive copies of books and magazines from publishers whose work is included. No doubt others will contact us. No doubt new independent publishers will be set up. Perhaps someone in another part of the world will set up a similar home page and link it to ours. Bandana will not be staying in Australia forever, and we will have to find others to help us keep this resource alive. My hope is that it will help to build the bridges we all so desperately need in a world which is becoming less diverse and more fragmented.

Bandana—There was an image in the early days of the project: a web, fragile and beautiful. One that breaks and again gets woven. Then I remembered a childhood poem: "come to my parlour, said the spider to the fly." I wasn't happy with the image anymore. One day when I was walking home another image came up. One from the *Ramayana* I had heard long ago. A bridge is being built. Monkeys, bears, and human beings, everyone is working. Someone noticed a squirrel. The squirrel took a dip in the water, came back, and rolled herself on the sand, hurried to the water again and took a dip. Again to the sand and then to the water. Again and again. Had she gone crazy? Someone asked her what she was up to. "The bridge needs to be built. Everyone is working. I can't carry

stones. I am so little. But I want to make some contribution. So I thought maybe I could do this," she replied.

Yes, this project was as humble a contribution as the squirrel's. But significant nonetheless. A memory we will cherish, a concern we will keep up. Visit our website: <http://www.publishaustralia.net.au/~spinifex/welcomeasia.html>

*The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable work done by Libby Fullard, Office Manager at Spinifex Press, whose involvement in the project was critical to its success, and without whose work this project would not have gotten off the ground. She taught herself HTML, worked extra hours in developing her skills, and then passed it all on.*

*Bandana Pattanaik is currently a post-graduate student in women's studies at the University of Deakin, Melbourne, Australia. A feminist academic she likes to think of herself as a low-tech person. She got interested in the Internet when she found the Indian newspapers online. The importance of this project for her was its political relevance and its commercial possibilities.*

*Susan Hawthorne is a writer and publisher with a fascination for change. Having been captured by the allure of the Internet and electronic publishing, she wanted to do something which would be politically useful. The Feminist Publishing in Asia Homepage came out of that desire and she looks forward to seeing how it will develop in the future.*

## References

<sup>1</sup>We co-produced *Women's Studies, Women's Lives* with Kali for Women in 1995 and have had many discussions with them about the difficulties faced by feminist publishers in the South. For further information on this see Butalia and Menon, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>We donated Asian rights for *RU 486: Misconceptions, Myths, and Morals* to Narigrantha Prabantana in 1992, and have had a long association with Farida Akhter and UBINIG working around issues such as women's health,

reproductive technologies, and population control.

<sup>3</sup>In 1992, during a visit to Hong Kong we made contact with Women in Publishing, Hong Kong. In 1993 we travelled to Bangladesh and India, visiting UBINIG and Kali for Women. In 1994 a number of publishers from Asia came to Melbourne for the Sixth International Feminist Book Fair, and in 1995 and 1996 we attended the Tokyo International Book Fair, and made contact with women in women's studies programs.

<sup>4</sup>Between 1995 and 1997 we have published: *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power, and Cyberspace* by Dale Spender, a groundbreaking book which looks at the development of print culture and electronic culture—an important book for feminists thinking about the social implications of the new technologies; a novel, *The Silicon Tongue*, with a Nethead character called Pixel by Commonwealth-award winner, Beryl Fletcher; Rye Senjen and Jane Guthrey's *The Internet for Women*—an easy to read guide for women who are currently print-oriented which gives a history of the Internet and explains how all the bits fit together; *Building Babel*—a dense poetic novel by Suniti Namjoshi with an interactive final chapter which has been put on our home page and is an incentive to visit our home page; *Cyberfeminism*—a collection of essays, to be published in 1998, by feminists who are actively engaged in developing electronic feminist enterprises and inventing feminist culture.

<sup>5</sup>HTML involves putting "tags" around text and pictures so that when they are uploaded others can view them.

<sup>6</sup>This section can be accessed at <http://www.publishaust.net.au/~spinifex/journeyasia.html>. Also see [bandana-hp.html](http://bandana-hp.html) for a report on the project.

#### References

Butalia, U., and R. Menon. *Making a Difference: Feminist Publishing in the South*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Bellagio Publishing Network, Studies in Publishing, 1995.

## JUDITH GEWURTZ

### The difference between you & me

The difference between you and me  
is plain and simple to all that can see.  
To the naked eye, we are of the same sex  
we differ in height, in race and in dress.  
My eyes are brown and yours are green,  
Your waist is just perfect, mine is too lean.  
You stand nice and straight,  
my back slightly bends,  
a sweet little girl is the impression you send.  
You always look neat, tidy and clean  
with always a smile, you never look mean.  
Your hair is light brown, mine used to be dark.  
But in our eyes we share that glitter, that spark.  
To the world of eyes that stare at us both  
these are the differences people would see,  
but inside of us is the truth that no one can see—  
The difference is that cancer lies within me.

### The Darker Side ...

The world is divided into two parts—  
The side of the living and that of the dead.  
A child with cancer lingers in between,  
her heart is still beating, her spirit has fled.  
She wanders into darkness,  
she is lost and afraid.  
She follows the path that cancer has made.  
And the closer she gets to the darker side,  
the more it feels like a roller coaster ride.  
A ride of fear with twists and turns,  
a ride that will lead her stomach to churn.  
Her only hope is that she will see the light,  
the light that G-d had put there that night  
so that she could see day and find her way home,  
so that she could reunite with her family and not feel so  
alone.  
It's up to her to follow her heart,  
to find the light and then to depart  
from the darker side of the world,  
near the side of the dead.  
She must find her way back to the home which she fled.  
What she doesn't know is that someone is on her side,  
G-d has mended her heart and has healed her with pride.  
She knows where to go, she knows what to do  
Now it's up to her to make it through.

*Judith Gewurtz, age 15, lives in North York and attends French Immersion at York Mills Collegiate. She is currently being treated for cancer, and is writing a book about her experiences.*