

How Gloria Steinem's lifechanging stay in India shaped her approach to feminism

Penelope MacRae in Delhi

When Gloria Steinem's plane touched down in Bombay in 1957, she could not have known that her stay in India would become what she later called a "pivotal, life-dividing event [that] made me who I am".

She was 22, with a degree in government from Smith college and was travelling on a Chester Bowles fellowship.

India was "not only a place I'd always wanted to go, but (also) an escape from a very kind and tempting man to whom I was engaged and knew I shouldn't marry," Steinem later wrote. The prospect of marrying Blair Chotzinoff, a pilot from a well-connected New York family, depressed her "enormously because marriage meant the end of life to me".

Funds were short, so she wangled a free airline ticket in exchange for an article "that I still feel guilty to this day because I never wrote".

While in London waiting for her Indian visa, she discovered she was pregnant and obtained an illegal abortion - an experience that underpinned her conviction that, without control over reproduction, women could not control their own lives.

Steinem, **who died this week at the age of 92**, arrived in Delhi with romantic expectations of "ageless beauty and jewelled elephants". They were quickly displaced. Driving from the airport, she had what she called her "first glimpse of Asian poverty", seeing people sleeping on pavements and doorsteps.

She lived at Miranda House, one of Delhi University's leading women's colleges, immersing herself in student life.

"At night in our rooms we have long sessions and are asked everything: the Christians' conception of God, the intricacies of western lingerie, the dating system, how much milk the American cow gives," Steinem wrote.

Steinem's Indian years have been extensively documented by Rashida Shafiq of Southern Methodist University, who drew on her fellowship reports and other archival material for a



▲ Gloria Steinem adopted the sari as everyday dress during her time in India. Photograph: Gloria's Foundation

recently published PhD thesis.

She adopted the sari as everyday dress, writing: "Saris make one stand straighter and walk more slowly and worry less about time and efficiency."

India was not entirely unfamiliar territory. Her mother and paternal grandmother had been Theosophists, part of a

spiritual movement that drew heavily on Hindu and Buddhist ideas such as karma and reincarnation, and at college Steinem had written a paper on the Communist party of India.

When her fellowship money ran out, she supported herself by writing for Indian newspapers, doing advertising work and taking

occasional modelling jobs - including posing in saris.

Wider travel in the country brought some of her most important encounters.

She met Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the former princess and follower of Mahatma Gandhi who became independent India's first health minister, and spent two hours with Indira Gandhi, whom she described as "shy to uncertainty, gentle and a little whimsical".

At a Radical Humanist study camp in Mussoorie, followers of the former communist MN Roy debated democracy, individual freedom and political organisation. Steinem later said she learned there that "radical" need not mean violent or extremist, but could mean "going to the root," and that "the means we choose dictate the ends we achieve".

But some of her most lasting political education happened on the road.

On a journey from Calcutta to Kerala, Steinem travelled third class in a railway carriage reserved for women, which she later described as "a dormitory on wheels".

Women settled in with children and food, nursing babies, sharing tiffins and talking. They wanted to know everything about her and conversations ranged across marriage, childbirth, contraception and family life. "Had I been isolated in a car, this

talking circle could never have happened," Steinem wrote later.

Years before American feminist "consciousness-raising" groups brought women together to discover that supposedly private problems were widely shared, Steinem had watched women in India exchange intimate experiences among themselves.

But the experience she regarded as most important came after caste violence erupted in what was then Madras state in 1957.

Steinem joined workers associated with the movement of Vinoba Bhave, a leading disciple of Gandhi, who were walking from village to village trying to counter rumours, discourage revenge and bring people together to talk.

She travelled with little more than "a cup, a comb and the sari I wore".

In settlements scarred by violence, meetings were held beneath trees and in village courtyards.

"I listened as villagers narrated burnings, murders, thefts and rapes, with fear and trauma needing no translation," she wrote.

The lesson was to listen before offering solutions. "Ask the people what they want, don't tell them what they need," was how Steinem later described it.

She remembered "the ancient and modern magic of groups in which anyone may speak in turn, everyone must listen and consensus is more important than time".

"If you want to know how people live, you have to go where they live; if you want people to listen to you, you have to listen to them," she later said. "I believe I learned that in India."

Steinem returned to the United States in 1958, more than a decade before she became one of the leading figures in the women's movement.

"I couldn't integrate into the rest of my life these two very, very crucial years," she recalled. "It was only after the women's movement started that links began to be forged."

She repeatedly connected her later organising methods with India. "The first organising I did



▲ Gloria Steinem at home. She said: 'If you want to know how people live, you have to go where they live; if you want people to listen to you, you have to listen to them. I believe I learned that in India.' Photograph: Gloria's Foundation

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