FEMINISM AND CHANGING NOTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS: AN ENQUIRY WITH REFERENCE TO SELECT AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis titled 'Feminism and Changing Notions of Knowledge and Politics: An Enquiry with Reference to Select Autonomous Women's Movements in India' submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is an original research work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree/diploma of any university/institution.

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CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The autonomous women's movement (AWM) is one particular strand of women's organising, that emerged in India in the 1970s and continues till date. It is often considered to be *the* feminist movement in India, in contradistinction to the other forms of women's organising in the country, for example of those associated with the country's major political parties. It is this movement that is seen as having put women's issues, *as* women's issues, into focus. (As opposed to women's issues as subsumed by other movements, organisations and ideologies.)

The basic distinguishing factor between the AWM and other movements and forms of organising is the idea of autonomy. Autonomy has been defined as a principle that allows women organised thus to be free to raise the issues that they deem to be important to women, and to campaign around these issues when and in the manner that they see fit. Autonomy has been achieved through feminists' maintenance of distance from those organisations and structures that could impinge upon them, through financial, ideological or cultural power (for example, through the withdrawal of funding, through the lack of prioritisation of women's issues, through sidelining women activists in mixed groups, et cetera).

Despite the movement's significance, there are few recent comprehensive studies of it. The two most well-known studies, perhaps, are Radha Kumar's *A History of Doing*, and *The Issues at Stake*, by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah. Both provide expansive and detailed looks at not just autonomous women's organising, but at various forms of women's activism. Both were published in the early 1990s. In recent years, there have been studies of various women's organisations: for example, Elisabeth Armstrong's *Gender and Neoliberalism* (2013), which examines the All India Democratic Women's Association, and Gargi Chakravartty and Supriya Chotani's *Charting a New Path*, which documents approximately four decades of the history of the National Federation of Indian Women. However, detailed studies of the autonomous women's movement are conspicuous by their absence. There are many

commentaries on or evaluations of specific aspects of this movement (for example, on the impact of NGOisation, or on feminist thought), and feminism itself has become the subject of much popular discussion (this is briefly described towards the end of chapter two). However, these studies often do not give us a sense of the nature of this movement: the actors, issues, campaigns, strategies, et cetera.

Purpose of the Study

This study is an ethnography of the autonomous women's movement. It presents an overview of this movement, largely through the eyes of its participants. Thus it engages with the movement as it appears to those activists who make it up.

The study also engages with the interplay between activists' understanding of gender and society on the one hand, and the kinds of interventions they have made, on the other, and traces shifts in these over the course of the autonomous women's movement.

For the purpose of this study, we use the term knowledge to mean feminists' conceptualisations of the social world, and the role and place of gender in those conceptualisations. This includes how womanhood and gender are defined (as biological, social, or cultural categories); how the subject of feminist politics is understood (for example, is it to be 'woman', 'women', or 'gender'); how the social disabilities that women suffer are understood (their root causes and how they are to be addressed), et cetera.

How have Indian feminists' conceptualisations of the social world changed over time? One major shift is of the theorisation of difference and differences between women, indeed in the theoretical and empirical weight given to these factors. This is documented in detail in chapter five.

Another categorisation of approaches on 'women' and feminism is offered by Mary John (John, 2014), who argues that there have been three "epistemes or grids of intelligibility" through which these have been understood. She terms these the colonial, national, and the post-national.

John argues that the colonial period saw women being viewed through the lens of "social reform." Women here came to be seen as "marked therefore by conceptions of

lack, lowliness, backwardness and oppression, all of which could and should be changed, precisely because they were rendered legible as *social* beings (John, 2014, p. 123)." According to John, it was through debates over girls' education, sati, and later over widow remarriage, the age of consent, and so on, that the idea of a social issue acquired meaning. The idea of the social also came to be accompanied by ideas of culture and tradition. These three ideas were defined in opposition to the political.

The end of the 1800s saw the emergence of nationalism, a discourse that was cultural as well as political; John argues that social reform was "increasingly taken over and recast by the rising politics of nationalism (John, 2014, p. 124)." The end of the colonial period saw the rise of the nationalist episteme. This according to John was not unique to India but was common in many decolonising countries. Here, the idea of development provided a means of breaking with the past and of imagining the future.

The feature of the nationalist episteme that John highlights is that of the centrality of the nation state, for both the state-led development discourse and its eventual feminist critique. The task of the progress of India's women was in effect handed over to the state, as was the task of nation-building. This formulation remained in place for the first twenty years or so after independence. The resurgent women's movement of the 1970s took the form, John argues, of an internal critique of this episteme. Critiques were placed within the frame of the nation state, as it was to the nation state itself that they were addressed. John classifies the various critiques that emerged at this time under two heads: critiques of development and poverty, and law and society from the point of view of violence.

Since the end of the 1980s, however, the national episteme has been supplanted by the post-national, which John denotes as "a situation where the nation is no longer the obvious or only horizon or frame of reference for our questions and critiques (John, 2014, p. 127)." This is accompanied by a heightened critique of the nation itself. John lists some of the ways in which the idea of the nation has been fractured through the visibility of conflicts based on caste, gender and community.

These three epistemes present us with broad ways in which womanhood has been understood over a long period of history. Ratna Kapur (Kapur, 2012a) instead examines the approach of the AWM, drawing links between feminist perspectives and the outcomes of the movement. She argues that liberalism has been a hallmark of the

AWM, which has looked to the rights discourse and to the law to "secur[e] women's freedoms and emancipation."

Kapur discusses the problems that emerge for feminism when the transformative potential of the liberal project and the rights discourse are critiqued. She argues that in their absence, feminism is left "rudderless and without a political vision (Kapur, 2012a, p. 333)." She discusses the "exclusionary and conservative potential of rights" in terms of the AWM's frequent recourse to law to secure women's freedom and emancipation. In turning to the law, feminism has had to balance its quest for emancipation with the need to establish its nationalist credentials. It has also been forced to perpetuate those stereotypes that are entrenched in law: of women as victims, devoid of agency. She gives the example of campaigns against sexual violence, which she says made public the violence women faced, but did not challenge either tropes of shame and dishonour, or stereotypes of women as victims.

According to Kapur, this idea of "women as victim-subjects" has allowed feminism to retain its nationalist credentials. In an atmosphere where feminism is denigrated as being 'western', Indian feminists have "sought to establish a distinctly Indian feminism" based on the idea of the authentic Indian woman as a victim of oppression and violence. Thus, to paraphrase Kapur, while the women's movement in India tries to achieve the revolutionary goal of equality between men and women, it remains tied to an essentialist and conservative picture of Indian culture and womanhood (Kapur, 2012a, p. 336).

The AWM also fails, Kapur argues, to account for differences between women. Religion has not been seen as causing conflicts between women, even as religious differences are recognised. The commonality of women's experience is stressed, especially with regard to sexual violence and exploitation.

Since the 1990s, Kapur states, feminism has faced challenges: of NGOisation, by sexual and religious minorities, and by lower-caste activists. But more importantly, the "liberal faith in state institutions and the law" has been exposed as flawed and myopic. She highlights three aspects of the liberal idea that are now in crisis: the belief in a progressive and evolutionary narrative of history; the idea of rights as the basis of freedom; and the supremacy of the liberal subject.

We see that Kapur draws a fairly straightforward line from feminists' conceptualisations of the world to their forms of intervening on behalf of victimised women. Her analysis of the shortcomings of feminist politics is traced to the nature of the framework applied. Her prescription for revitalising feminism too entails a change in feminist perspective and theoretical orientation, towards postcolonial theory.

> Feminism needs to incorporate the insights of postcolonial theory, from which it has hitherto remained distant, not only because such a theory can better capture law's complex and contradictory role in struggles to improve women's social, economic, political and cultural position, but also because it can provide a productive way out of the current crisis (Kapur, 2012a, p. 346).

Kapur, then, makes a direct connection with the forms of theorising of feminist within the AWM, and the kinds of interventions they have made. This brings us to politics, the second term which we will trace in this thesis.

The term politics has been understood in different ways in the study of social movements. Kate Nash argues that there are two main schools of thought through which social movements are analysed. One is the political process model, exemplified by Charles Tilly, and the second, new social movement theory, exemplified by Alberto Melucci and Alain Touraine. These two schools of thought provide distinctive ways of looking at social movements. According to Nash, the political process model defines social movements as follows:

> They involve networks mobilised outside formal democratic representation; their demands are addressed to state elites; and they involve the formation of collective identity insofar as leaders successfully speak for a group (Nash, 2002, p. 316).

Turning to new social movement theory, Nash focuses on the work of Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci. Melucci in particular is described as having developed a model of social movements that is "much more concerned with cultural change in the widest sense than with legislation and policymaking" (Nash, 2002, p. 320). Therefore Nash makes a distinction between theories of social movements that look at challenges to the state as their main goal, and at those that look at cultural changes as their main goal.

Nella van Dyke, Sarah Soule and Verta Taylor (2004) too point to the tendency within the political process model of social movements to look to the state as the "primary target of movement activity (van Dyke, Taylor, & Soule, 2004, p. 28)." This neglects those movements whose targets are non-state institutions, for example religious, educational, or medical establishments, or whose efforts are aimed at public opinion more broadly.

It is important, according to Nash (Nash, 2010, p. 106), for scholars of social movement to recognise that the work movements do within the cultural sphere is not simply a "preliminary to collective action, a mobilising strategy to enable a movement to realise the real goals of influencing political structures and effecting socio-economic change." It does not merely prepare the ground for political action; rather, it is political in itself. Movements are engaged in cultural politics, i.e. "the contestation and transformation of the meanings actors attribute to events, experiences, and perceptions, and the attempt to construct and reconstruct one's view of oneself and others."

Nash traces shifts in definitions of power, based on whether power is seen as exercised at the level of the state, or more diffused in society and a potentiality of all relationships (Nash, 2010). The shifts in social movement theory that she plots, which we have explored above, reflect these changing notions of power and politics. Social movements are not political, in this definition, only when they make claims on the state. Rather they are also political in their contestations over the values and meanings that play out in peoples' everyday lives.

This shift has implications for how we look at and understand movements, beyond how we understand the shifts in a movement's aims. For example, it also changes how we look at how social change is defined, how it is to come about, who the agents of change are, et cetera.

In the context of the AWM, interventions have taken both forms. These have been aimed at the state (for example, pressuring the state, through mass mobilisation, to enact a particular form of legislation) and also at wider cultural changes in the public in general (for example, through plays aimed at denouncing practices like sati or dowry).

They include ways in which feminists organise, to the extent that these too are seen as expressions of feminists' political outlooks (for example, organising in non-hierarchical collectives as a rejection of masculine notions of hierarchy).

In this study, then, we will examine the interplay of political interventions by the autonomous women's movement, and the ways in which women, gender and society have been understood by movement actors.

Beginning the Study, Entering the Field

The academic literature surrounding the AWM covers, fairly extensively, the conditions of the emergence of this movement, in the 1970s and 1980s. NGOisation in the 1990s is also discussed by some feminist scholars, from various perspectives. There are discussions of specific feminist campaigns (at national and local levels). There are also extensive discussions of feminist engagements with law.

However there are also significant lacunae in this literature. One is the relative sidelining of the autonomous movement outside of urban India, especially outside of the metros. Even within the urban sphere, there is little discussion of the processes of organisation formation and/or dissolution after the 1990s; and little discussion of how feminists have come to be part of this movement after its incipient phase in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

When I began my research, I had little knowledge of the AWM. My primary interest was in studying feminist thought and my previous research had been on feminist epistemology and the philosophy of science. Thus my first introduction to the movement came from what I read about it, and this influenced my view of the movement, and my research design, in certain specific ways.

First, my entire idea of the field came from this literature. Types of organisations, forms of mobilising, relations with other movements, major debates, significant events, campaigns, et cetera – my knowledge and understanding of all these dimensions of the AWM came from what I read. Conversely, I was largely ignorant of those dimensions of the AWM that did not figure in the literature. For example, I had little knowledge of how women came to be part of the AWM after the 1990s, or how collectives had changed over the decades (beyond the idea of NGOisation, also

derived from the literature). I was unaware of any groups which did not figure in the well-known books on the AWM.

Thus much time at the outset of fieldwork was spent in surprise over the dissonances between what I had read and my observations. For instance, I felt that an activist was someone who was part of a movement group like a collective; what sense could I make, then, of people who had been active in feminist campaigns but never been part of a collective? What sense could I make of respondents who described their association with collectives in terms other than membership? These were challenges that I could address through a deeper examination of the literature on social movement theory and social movements in general. But it also made me realise that I could not take what I read as a complete expression of the empirical reality.

Second, my research questions were shaped by what I had read. For example, my interest in mobilisation, of how people had come to be part of this movement in particular and come to participate in movements in general, derived largely from the castigation of young women as apolitical, less committed, and career- rather than movement-oriented. This characterisation made me wonder how women had come to be part of the AWM over time, and what had changed. Did anyone join a movement solely due to their political convictions? Were there other mediating factors that brought people into movements or kept them out? Chapter two engages with the question of mobilisation, by tracing activists' narratives from the 1970s to the 2010s.

Another example is that of NGOisation. This is seen as a significant process in the history of the AWM, and much of the literature that describes the contemporary movement engages with this phenomenon. The weight given to this phenomenon led to me examine it more closely, and look at the NGO form as part of my research. There was no comparable weight given to the relations between feminist organisations and, for instance, government bodies like the Ministry for Women and Child Development, or the National or State Commissions for Women. Or, to take another example, there was little discussion of the links between autonomous groups and other movements or movement organisations, or women's wings of political parties. Studying NGOs and collectives was therefore a much more obvious step for me.

Other ideas came to me not through literature as such but through a strange osmosis. One idea which made a strong impression on me was that of feminists and the autonomous women's movement having once had a universal notion of womanhood that did not recognise differences. I recall this idea being shared in seminars and classrooms; it was, I recall, very much in the air at the time I commenced my research. This is an instance, however, of a popular notion for which I could not find any definite proof. Everything I read, heard and observed led me to the conclusion that while differences had not always been addressed in a productive manner, and had been downplayed, it was rare for them to not be recognised by feminists at all. Therefore I ultimately rejected the pithy and simplistic idea of universal notions of womanhood. Chapter five engages with the question of difference and womanhood in the AWM.

One lasting impact is on the title of the thesis itself. The title refers to 'select autonomous women's movements in India'. This reflects two factors: one is the impossibility of doing rigorous ethnographic work across the country, for reasons of scale. The second is the idea that there isn't/hasn't been a single autonomous women's movement, but multiple movements. What inspires this second idea? Firstly it corresponds to the stress, in academic spaces, on particularity and diversity rather than universality and commonality: the idea that phenomena are more unlike than alike, and that our intellectual endeavours ought to explore contingency and difference rather than sameness. This was definitely a view that had a great deal of currency at the time I commenced my research, and was bolstered for me by accounts like that of Raka Ray in *Fields of Protest*, which identified differences in autonomous groups in the cities of Kolkata and Mumbai. Ray engages with the manner which the different influences in these two cities have caused autonomous feminist groups to develop in different ways, and have different spaces within the city's politics.

As my research proceeded, however, I realised that my questions were unearthing commonalities in autonomous groupings in different places. There were similar trends across the field sites I visited, and respondents often referred to similar phenomena as impacting the movement. This made me revise my earlier decision to look at my field as 'autonomous women's movements' and instead treat the movement as the unit of analysis. Additionally, I wondered if local variations could, themselves, indicate the presence of multiple or distinct movements. Definitions of social movements do not

tend to emphasise the sameness of the various constituents of that movement. For example, Mario Diani and Donatella della Porta define a social movement as

> …a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action:
>
> • are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents;
>
> • are linked by dense informal networks;
>
> • share a distinct collective identity (della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 21-22).

Or, to take another example, Snow, Soule and Kriesi describe social movements as follows:

> Although the various definitions of movements may differ in terms of what is emphasised or accented, most are based on three or more of the following axes: collective or joint action; change-oriented goals or claims; some extra- or non-institutional collective action; some degree of organisation; and some degree of temporal continuity (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004, p. 6).

While these definitions stress that movements are collective actors who are bound into a common network and who share a common identity, they do not indicate that the individuals and groups that make up a movement are identical to each other or are not diverse. Indeed a very (demographically or ideologically) diverse set of individuals and groups could be said to constitute a movement if they were bound together through informal networks and shared a collective identity, which members of the autonomous women's movement are and do. Thus over time, my understandings of this issue have changed and I now refer to the autonomous women's movement as *a* movement rather than as a set of movements.[1]

As I said above, when I began my research into this movement, I was familiar with it only through academic literature. I had never been an activist, though I considered myself a feminist. I had never been part of a feminist organisation, had never volunteered at a feminist NGO, or been part of a feminist campaign on any issue.

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[1] Scholars and activists too would occasionally tell me that within India, one ought to speak of multiple women's *movements* rather than a single movement. However, I noted that activists too would slip into using the term women's *movement*. For instance, at a conference on "Challenges to the Women's Movements in Contemporary India," speakers and audience members too would often use the singular term instead of the plural, despite the name of the conference itself. This conference was held in New Delhi in 2014.

Thus I had no first-hand knowledge or experience of this movement prior to my research.

As I began my research, I began meeting feminists, attending meetings, conferences and public events, and joined a feminist mailing list. After a while, I noted that I often felt like an outsider within feminist spaces. I didn't think of myself as an outsider, as I believed in the value of protest and movement politics and saw myself as a feminist. However, there were many small things that I noticed. Many of the books I was reading on the women's movement were written by 'insiders,' people who had been part of autonomous organisations, or had been part of movement spaces like conferences, campaigns and agitations. At the first women's movement conference I attended, I observed that when certain people (myself included) got up to speak, they were asked to introduce themselves, but many people were not. I didn't know who they were, but everyone else seemed to know them.

A general sense of alienation pervaded other spaces as well, like meetings and protest events. While everyone was warm and friendly towards me, they were all very obviously good friends with each other and had shared a number of experiences. While I was also open and friendly, I could sense that there was still some distance that was not being traversed. Some things were very small – for instance people I had met previously might not remember my name. People might ask me to introduce myself but not introduce themselves in turn. Someone might assume I knew a person I had actually never met. Sometimes people would recount an amusing incident that had occurred at a feminist movement conference years ago. These stories were funny, no doubt, but they were not shared memories for me as they were for those recounting them and for many of the audience. Such incidents again made me aware of my recent entry into this feminist space. These are small incidents, hardly worth mentioning individually, but they occurred with a frequency that made them hard to overlook, and contributed to me feeling like I was encroaching on a personal space.

At the time, I ascribed many of the problems that I was having in developing relationships, to my own shyness and difficulty in speaking to new people. I thought that to build networks one had to be outgoing and that I was unable to develop closeness to my subjects due to my own introversion and diffidence.

Yet I had different experiences with other groups: it was easier to feel part of the group. Again, they were formed of people who knew each other and had been active together for many years. People shared memories and talked about events and activities which they had undertaken together. But I didn't feel alienated.

It took some time for me to think of these experiences not as, or at least not only as, a reflection of my own personality and sociability. It took me time to ask whether there was something in the groups which made some more welcoming of newcomers, or at least made newcomers feel at home and comfortable more quickly. I began to think of groups in different ways – what were the concrete things people did which made one feel either part of the group or an outsider? After a while I could articulate some of these – whether and after how much time people added me to mailing lists, how much time they spent with me talking about feminist politics in general or about the group in particular, their attempts to get me to participate in their events, their willingness to include me in planning meetings and not just ask me to attend public events. I began to look for commonalities and differences between groups, wondering whether the nature of the group, its origin and composition et cetera had something to do with how effective it was in making new people feel included. At the same time, I had to avoid the temptation to generalise my own experience or rely on it too much. During interviews, I asked specific questions about how groups reached out to people, or asked individuals how they came to be part of feminist activism, taking care not to overlook variations in experiences. Chapter three engages, through activists' narratives, with patterns of mobilisation over time.

Being an outsider had an impact on my research in its later stages as well. For instance, I could make more sense of some of the criticisms that were made of the movement, in particular of its closedness to outsiders and its cliquishness. I don't know if this would have been as apparent to me if I began as an insider. My outsider status has helped form a bond with others who also feel like outsiders. For instance, there were occasions when I met people who also had a sense of not being part of the community of the AWM. I think their articulation of the sense of alienation made more sense to me because I had also experienced alienation in similar ways, and had felt like an outsider with regard to the AWM.

I recall one instance in particular. In 2015, a few Delhi-based activists organised an open meeting to discuss the Vogue video 'My Choice' and the film *India's Daughter*. This took place one afternoon in the Saheli office. There was a smattering of older activists, and many younger activists, students, NGO employees (of various ages and ranks) et cetera in attendance. There was a long discussion on the Vogue video, and those present shared, discussed and debated their opinions of it and the status of the feminist movement. Towards the end of the meeting, a young woman who had so far remained silent, spoke. She said, in so many words, that those of us present and anchoring the meeting, could not see our own class and caste. "Aapko apni class nahi dikhti, aapko apni caste nahi dikhti." The convenor of the meeting replied that feminist activists had tried their best to be open to others, to make themselves and whatever resources they had available to all. We have sheltered people in our houses, she said.

The exchange has stayed in my memory because of the deep sense I got that the young woman who made this criticism was also trying to express a sense of alienation from the activists in the room. She was, I felt, trying to communicate how outsiders might find these spaces alienating and unfriendly. In retrospect, I feel that I might have been able to share this insight with her as I had also experienced alienation, not in terms of class and caste, but as a newcomer to the field.

I have communicated my outsider status with respondents on a few occasions. I rarely described it as a sense of alienation. But I pointed out that as I had entered the AWM as a researcher, I was in a perpetual 'observer' mode which was difficult to relinquish. The idea of me being an outsider has been received differently by different respondents. But in a few cases, I feel that it might have helped to break down a barrier between myself and those who consider themselves to be outsiders as well. Thus it has allowed for some kind of empathy, though limited, to develop in some cases.

My experiences also made me challenge the idea that one's experiences of this movement could be explained solely by looking at the social locations of the actors concerned. Like many of my respondents, I am urban, English-educated, middle class, savarna. Therefore if I didn't fit in, if I was unable to become part of the group, it was because of something that went beyond these factors of demographic similarity or

similarity of social location. The importance of looking at group dynamics beyond the social locations of the actors became abundantly clear to me through my experiences.

What is the disadvantage of this outsider position? There are many elements of the working of collectives and NGOs that are small, subtle, intangible, and that due to my lack of exposure, it would not occur to me to ask about. There are many occasions for observation and deeper empathy and understanding that I have doubtless lost, due to not being a part of the group. The discussions and decisions that take place in informal meetings, between friends, over meals and tea, after meetings et cetera, are lost to me, as are shared definitions, experiences et cetera.

In her book *Queer Activism in India*, author Naisargi Dave writes that she describes most of the activists in her field as friends (Dave, 2012, p. 26). This friendship has been an important aspect of her research:

> It is through my experiences of friendship and intimacy that I came to see
> things about queer activism that I am certain I would not have seen had I
> only attended meetings and conducted interviews (Dave, 2012, p. 26).

The book itself is replete with examples of the informal relations between Dave and the activists in her field: descriptions of shared auto rides, meals, of hanging around in activists' apartments. Dave has drawn heavily on these sorts of interactions in her writing:

> While oral histories and interviews were certainly productive and
> strengthened my relationships with people…the bulk of my material and
> the spirit of this book emerge from the everyday, unscheduled interactions
> that define the ethnographic endeavour (Dave, 2012, p. 25).

Dave's account of her relationship with the activists in her field is very different from my own. Unlike her, I have relied on observation alongside meetings and interviews, and my knowledge of the everyday of AWM has been gleaned through these sources. Yet as the preceding paragraphs show, the position of being an outsider in one's field has certain advantages as well.

Thus my research has been shaped, in its initial phases, by two important factors: one, my introduction to the field through the literature; and two, my status as an outsider.

The AWM consists today of individuals and organisations. The latter are of varying degrees of informality and formality of membership. What links these individuals and organisations together are the relationships that exist between them: of shared histories, presents, and futures.

How have I decided what is relevant to be included in the field? As we will see in chapter two, definitions of autonomy have changed over time. Autonomy has largely been seen in terms of what organisations are autonomous from, i.e. from whose interference and influence they are free.

For some, it also has a historical dimension, referring to the groups that emerged in the 1970s, under unique conditions that are impossible to replicate. Others, however, place themselves within this movement, despite not having been part of its emergent phase. This latter stand is more common. Indeed, the former view was only expressed by one respondent during the course of my research.

This brings us to an important part of a movement's self-definition. As Mario Diani and Donatella della Porta state, being part of a movement involves identifying oneself as part of an 'us'. Diani and della Porta define movements as, amongst other things, sharing a collective identity. For them, movement membership is ultimately a matter of "mutual recognition between actors (della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 21-22)." Thus there are groups that may fulfil the criteria by which autonomous groups define themselves, but still not consider themselves part of the AWM. My research has included those groups that define themselves as part of the AWM.

Objectives of the Research

The broad objective of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the autonomous women's movement as it is situated today. The research objectives encompass the following:

Understanding the trajectory of the autonomous women's movement: the circumstances of its emergence, and how it has evolved to the present day. This relates to the history of the movement: its major characteristics over time. It also deals with significant events and processes (for example, NGOisation) or significant aspects of its history (for example, its relationship with the left). It also relates to the question of how feminists have mobilised over time.

Understanding the interplay of feminist thought and action: how one impacts the other, including in ways that are unintended.

Understanding the various dimensions of 'autonomy': this primarily means understanding how autonomy has come to be defined within the autonomous women's movement. Autonomy was originally seen as freedom from certain external influences, and therefore freedom from having to subscribe to a particular ideology, from being dependent upon external bodies for funds, and of necessarily having a hierarchical organisational structure. It was seen as the basis of the development of a feminist politics. Are these still the parameters from which feminists need to be autonomous, to be able to develop their own politics? What assessments do feminists make of the contribution of autonomy as an organising principle, to feminist politics? Is autonomy still understood in the manner in which it has been in the past? Have any shortcomings of autonomy been identified? What are the changing notions of autonomy, and the changing notions of the implications of autonomy for organisations?

Examining the links between how feminists have theorised the social world, and the links between their understandings and their forms of politics. The latter term includes both feminists' interventions, and how they have organised themselves (this too being seen as an expression of the movement's politics). However, another interesting dimension of this problem is to understand how the meanings of 'politics' and 'political' themselves have changed. Do 'doing politics' and 'being political' have the same meaning that they had at the inception of this movement? If not, how have these meanings changed?

Methodology

This study takes the form of an ethnography of the AWM. It studies the movement largely from the perspective of its current and former activists, persons who are or have been involved in the movement in various capacities. The various themes that this thesis takes up (which are elaborated upon below) are understood largely from the perspective of the actors in the field.

As a methodology, ethnography involves a detailed understanding of a social phenomenon from the point of view of the actors involved: "it is the intense meaning

of social life from the everyday perspective of group members that is sought (Hobbs, 2006, p. 101)." This approach seeks to understand "how people give meaning to their experiences (Bray, 2008, p. 300)."

In this study, I have examined various aspects of the AWM according to the meanings that actors attach to them. For example, we will look in the following chapters at the meanings that movement actors attach to autonomous women's groups or collectives, and the ways in which these meanings differ for different groups of women. For some, the collective space may be welcoming and friendly, while for others, it may be intimidating. These meanings have consequences for activists' participation in movement spaces. Similarly, collectives and NGOs as two popular spaces of movement participation are understood in terms of activists' own desires, ambitions, and views of what it means to be active. Aside from these, we also look at shifts in the shifts in the meanings of feminism and politics themselves: what are the various meanings these terms have had over time?

A note on method would be appropriate here. To quote Mark-Anthony Falzon, "Conventionally, ethnography has involved the idea – if not necessarily the practice – of a relatively long term (typically several months upwards) stay in a field site of choice (Falzon, 2009, p. 1)." However, various other ways of doing ethnography have emerged.

One of the major changes has been in the field site of an ethnographic study. Initially, ethnographic studies were carried out in a single, delimited field site, one which was culturally dissimilar to the ethnographer's own cultural background. Over time, the field has come to include not just a single site but multiple sites, giving rise to multi-sited ethnography. It has come to include virtual space in the case of ethnographies of the digital sphere. It has also shifted from the society 'out there' to the ethnographer themselves, as in the case of autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 2006). Thus, "today's ethnographies are often multi-sited and multi-media, taking place in both physical and virtual spaces (Smartt Gullion, 2016)."

According to Zoe Bray, the "main data-gathering techniques of ethnographic research [are] participant observation and open-ended, discursive and semidirected interviews (Bray, 2008, p. 298)." My research has relied more heavily on the latter (along with group discussions) than the former. This has been for various reasons. Firstly, I sought

data on specific events and processes that were part of the AWM's history. Secondly, as an outsider to my field, certain movement spaces were not open to me and collecting information required asking specific questions in an interview setting. Thirdly, some of my respondents were not part of collective action, and thus could only be approached as individuals, for interviews. However, I have also relied on observation of protest events, meetings, and other public events of various kinds. (This aspect of the research methodology is discussed in more detail below.)

At times, however, the thesis also attempts historical reconstructions and looks for patterns in the development of an aspect of the AWM over time. The prime example of this is the recounting of mobilisation, in chapter three. Though it includes and is informed by actors' views on mobilisation, it is an attempt to historically reconstruct patterns of mobilisation. While it also contains a section on activists' views on mobilisation (in particular, mobilisation of young women to the AWM), this forms only a small part of the chapter, the bulk of which traces trends in mobilisation over time.

I have traced mobilisation using activists' recollections and narratives in part because of the paucity of other data on this subject. Much of the published material engages with the reduced numbers of women at protests and in autonomous collectives. Much of this literature has been written in the 2000s. (One exception to this trend, published in 1988, is cited in chapter three). Thus activists' narratives were needed to fill in the gaps, to describe the process of mobilisation more fully, and to draw out the various factors which contributed to both mobilisation and demobilisation.

Activists' narratives and recollections have also been used to flesh out some aspects of movement history which are somewhat sparsely documented in the literature: for example, the impact of economic liberalisation on activists themselves.

Despite the feelings of alienation which I recounted above, I also recognise that I have been a participant in the field. Whether it has been through participation in demonstrations and protest events, planning meetings for events like the Annual Women's Day programme in Delhi, through my presence in the regular meetings held by different organisations (like for example, Pinjra Tod in Delhi or Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai), or women's movement conventions, I have participated in movement activity. This participation too has informed my work,

giving me the opportunity to develop many insights. Thus in some way I have been both an insider and outsider with regard to my field. My 'insider status' was revealed to me most sharply over the question of whether to censor the more controversial things my respondents said in their interviews. In many cases I found myself selecting those quotes that were not obviously inflammatory. While this can also be explained by the ethical imperative to not get others in trouble in the course of my research, it is difficult to know when I have gone beyond the call of duty in this regard.

My observations of feminist events like meetings, demonstrations, conventions et cetera began in 2012, when I attended a women's movement convention in Hyderabad. Being based in Delhi and the NCR, the bulk of my observations of such events has been in Delhi, starting with the mass of protest events that took place after the Jyoti Pandey rape case in December of 2012.

However I have been fortunate to attend feminist meetings in the cities of Hyderabad and Mumbai, where I conducted fieldwork sessions. I visited Hyderabad in April-May 2015 and Mumbai in April-May 2016, at which time I also conducted interviews of activists at these two locations. Of course, it is difficult to anticipate protest events and demonstrations since these are often planned at short notice. Nonetheless, my visits to both cities coincided with public protests: a counter-protest against a men's rights group's programme on section 498a in Hyderabad, and a demonstration on the rape and murder of the Kerala-based law student Jisha, in Mumbai.

My research also drew on documents from the autonomous women's movement. These included pamphlets, newsletters, magazines, Facebook pages, organisation manifestos, memoires, and posters. Few of these are directly cited in this thesis, but they have all contributed to the development of my background knowledge of this movement.

This thesis is based primarily on interview data from respondents from the field. Groups were selected through a mix of snowball sampling and the selection of key informants. By 'key informants' I mean those respondents who are asked to participate in the research due to their "specific expertise (della Porta, 2014, p. 262)." In the context of this project, these included activists who had been part of specific groups that were significant parts of the AWM (for example, Saheli in Delhi or the Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai). They also included scholars who

have written or otherwise commented on the AWM at various points in its history. Some informants were selected on the basis of their former or current membership of groups that have a significant place in the AWM. For example, the Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad is often mentioned as the first autonomous group to emerge in the country. Other organisations like Saheli in Delhi and Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai are significant because of their longevity, tenacity, and the depth of their contribution to the AWM. Feminists who have been part of the autonomous women's movement, or have made significant scholarly contributions to it, were also included.

I should note that I was occasionally unable to speak to some activists I would have liked to include amongst my key informants, most commonly as they declined to be interviewed. Thus I was able to speak to many older activists from Mumbai but not Delhi, and younger activists and women working in NGOs from Delhi rather than Mumbai.

Often respondents would suggest other names of people they thought I ought to meet: this formed the snowball sampling that I mention above. As della Porta states, snowball sampling involves "requesting new potential contacts from people already interviewed (della Porta, 2014, p. 272)." (The snowball sampling method also sometimes yielded names of collectives rather than individual feminists.) A more randomised form of sampling was not possible, as many collectives did not have a history of highlighting individual's names. Thus while the collective's name might be well-known, individuals did not often come to be known in the same manner. Individuals who were not part of well-known collectives but had been part of the autonomous movement in other ways, would not have been included amongst my respondents had I only sought data amongst the established feminist organisations.

The thesis therefore derives from two group discussions (with the collectives Pinjra Tod and Saheli in Delhi) and individual interviews with twenty-eight activists. In some cases, the interview transcript was shared with the concerned respondent, who then decided upon the use of their name. In other cases, respondents were shown the specific quotes from their interview, which figure in the thesis, for their approval and to allow them to decide between the use of their names or pseudonyms. Where requested by the respondents, pseudonyms have been used in place of their names.

In addition to the interviews and group discussions I conducted for this research, I also accessed interviews archived at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, and the archives of the Indian Association for Women's Studies, at the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University Juhu Campus, Mumbai. The former has a set of interviews of women in left and progressive movements; the latter has a set of interviews with women who have been part of women's activism from the 1970s. Both archives provided a rich source of data on the histories of feminist and other activism in India. I regret that as I only speak, read and write Hindi and English, I was unable to access interviews conducted in other languages.

The interviews I conducted were based on a semi-structured format. This seemed the most appropriate, based on the respondents' varied backgrounds. Some were young activists who had been part of feminist politics for a few years, while other had been active for decades, in fact since the inception of this movement. Thus it was appropriate to introduce some flexibility into the interview process. The interview grid covered specific themes: the respondents' introduction to and involvement with politics of any kind; their introduction to feminist politics; feminist politics and the left; contemporary feminist discourse on caste and sexuality; NGOisation and the links between NGOs and collectives.

Interviews were conducted in Hindi and English. The direct quotes which have been used in the thesis have been translated into English by me. In translating the quotes from Hindi to English, I tried to stick closer to the meanings of statements and sentences than to literal translations. This allows meanings to be conveyed more accurately than literal translations. While it has been necessary for reasons of space and clarity to edit the quotes, I have tried as far as possible to maintain the language of the original speaker. This has meant retaining conversational forms of speech, which are often not entirely grammatical, as speakers interrupt themselves, switch from one language to another, or speak in fragments of sentences. I have been reluctant to edit these excerpts too heavily, as I felt it would prevent the speakers' voices from coming through. It was interesting for me to note that respondents would often point to these grammatical errors when I showed them the relevant quotes. However, they have been willing to let them remain as they were, as the meanings of what they said were not obstructed or obscured by the grammar.

Organisation of Chapters

Chapter two traces the history of the autonomous women's movement from the 1970s till the present. The chapter begins with a brief description of the conditions which gave rise to autonomous feminist politics in the 1970s. Women were participating in movements of various kinds; simultaneously, they were experiencing discrimination, sexism and misogyny of various kinds and in various spheres, even in movements of which they were a part. The chapter examines how women came together to form their own networks and groups, and examines some of the campaigns of the fledgling movement. The relationship of the incipient movement with the left is also briefly discussed. The autonomous movement's organisation through collectives is also described. The chapter then goes on to examine the conditions, pragmatic and theoretical, which initiated the movement's institutionalisation. Shifts and changes within the movement after the 1990s are also examined. The chapter closes with a look at the contemporary movement, with brief discussions of the impact of social media on contemporary activism, and the issues being raised at the present moment.

Chapter three, on mobilisation, examines how young activists have come to join autonomous groups or be part of the autonomous movement more generally. Using activists' narratives, the chapter plots the ways in which women came to know of and be part of the autonomous movement since the 1970s, and the ways in which this has changed in the recent decades. Various trends and patterns in mobilisation are identified; the chapter examines theories of mobilisation to social movements to explain these trends in mobilisation to the AWM. In particular it engages with the concept of mobilising structures.

Chapter four engages with NGOs and collectives as significant organisation forms in women's movement spaces. We first examine collectives and NGOs individually as loci of feminist politics, using activists' narratives to understand how conducive they are for such politics. We then turn to the process of NGOisation: in particular, the impact that it has had on non-funded feminist politics. The chapter examines the relationship that autonomous groups have with funded organisations, and the forms of interdependence that exist between them.

Chapter five engages with the relationship between feminist thought and practice. It engages specifically with how the idea of difference and of the plurality of women's

experience has been incorporated within feminist practice. It traces this history both through the literature on the subject, and also though feminists' narratives and recollections of different phases of autonomous politics. The last section of the chapter deals with one specific definition of feminist politics that has emerged in recent times: of feminism as perspective. It engages with the shift in focus of feminist politics from intervention to a politics of refinement of one's powers of interpretation and the sophistication of one's feminist perspective.

A brief appendix engages with one particular aspect of the institutionalisation of feminism – the relatively little attention that has been paid to institutionalisation through the formation of women's and gender studies centres in the country. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage deeply with this question; however, this is an interesting dimension of institutionalisation that would merit further examination.

It should be noted that there is no stand-alone chapter in the thesis that deals solely with a review of literature. Rather the relevant literature is incorporated into the corresponding chapter. This provides a way for us to engage more deeply with the literature and the corresponding empirical data together.

In the next chapter, we will examine the history of the AWM, and its development from the time of its emergence to the present.

Chapter Two

The Autonomous Women's Movement: A History

The birth of the autonomous women's movement is often traced to the decade of the 1970s, and linked to two events – the publication of the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, titled *Towards Equality*, and the Mathura rape case (the former bringing the deteriorating condition of Indian women to public notice, and the second providing the impetus for feminist mobilising). Yet women's organising had preceded both these events.

Meera Velayudhan places women's activism in the 1970s in the context of the economic and political crisis of the state. Economic crises manifested in rising prices, unemployment, high taxation and the "increasing expenditure on non-development sectors like the military, police and bureaucracy (Velayudhan, 1985, p. 57)." Leslie Calman points to the economic consequences of the Bangladesh war in 1971 and droughts in 1971-72, which resulted in reduced food production. Additionally, increased oil prices brought about "severe inflation, as industrial recession, growing unemployment, and a slowed economic growth rate (Calman, 1992, p. 25)." The agricultural sector also suffered, with "gains from government-sponsored development projects devolving largely…to the dominant landowning castes (Calman, 1992, p. 25)." Women's labour force participation was declining and women in agriculture were increasingly being pushed into agricultural labour through a process of proletarianisation (Velayudhan, 1985, p. 58).

Calman links the economic crisis to a political crisis as well – the failure of the Congress government, and Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, to fulfil populist election promises and implement development measures. Anti-government movements, beginning with those in Gujarat and Bihar, particularly the JP movement, "signified a breakdown in the consensus that government was legitimate, and an expanded willingness to engage in extra-legal, including violent, political behaviour (Calman, 1992, p. 27)."

For Gail Omvedt, the women's movement was amongst the 'new social movements' that developed in the 1970s, along with anti-caste, peasant, tribal, and environmental movements (Omvedt, 1993). Omvedt notes certain similarities between the post-independence Congress Party and the communists: both subscribed to a "modified version of a state-socialist model of development" which prioritised industrialisation, planning, and a large public sector, and entailed a large centralised state and bureaucracy. This model equated development with industrialisation and shared a vision of the agricultural sector as "backward," and indeed peasants and women as also backward, the latter due to their association with the "isolated, low-technology, and non-'value-producing' domestic labour of the home." For Omvedt, the debates between "bourgeois liberals and technocratic Marxists" were of "who should spearhead or manage this development." This was based on the assumption that the "tradition-bound, caste-ridden" peasantry had to be controlled, and the surplus extracted from it "centralised in the hands of the bureaucracy for investment in industry and agriculture." Omvedt identifies the urban elite as male, and "urban interests" as "overwhelmingly Brahman and Bania by caste," while the rural elite was drawn from upper non-Brahman castes (Omvedt, 1993, pp. 28-32).

The new social movements also challenged Marxism. Women, Dalits, and peasants were groups "left unconceptualised by a preoccupation with 'private property' and wage labour." For Omvedt, these groups defined their oppression, its basis, and how to challenge it, in ways related to but different from Marxist terms; they also distanced themselves from the "vanguardship of the working class and its parties (Omvedt, 1993, p. xv)."

Rajni Kothari too sees 'non-party political formations,' as he terms them, as a redefinition of politics, in two ways. Firstly, they opened up "alternate political spaces" and did not operate within older government and party frameworks (though they still operated within the ambit of the state). Second, they entailed a redefinition of the "content" of politics, with issues of health, education, forest rights, women's rights et cetera being "defined as political and provid[ing] arenas of struggle." Kothari too points to the failure of the state to "deliver the goods" and people's disillusionment with parties, whose roles and functions such non-party political formations were taking on (Kothari, 1984).

Kothari sees the rise of such formations as the result of a crisis of all parts of the political system, and also of the press and judiciary – the crisis of a coercive, extractive state, whose economic exploitation benefitted a growing middle class and bureaucracy, and a government which could not meet people's expectations. It was also a crisis of theory – not just of Marxism (which Omvedt highlights) but also of the liberal faith in the redistributive power of the market, and of the faith in the welfare state, which could not ensure equity in the absence of high growth rates and a large state surplus (Kothari, 1984).

Writing about women's political participation, Vibhuti Patel states that in the 1960s, the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the Socialist Party "showed an interest in organising women." Women had participated in the Naxalbari, JP, Nav Nirman, and Chipko movements, amongst others (Patel, 1985, pp. 7-14).

Women's activism in the 1970s was extensive and varied. Women workers participated in and led agitations: coir and cashew workers in Kerala, bidi workers in Andhra, and agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu organised around issues such as increased wages, enhancement of DA, fixed working hours, and rights to land. Women participated in the anti-price rise agitations and movements in Goa, Kerala and Maharashtra, and the JP and railway workers' movements in Bihar and across the country. The Mahangai Pratikar Samyukta Samiti (United Women's Anti-Price Rise Committee) came into being in 1972 in Bombay, evolving new and popular ways of conducting agitations. The campaign succeeded in increasing the amount of kerosene available through ration shops and cleaning adulterated food items. In Kerala in 1976, two young women committed suicide after being raped in a police station by policemen. Following a state-wide dharna at police stations, the state Home Minister announced that women would not be arrested after 5 p.m. or held in a police station overnight. Women workers raised the issues of wife-beating and alcoholism on various occasions, in different parts of the country (Velayudhan, 1985).

The Shramik Sangathana was formed in 1972. The Shahada movement, of which this was part, was a "tribal Bhil landless labourers' movement." Women members of this movement were the most militant, while convincing labourers to join, demonstrating and sloganeering, or negotiating their demands. They raised issues of wife-beating

and alcoholism; in one instance, getting up spontaneously from a meeting and marching to a village to break the pots of liquor in a shop, then gheraoing the police inspector (Kumar, 1993, pp. 99-100).

Women's organisations were also being formed. By 1974, both the Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) had formed working women's organisations: the Shramik Mahila Parishad and Shramik Mahila Sabha respectively. The interest in women's issues was manifest by other organisations as well. The Maharashtra-based Lal Nishan Party brought out a special issue on women's liberation in 1973 (Omvedt, 1980, p. 57). The Magowa group published a special issue of their magazine, on women's liberation, covering not just middle class women but also tribal women.

Women's Experiences and the Need for a Separate Women's Movement

Throughout the 1970s, we find women questioning their positions in society – whether in their families, in educational institutes, or in movements. K. Lalita, writing of her contemporaries in Osmania University in Hyderabad in the early 1970s, talks of the circumscribed independence accorded to young women: though women were expected to achieve good marks and prepare for careers, they were expected to be home promptly after classes and explain themselves if they were late. Women were still socialised to be wives and mothers (Lalita, 1988). Other women articulated similar issues: in a presentation at an Indian Association of Women's Studies conference in 1986, women students from Delhi University gave an account of problems faced by their contemporaries, especially lower-middle-class women students, including the pressure to be home on time and to do housework (IAWS, 1986, p. 7). Others talk of the witnessing domestic violence or other forms of patriarchy within their or others' households. Vimala, in Hyderabad, describes the liberal atmosphere in her house in the early 1970s: her father, who had been an activist in the Telangana Armed Struggle, never told his daughters what to do or prevented them from meeting and talking to boys, and told his sons not to interfere in their sister's affairs. Nonetheless her mother did all the housework, and was dominated over by her husband; Vimala reports that her father had the final word in the house. Slowly, she says, she realised that the atmosphere in the house was not democratic and that though invisible, "patriarchal structures [were] there." A friend's

mother was beaten by her husband; yet when asked, she said she had sustained injuries because she fell down. Through these observations, she slowly realised that men and women are not equal in society.[1]

Women in various social movements, who were working in mixed groups, were also beginning to sense the patriarchy in these groups. This was manifest in the division of labour between male and female activists, and in their interpersonal relations. Pamela Philipose writes of her experience in a left group in Bombay during the emergency:

> There were the neat, unquestioned divisions along gender lines that marked the way we functioned as a group. While the 'intellectuals' – invariably male – would effortlessly inhabit a superior realm and discuss weighty matters amongst themselves, we, – invariably female – would cook khichadi for rough-and-ready meals and beseech those who intellectually laboured for us to eat before the rice became inedible lumps of cold putty. While the intellectuals – invariably male – wrote the main pieces for the [group's] bulletin, we – invariably female – would selflessly breathe in the fumes of correction fluid and wear our fingers down typing into stencils the never-ending pages of handwritten paper handed over to us (Philipose, 2011, pp. 171-172).

Sujatha Gothoskar recalls the patriarchy within the left organisation and trade union of which she was a member. Initially, she says, women members did not feel discriminated against because they were "pampered." Yet she and her friends gradually "began to feel uneasy about the relationships in the group," the way in which some male members treated some female members "either with disdain or with indignity." Men would admonish women for their sexual repression. It is when women friends started talking to each other that they realised that they had similar or even identical experiences. It is then, she says, that she realised that women shared something which was different from men of their castes or classes. By then the group had dissolved; many activists began to meet as women and subsequently began a socialist feminist network.[2]

Vibhuti Patel describes the autonomous women's movement as a movement for women's liberation; as "a revolt against women being treated as objects and not as

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[1] Vimala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[2] Sujata Gothoskar, interview by Neera Desai, 16 June 1991. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

individual human beings." After 1975, she writes, many small women's liberation groups came into being, and "many young women activists who were involved in various progressive, radical and leftist organisations started raising their voice against sexual discrimination in these organisations (Patel, 1988, p. 250)."

It is against this backdrop that women were coming together and forming their own organisations and collectives. The Mahila Samta Sainik Dal, a group of young Dalit women students of Milind College, Aurangabad, was formed in 1975 (Velayudhan, 1985). The Purogami Stree Sangathana and Stree Mukti Sangathana were formed in Pune and Bombay respectively, in 1975 (Kumar, 1993, p. 104).

Gail Omvedt writes her experience of India starting in 1973, of not just the "militancy of poor peasant women" but of how "many young educated women [were] stirring with new ideas."

> Themes of women's liberation from the movements in the West were beginning to reach India and…were interacting with the awareness already growing inside India that women were not only unjustly treated, but were also a huge potential force for change (Omvedt, 1980, p. 3).

Omvedt's book, titled *We Will Smash this Prison! Indian Women in Struggle*, is a rich, detailed, first person account of women's activism and organising in Maharashtra, covering tribal women, agricultural labourers, women in the left, college-going urban women and others. College-going women were having debates and discussions on their place in society, especially vis-a-vis men, and trying to give some shape to an idea of equality. The inevitability of marriage, dowry, housework, and the question of whether one's husband will allow one to work after marriage, came up in many women's accounts. Members of the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal, young Buddhist women, raised issues of caste atrocities and religion. Omvedt discusses the formation of the Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad, and describes an occasion where a POW activist visited Pune and met local activists, talking about the need to maintain a separate organisation for women: "Women's problems are special. ... There *is* a contradiction between men and women. *You have to accept that.* This division of labour that exists is unfair (Omvedt, 1980, pp. 54, italics in original)." Two weeks later, Omvedt writes, an organising meeting was

called in Pune, which involved not only radical students but also older women activists of various left and socialist formations.

The emergency is often credited with halting all movement activity. Certainly, the Anti-Price Rise Movement suffered, with its leadership in jail. Most activists of the Progressive Organisation of Women were jailed, and the original group did not survive the emergency. However some forms of women's organising continued; as Omvedt writes, "the women's movement [was] not automatically viewed as subversive," and while this was "humiliating" it was "useful for the purpose of carrying on activity (Omvedt, 1980, p. 147)." Thus a Women's Liberation Conference was held in Pune in 1975, with participation of rural and urban women. Indeed, Vina Mazumdar reported a conversation between herself and JP Naik, then Member-Secretary of the Indian Council for Social Science Research, just after the emergency was announced; he suggested that they focus on research on women, as he doubted both that the "political implications of such research [would] be immediately understood by the powers that be" and that they would "be permitted to do anything else (Mazumdar, quoted in Pappu, 2002, p. 224)."

The 1970s saw the formation of various women's groups and networks. Women came together to form the Socialist Women's Group in Bombay in 1977. Vimochana, in Bangalore, grew out of the Society for Informal Education and Development Studies, itself formed by activists who were "disillusioned with existing radical politics." Leslie Calman writes that some members of this collective were former members of the CPM, the CPI (ML), or Trotskyite groups. Vimochana, formed by various women from this collective, was formalised in 1979 (Calman, 1992, pp. 80-82). Stri Sangharsh, in Delhi, was formed in 1979 (Omvedt, 1993). Kiran Shaheen argues that the development of women's groups in Bihar was slower than that of other states, but nonetheless by the end of the 1970s a few such groups had been formed in the state, "in industrial towns such as Jamshedpur, Dhanbad and Patna." The Mahila Kalyan Samiti in Jamshedpur was "formed during communal riots in 1978" while that in Patna was formed some years previously. However she points to the difficulties these groups had in sustaining their work (Shaheen, 1988).

Groups were being formed, and also disbanded, for various reasons. Omvedt describes her pre-emergency interaction with the members of the Mahila Samta

Sainik Dal: though passionate on the subject of religion and caste, they "falter[ed]" when asked what the organisation planned to do: as a new organisation, they had "only vague ideas of action (Omvedt, 1980, p. 40)." She reports that the group was inactive by 1975 (Omvedt, 1980, p. 149). The Progressive Organisation of Women, too, was reconstituted after the emergency. The Socialist Women's Group functioned till 1979 (Singh, Patel, Gothoskar, Savara, & Banaji, 1985, p. 95). In Delhi, the women's group Samta came into existence in 1978, though it did not last very long; many of its members joined Stri Sangharsh which came into being in 1979 (Patel, 1985, pp. 20-21).

Many women's magazines, newsletters and journals began to be published in this decade. The Progressive Organisation of Women had published a magazine titled *Stree Vimukti* in 1975, but its publication was halted due to the emergency (Lalita, 1988, p. 64). The Socialist Women's Group published an English newsletter titled *Feminist Network* and a Hindi newsletter titled *Stri Sangharsh* (Patel, 2011, p. 240). Six issues of *Feminist Network* were published before the group decided to put their energies into the journal *Manushi*, instead (Patel, 1985, p. 20). The group also published a series titled *Feminist Contributions*, on women's participation in movements (like the Nav Nirman movement and the Anti-Price Rise struggle) and another titled *Feminist Reading*, which reproduced articles by Australian, British and French feminists.[3] In 1977, the Purogami Stree Sanghatana in Pune began publishing a bi-monthly Marathi magazine called *Bayja* (Patel, 1985, p. 18). The journal *Manushi* began to be published from Delhi in 1979, in both Hindi and English. Vibhuti Patel lists the following feminist magazines as being published by 1984: from Calcutta, *Sachetana*, *Sabala*, *Alhalya* and *Maitreyi* in Bangla; from Chhattisgarh, *Awaz Aurat Ki* in Hindi; *Narimukti* and *Anasuya* from Gujarat; and from Patna, *Apni Azadi ke Liye* and *Stree Sangharsh* (Patel, 1988, p. 255).

By the end of the decade, women activists were attempting to come together on various platforms. The United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference was held in Pune in October 1975, organised by the Lal Nishan Party and other women who were not members of political parties. Chayya Datar writes that six hundred women attended, mainly landless labourers from rural Maharashtra, and also working-class

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[3] Vibhuti Patel, interview by Ponni Arasu, 2011, IAWS archive, SNDT University, Juhu Campus, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

women from the city (Datar, 1988, p. 17); however Vibhuti Patel puts the number of attendees at eight hundred (Patel, 1985, p. 18). Gail Omvedt also counts middle-class working women and college-going women among the attendees (Omvedt, 1980, p. 148). Omvedt terms the themes of the discussion "familiar ones," including the right to work, the "burdens of housework," "the bondages of a traditional culture," rape and street harassment, alcoholism, and rising prices: familiar themes but expressed with a "new force" (Omvedt, 1980, p. 150). She describes the eagerness of all women to participate in the proceedings, and to speak not in small groups but to address the entire gathering:

> Perhaps they too, hearing from so many others the same kinds of agonies and experiences that they themselves have faced, sense the power of a newly stirring force in so many women gathered together (Omvedt, 1980, p. 150).

Omvedt describes the attendees feeling that they had seen "the beginning of something new, the mobilising force of women fighting their oppression which really is a force potentially capable of shaking the foundations of society and the state itself (Omvedt, 1980, p. 151)." Yet the promise of the event failed to materialise. Writing about it some years later, both Omvedt and Chayya Datar reference the inability to "come together and form a group (Datar, 1988, p. 17)," or to create an organisation of "trained and committed active workers who can maintain contacts with all the diverse women present" (Omvedt, 1980, p. 152). Even the correspondence committee which had been created as an "ongoing organisational medium" did not survive (Omvedt, 1980, p. 152).

In 1978, the Socialist Women's Group organised a workshop for women activists, which was attended by activists from Delhi, Kanpur, Gujarat and other cities. The attendees resolved to issue a journal from Delhi, a newsletter from Bombay, and to form a coordination committee of women's groups "to come out of isolation and learn from each other's experiences (Patel, 1985, p. 19)."

The Stree Mukti Samparka Samiti was formed in 1979: this was a coordination committee of women's organisations across Maharashtra. It organised a conference in February 1979, which was attended by three hundred women from various districts of the state. Attendees made a list of demands to be raised by women's organisations,

including the social recognition of housework and childcare, hostels for working women and students, crèches for the children of working women, drinking water, pressuring trade unions to take up women's issues, and MPs and MLAs to enact legislation that would benefit women, et cetera.

What is evident from this account is that women's activism, not just around women's issues, but organised and led by women, was gaining ground in various parts of the country. Women were making attempts to reach out to one another, through conferences and workshops, and through the publication and circulation of literature, in the form of magazines, newsletters, the reproduction of feminist texts, and so on.

Women and the Left

A number of the women who became part of autonomous groups in the 1970s and 1980s did, as we saw above, have prior experience of being part of left politics. The term 'left' brings to mind the communist parties that have existed in India for several decades. However women's descriptions of the political formations they were part of in the 1970s and 1980s bring to the fore a variety of organisational forms.

The term 'left' encompasses many different types of organisations, from national parliamentary parties to small, localised study and discussion groups. Praful Bidwai describes the left as having once been a "rainbow comprising breathtakingly different currents (Bidwai, 2015, p. vii)," though having shrunk over the years. He lists various types of formations as being part of the left, including communist parties, socialist groups, the Republican Party of India, and Maoist and Marxist-Leninist parties, amongst others. Bidwai states that some of these forms and currents have shrunk over time (for example the Peasants and Workers Party and the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha).

Bidwai lists non-party left organisations like civil society organisations and people's movements within the ambit of the left. Some of the organisations he includes are the New Socialist Initiative, the National Alliance of People's Movements, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, the National Fishworkers' Forum, et cetera (Bidwai, 2015, p. viii).

It may be noted that Bidwai does not indicate ideological or organisational grounds on which he defines a group as part of the left. However there are parallels between the

kinds of groups that Bidwai includes within the left, and the types of organisations that women refer to when they speak of the left, especially when they describe the left groups that they knew or were a part of during the 1970s and 1980s. Women describe political parties, and also independent left groups, student groups and other progressive politics.

For example, activists such as Sujata Gothoskar were part of Magowa in Maharashtra.[4] Magowa was formed in 1972 by students from Mumbai, who had been associated with Baba Amte and the Shahada Shramik Sangathana (Samant, 2016, p. 426). Aruna Burte too came to know of Magowa through her friends, who knew some of the group's activists. She describes Magowa as a reading and discussion group; however the group also went on to organise workers in urban and rural Maharashtra.[5] Sandhya Gokhale describes being part of a student discussion group in while pursuing her degree at IIT in Bombay, a group through which she came to know of the trade union politics in the city. After graduating, she worked with the Sarva Shramik Sangh, the trade union of the Lal Nishan Party. At the time of the formation of the Forum Against Rape in Mumbai, she was part of a small group called the Bolshevik Leninist Group.[6]

Vibhuti Patel describes becoming part of a study group called the Study and Struggle Alliance in Baroda. She was also active within the Vadodara Kamgar Union, a union of textile workers formed by herself and her associates. On arriving in Mumbai in 1977, she became part of civil and democratic rights groups like the APDR and CPDR.[7]

K. Lalita describes her introduction to activism through various sources. Her college teachers were a significant influence; she recalls her Political Science teacher, Rama Melkote, "teaching Marxist political thought in a way that made sense to [her]… That way of analysing life, society, politics, was very attractive." Students organised Marxist study circles, involving teachers in their discussions, reading Marxist classics and inviting speakers to address them. The burgeoning student movement, she says,

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[4] Sujata Gothoskar, interviewed by Neera Desai, 1991. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.
[5] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[6] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[7] Vibhuti Patel, interviewed by Ponni Arasu, 2011. IAWS archive, SNDT University Juhu Campus, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

soon came to the attention of Marxist-Leninist parties in Hyderabad. Some students went on to formally join these parties. Others, like herself, did not take formal membership, but worked closely with ML parties as activists.[8]

Ammu Abraham worked to organise hotel employees in Bangalore, and prior to that, worked with the residents of a slum to get a municipal water connection. She was simultaneously associated with a Marxist group, whose 15-20 members were mostly students and teachers in various academic institutes in the city. This group was oriented towards studying Marxist texts; she says that there was little clarity as to what concrete activities the group was moving towards.[9]

Activists thus recall a mix of organisation forms, from small, informal reading and study groups to formal parliamentary parties. Their recollections also indicate the fluidity of these organisations, as they grew or shrank, took up new activities or withdrew from them, sustained themselves over time or broke apart.

What made a group or individual a part of the left? There may not be any single criterion, but activists refer to groups and individuals who were interested in understanding Marxist thought and/or being part of communist politics (or politics that foregrounded class) or workers' issues.

Being part of the left thus entailed being part of communist politics in a variety of ways. Women who had been part of or were otherwise exposed to this form of politics, then carried some of its features into autonomous feminist politics, despite their disavowal of left party structures. This carrying forward of left politics could be through informal channels. For example, Achala, a feminist activist from Hyderabad who was active in the Stree Shakti Sanghathana, states:

> I was not a party member, but I was definitely very close to the left. …
> And so you definitely imbibed the whole framework of the left's perspectives on organising, on understanding social hierarchies, understanding class, understanding a whole range of questions.[10]

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[8] K. Lalita, interviewed by CS Lakshmi, 2006. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.
[9] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[10] Achala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

Vasantha Kannabiran points out that due to the backgrounds of activists, Stree Shakti Sanghatana's self-image was formed with reference to the left. She writes that

> When women with rightist assumptions came to the group in its early stages, we were troubled not only about their disruptive influence on the group but also about the image we would present to the public - our public being, of course, the left (Vasantha Kannabiran, 1986, p. 602).

Personal relationships were one medium through which connections between the left and women's groups were maintained. Lalita notes the links between the activists of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana and other left activists and sympathisers in Hyderabad.

> Whatever arguments, discussions we were having in the groups, were being taken back into the households, arguing, debating with our own spouses, so there was that kind thing also coming back. And since [one member's husband] was very involved in the left movement, that point of view got very much placed into our discussions...[11]

These continued connections with the left then impacted the group's own actions:

> How do we understand this question of violence and do we raise in the context of the left movements itself. Because even within the left groups, suppose there were incidents of death or violence on women activists within the party. Do we take up those issues or not. So these were constantly issues that we grappled with. Suppose there is a harassment complaint coming from one of the wives of a comrade. So people would say "now don't focus on that. Talk to her, support her, but not make an antagonistic kind of thing" … So do we take it ahead or not, was a major kind of tension within the group. All the outside politics and issues were impinging on our understanding, of course we held our own, quite a lot of times.[12]

Sandhya Gokhale describes how the form of theorising learned in left politics continued to impact activists who became part of autonomous feminist politics.

> The way you think about issues, about power structures, the way you address any political issue, that's a Marxist framework. How do you take up issues. For example the bar dancers issue, some of the recommendations which came out, basically it meant how do you build

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[11] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[12] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

their collectives, how do you increase their bargaining power, things like that.[13]

She states that Marxism and feminism both gave different inputs into how feminists analysed issues:

> How do you look at structural oppression… Marx never spoke about gender, he basically spoke about class, so it is not per se Marxism. But the way you look at society, the way you analyse various issues in society, how do you counter it. Do you counter it by individual heroism or [by] building a structural response to a structural oppression. Because unless you challenge structures and you make sure that the structures are also controlled by people who are themselves marginalised, the structures themselves become oppressive… So that understanding I think we got from Marx.[14]

Employing the campaign strategies of left parties, however, had mixed results. Vasanth Kannabiran and Veena Shatrugna describe the experience of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana's campaign around working women's hostels in Hyderabad. The campaign, which involved two hostels, resulted in strikes by the residents. While one was successful (resulting in the resignation of the hostel administrator), the other was swiftly broken by the hostel authorities.

> While the demand for action did come from the hostelites, our own understanding of public action was so determined by our background, that the only course of action that occurred to us was that of a strike followed by a demonstration and statements to the press. …the struggle also brought about the realisation that certain forms of public action were not only alien to women but unsuited to the politics of the women's question as well (Vasanth Kannabiran & Shatrugna, 1986, p. 27).

Thus various features of the left politics that women activists had learned through their participation in other movements, carried forward to the newly-formed autonomous movements. One aspect of left politics which women rejected, however,

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[13] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[14] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

was the centralised, hierarchical organisation form, choosing instead to form small, non-hierarchical collectives.[15]

Organisational Form

Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah argue that autonomous groups adopted the collective as the most suitable organisational form for their purposes: a "leaderless collective with decision-making by consensus [and] a voluntary rotation of tasks (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 285)."

The term 'organisation' gives the sense of a group with a fixed membership or distinct identity. Yet this was not always the case. For example, the Forum Against Rape in Bombay grew out of a group of 22 women who had come together to discuss the open letter written by Lotika Sarkar, Vasudha Dhagamwar, Upendra Baxi and Raghunath Kelkar, critiquing the Supreme Court judgement in *Tukaram vs. State of Maharashtra* (i.e. the Mathura rape case). The group made a list of demands and undertook agitations, but continued functioning subsequently. It decided that rather than acquiring a specific organisational identity, it would "remain a 'Forum,' meaning a platform for several tendencies within the women's movement, where women could

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[15] Feminists have made several critiques of left parties' organisational structure. Nandita Gandhi writes that left parties base their "theory, practice and organisational structures...on the principles of democratic centralism expounded by Lenin." Parties tend to be hierarchical and rigid, with strict divisions of labour and no sharing of tasks (Gandhi, 1996, p. 16). Amrita Basu, discussing the Communist Party of India (Marxist), argues that democratic centralism has been a source of the party's deradicalisation as "deprived of significant influence or understanding of its inner workings, many of its lower-ranking cadres lack commitment" (Basu, 1992, p. 48). Chayya Datar does not use the term democratic centralism itself, but states that the various mass organisations that a party may develop are dominated by the party's political line, i.e. the party's own politics and positions. Thus women's organisations are created to further the party's own political goals (Datar, n.d., p. 5). Gandhi writes that parties' structures also reflect class, caste and gender differences. For example parties do not change locations or timings of meetings to suit women members; on the contrary, the leisure time created by women's domestic work frees men to participate in party activities (Gandhi, 1996, p. 16).
Nandita Gandhi writes that left parties "tend to view people in a condescending manner as objects of politicisation. The party thus loses the opportunity of absorbing people's experience and ideas. Like Dalits and tribals, women have not found a sympathetic ear within political, especially left, parties and have had to develop their movements outside of them (Gandhi, 1996, pp. 16-17)."
This last statement indicates that the women's question is neglected not only out of theoretical inadequacy, but also because of the culture of left parties themselves. Chayya Datar writes of how she could not explore her interest in feminism within the left group of which she was a member, as feminism was considered a diversion, and western feminism itself was considered bourgeois. Her interest in feminism would have called into question her commitment to class politics, feminism being seen as a bourgeois liberal project (Datar, n.d., p. 2).
According to Nandita Gandhi, women were less politically experienced and less confident than men, and therefore would lose out to men in debates and in any decision-making process that required voting (Gandhi, 1996, pp. 110-111). Additionally, "The high degree of theoretical and organisational discipline demands conformity, is intolerant of beginners and is more goal (than process) oriented....Lastly, the party is in the hands of the leadership elite which seldom allows dissent (Gandhi, 1996, p. 111)."

come together for dialogue (Datar, 1988, p. 22)." This had consequences for the group's further activities: it had not developed any "total perspective about women's oppression," and attempts to develop any such perspective were also stymied by the face that as a platform, it "could not have projected any position of its own (Datar, 1988, p. 23)."

Other women too point out that the being active with a group did not necessary imply being the group's member in a formal sense. Deepti Priya Mehrotra states that she worked closely with groups like Saheli, Manushi and Action India in Delhi, but adds that she was not formally a member.[16] Nirupama describes how she went to early meetings of Saheli in Delhi, and also the collective that launched the journal *Manushi*, which she says was initially a loose collective. These were initially "open space[s] within a whole." The sense of being an organisation came later: "I don't think it was quite like that in the first couple of years."[17] Vibhuti Patel recalls how she worked with various women's, human rights and new left groups, mobilising as well as attending programmes and rallies, translating speeches and documents from English into Gujarati and Hindi and contributing articles to journals et cetera, but was not in the inner circles of these groups.[18] Thus there were ways of contributing to groups, and being part of the movement, without formal membership.

Social Backgrounds of the Autonomous Women's Movement

Vibhuti Patel describes the members of autonomous groups as "young, educated women." Patel describes many young women who had acquired higher education women as being influenced by the literature and issues raised by the western women's movement (Patel, 1988, pp. 249-250).

Ilina Sen writes that

> The last two decades have seen a conscious articulation of women's issues among many urban and educated middle-class women. ... Many women from educated backgrounds have come together in groups in a realisation of their strength and potential. ... Structurally, such groups are close to the feminist groups of the west, and this has facilitated their integration into international feminist circuits. However, such groups have often remained

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[16] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi.
[17] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[18] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

circumstantially distant from the actual lives of poor women, even when they have made conscious efforts to articulate their needs (Sen I., 1990, p. 1-2).[19]

Leslie Calman also characterises the autonomous groups as consisting of middle-class and educated women activists. Calman makes a distinction between the 'rights wing' and the 'empowerment wing' of the Indian women's movement, placing the autonomous groups within the rights wing, along with mass organisations associated with opposition political parties (AIDWA and NFIW, associated with the CPI(M) and the CPI respectively) (Calman, 1992).

The rights wing, Calman writes, is largely urban. Members in the "collectively-operating autonomous organisations are generally middle-class, highly educated, and Hindu," and though there is a "small representation" from the Christian and Parsi communities, "only a very few are Muslim (Calman, 1992, p. 14)."

A caste composition of the women's movement is not mentioned. However, Gail Omvedt writes of an attempt at organising by the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal, formed by Dalit women students of Milind College, Aurangabad, in 1975. The MSSD's manifesto, unlike that of the Progressive Organisation of Women or the Socialist Women's Group, linked women's oppression to caste and religion, tracing inequality in Indian society to varna and jati divisions, and declaring that religion has enslaved women and Shudras. The group referred to itself as the heirs of Mahatma Phule, and paid tribute to the Buddha, Savitribai Phule, and Dr. BR Ambedkar as liberators of women (Mahila Samta Sainik Dal, 1980). However, Omvedt mentions that the group had fallen into inactivity by 1975. Describing the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference in Pune in September 1975, she notes the absence of "young educated Dalit girls (Omvedt, 1980, p. 149)."

The Concept of Autonomy

The autonomous women's groups, Vibhuti Patel writes, were not run by political parties, and were not "women's fronts of specific political parties." She characterises the AWM as being organised and led by women, prioritising women's issues, and not being subordinate to the requirements of any political organisation (Patel, 1988, pp.

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[19] This distinction – between middle-class and poor women – is also reflected in Samita Sen's essay, titled T*oward a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective*. She notes that the types of mobilisation of these two groups of women tend to be different (S. Sen, 2000).

249-250). Autonomous organising was important precisely because it allowed women to come together away from the controlling presence of men,[20] organise under their own leadership, and decide which issues to raise.

For Achala, autonomy allowed a distancing from the left in terms of ideas and understandings of issues.

> For us, autonomy was great… The rupture from the left initially was shocking, frightening, you felt orphaned because you didn't have these great leaders who would show you the path, but later it was so liberating. You could think through questions yourself, with the help of whatever people you valued. Autonomy was great, we didn't even think about it then but now in retrospect it was liberating. [We could] talk about women say in the hospitals and what's happening to them, without being reprimanded saying "diversionary tactics, you're wasting your time, these are not the real issues of the country." It was liberating. … The framework of analysis is what limited us in the left. It was very limited.[21]

Yet many women still saw themselves as part of the left and other radical movements. The Progressive Organisation of Women and the Socialist Women's Group defined women's oppression in class terms. The Socialist Women's Group drew on Marx to understand women's oppression as an ideology connected to the bourgeois family (itself materially based in private property), and generalised throughout society. It discussed the causes and consequences of women's exclusion from 'socialised production,' i.e. production in the public sphere, and their performance of private labour (housework and childcare) as both vital to the creation of surplus value and yet invisible and ignored. They declared that a critique of "bourgeois sexual morality [and] the sexual division of labour" were vital not only for the women's movement but also the working-class movement.

The Socialist Women's Group critiqued the left for holding that "women's liberation [was] not possible until the establishment of socialism." They maintained that socialism was not possible without women's liberation, and that a socialist society

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[20] Vibhuti Patel points out that autonomous groups are not "separatist" and did not "exclude men": "men do participate in the campaigns and struggles launched by autonomous women's organisations (Patel, 1985, p. 21)." Yet women-only organisations were needed, Deepti Priya Mehrotra writes, for women to be able to "safeguard their independence," such that they would be able to create an atmosphere where they could speak "without hesitation," away from men's "surveillance, interference and comments" (Mehrotra, 2001, pp. 63, translation mine).
[21] Achala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

entailed not only the "abolition of the dominance of one class over the other but the abolition of all dominance, all hierarchies, all subordination." Socialism was the establishment of a non-hierarchical society, which was "not something to be achieved after the revolution. But *revolution* is the *process* through which this can be achieved (Singh et al., 1985, p. 100, italics in original)." Revolution, in this understanding, was not confined to the party or the state but entailed a transformation in social relations (Singh et al., 1985, p. 102).

The Progressive Organisation of Women too saw women's economic dependence on men as the "root of all sexual, cultural and political domination," and the exclusion of women from the sphere of social production as "[giving] rise to the low status of women in society (Progressive Organisation of Women, 1980, p. 170)." They contrasted the condition of women in capitalism with their condition under a "primitive communal" stage of society, when men and women both participated in social production, and linked the oppression of women to the discovery of agriculture and the creation of private property, under which women came to be owned by men (Progressive Organisation of Women, 1980, p. 171). The POW too declared that women's struggles for emancipation were part of the struggle for socialism, and that women thus had an important role to play in "educating, organising and mobilising women on their own demands." "It is thus necessary that we women take a direct, leading role in organising the masses of women in their struggle for a better life and a changed system (Progressive Organisation of Women, 1980, p. 172)."

Kiran Shaheen, writing of the women's groups in Bihar in the late 1970s and early 1980s, described the challenging situation in which they found themselves, given the conditions prevailing in the state: 88% of the women of the state depended on agriculture, 58% lived below the poverty line, and many worked as bonded labourers. "No independent women's movement can be successful without incorporating their problems; and...it should be inherently associated with class struggle (Shaheen, 1988, p. 157)." Nevertheless, she writes that "most of us believe that the women's movement should develop as part of the changing political movement and along with it should keep its independent identity (Shaheen, 1988, p. 158)."

Thus members of autonomous organisations were not "apolitical":

> Women members of the autonomous women's organisations may adhere to various political ideologies and some of them belong to different political parties. ... To many of us, [the movement] is also not independent of class struggle or the problems of the toiling masses. We strongly believe that the women's movement is inseperable (sic) from movements of the working class (Patel, 1985, p. 16).

While organisationally distinguishing themselves from the left, women's groups and women activists still saw themselves as part of a larger social transformation.

Interestingly, some activists argue that the idea of autonomy was derived from the left itself: from the existence of non-parliamentary left formations. For instance, Ammu Abraham describes herself as being part of an autonomous left group, that is, a non-parliamentary left group. She applies the term autonomous retrospectively: "working backwards from the word autonomous feminist group."[22]

> Though we all, though these autonomous feminist groups across the country emerged around the Mathura rape case, obviously there [were] some pre-existing feminist[s] or activists who felt drawn into it and why were we autonomous, we were autonomous feminist[s] because we were from autonomous Marxist groups, something like that. You can define autonomy or feminism in various ways but one of the ways in which at least I saw it is left but not with the traditional, what we call[ed] the orthodox political communist parties at that time.[23]

According to Aruna Burte, the smaller left groups which she saw and was part of in the 1970s were also autonomous, in that they were claiming autonomy from the "established left parties." Thus "[the] idea of autonomy germinated there but the feminist groups took it further." Other sorts of organisations also organised around an idea of autonomy: she gives the example of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra.[24]

Ammu and Aruna both apply term autonomy retrospectively to these left formations. Yet to the extent that the idea of the non-hierarchical collective implied a critique of and challenge to a formal party structure, it must be noted that such a critique was being made in other movements as well.

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[22] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[23] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[24] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

Thus the idea of autonomy in circulation at this time stressed autonomy from the left, given the need of the early autonomous women's movement to distinguish itself from the left.

Campaigns

The decade of the 1980s is perhaps best remembered for large campaigns on issues of rape, dowry and sati. However, groups also campaigned around issues of local importance. This brief description of the campaigns undertaken by various groups is not intended to be exhaustive but indicative of the issues that were being raised.

One of Stree Shakti Sanghatana's first campaigns after its formation in 1978 was against the export of vegetables from India to Arab countries, which was raising the local cost of vegetables to prohibitive levels (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, pp. 266-273). The group worked on this campaign together with "a forum of Mahila Mandals," mobilising thousands of women and forcing the government to temporarily ban vegetable export (Vasanth Kannabiran & Shatrugna, 1986, p. 28). Another early campaign was on the conditions of working women's hostels. The group worked with the residents of two such hostels in Hyderabad – a YWCA hostel and another run by the Andhra Yuvathi Mandali. Both sets of residents faced similar issues: poorly maintained facilities and inadequate food, water and electricity supplies (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, p. 268). While the YWCA hostel residents' protest was successful, that of the Andhra Yuvathi Mandali residents was "easily" broken by the hostel management, which spread rumours about the Stree Shakti Sanghatana, played on caste and religious divisions between residents, and maligned residents' characters to discredit them (Vasanth Kannabiran & Shatrugna, 1986, p. 27). The group's other activities dealt with the issues of rape and dowry; they also participated in fact-finding missions on the lives of bidi workers (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, pp. 270-272).

In Mumbai, the Forum against Oppression of Women campaigned against the harassment of women commuters on local trains. In 1981, a woman commuter was murdered in a first-class compartment. Members of the FAOW conducted a survey of women commuters, which yielded several suggestions for their safety, including that the second-class women's compartment be made exclusively a women's compartment, instead of becoming a general compartment after 10 p.m. The Forum

presented their demands to the Railway authorities. While a rule regarding the women's compartment was made it was not enforced; men continued to enter the compartment, either out of ignorance or in deliberate violation of the rule. In 1982, the group began travelling on the train at night and physically pushing men out of the compartment when they tried to enter. The group persuaded the Railway authorities to paint notices on trains reading 'women only–24 hrs' (Patel, 1985, pp. 34-36).

Members of the Forum protested various cases of rape, murder and dowry-related violence in Mumbai. Demonstrations and gate meetings were held after the rape and murder of a woman worker in an industrial estate, and the victim's employer gave compensation to her mother. The group organised a dharna in front of the Thurbe Police Station when a 15-year-old girl was raped by four men including three policemen.

The issue of dowry had been raised by the POW before the emergency. Looking it as an issue of equality between men and women, the POW asked why women who were working and studying just as hard as their brothers were prepared to pay dowry; and why women had to pay dowry when they would be doing housework in their husbands' homes. The issue of dowry violence emerged more strongly after the emergency. In Delhi the Mahila Dakshata Samiti investigated reports of accidents and suicides of young women and issued a report in 1978 in which it concluded that these were murders (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 54).

Various incidents of deaths of young married women in Delhi began to gain publicity and demonstrations and protests began to be held in front of houses where dowry-related deaths were reported. The first of these was the death of a young Sikh woman, Tarvinder Kaur, in June 1979; the protest was widely reported in the media (Kumar, 1993, pp. 118-119). Other incidents of dowry murder began to be protested, by organisations like Stree Sangharsh and the Nari Raksha Samiti. Protests against dowry violence also took place in other parts of the country (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 54).

Various methods of agitation were used in the anti-dowry campaign. Protests were held in front of the homes of perpetrators; posters pasted in their neighbourhoods asked neighbours to socially boycott their families. Consciousness-raising tactics included seminars, debates, and organising mass pledges (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 55). In Delhi, Stree Sangharsh performed a play on dowry murder titled *Om Swaha*.

The Mahila Dakshata Samiti raised the issue of dowry with the government and police. In 1983, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act was passed: amongst other things, it created section 498a of the Indian Penal Code, which made cruelty to a wife a cognisable and non-bailable offence, and amended the Criminal Procedure Code to make the post-mortem examination of a women who died within seven years of marriage mandatory (Kumar, 1993, pp. 120-125).

The Supreme Court judgement in the case of Tukaram vs. State of Maharashtra, in 1979, is perhaps the best known incident in the history of post-independence feminist activism, known as the Mathura rape case. Mathura, a young Adivasi girl, was raped in a police station by Tukaram, and assaulted by Ganpat, both policemen, in 1972. Acquitted by the Sessions court, Tukaram was convicted by the High Court, only to have the conviction overturned by the Supreme Court, which disbelieved the testimony of the victim, and pointed to the lack of marks of resistance on her body.

Four legal scholars, Lotika Sarkar, Vasudha Dhagamwar, Raghunath Kelkar, and Upendra Baxi, wrote an open letter to the Supreme Court, criticising the judgement. Amongst other arguments, the authors pointed to the Supreme Court's willingness to give the accused policemen the benefit of doubt while disbelieving the victim's testimony, and its equation of submission with consent. The letter asked whether the Supreme Court felt that Mathura was a person of "easy virtue," and whether this gave the policemen licence to rape her. The authors also asked that the case be re-opened.

The open letter was circulated amongst various women activists, as well as between women who were part of the women's wings of left parties. It was reprinted in the Pune-based journal *Bayja*, in November of 1979; extracts were reproduced in *Manushi* in its fourth issue in 1979-1980. "This," Chhaya Datar says, "proved to be a rallying point and a catalyst provoking widespread reaction (Datar, 1988, p. 15)."

Interestingly, the Rameeza Bi rape case in 1978 in Hyderabad had been widely protested, with 22000 people storming the police station in which her husband had been killed, forcing the government to declare a curfew (Kumar, 1993, p. 128). However the Mathura case catalysed women's groups in many parts of the country, and rape became the first women's issue to be the basis for an all-India campaign.

In Bombay, the Forum Against Rape organised public meetings and skits, and organised a demonstration before the Bombay High Court (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 40). The Forum organised and hosted the first national conference of women's groups in India, where various demands were raised regarding the issue of rape, including demands regarding interrogation of women, how consent was to be defined (especially in cases where the accused was a public servant or policeman), and that a woman's previous sexual history be excluded from the evidence, amongst others (Patel, 1985, pp. 29-31). A report in *Manushi* described how the Mathura case had been raised in Women's Day programmes in various parts of the country including Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad, Pune, and Kasegaon and Kalamwadi in Sangli district in Maharashtra. Sandhya Gokhale and Gayatri Singh described the campaign preceding the event in Bombay, which had included a public meeting, plays and the distribution of pamphlets ("We Will Not Live in Fear Any More: Some Reports and Impressions of the Participants," 1980).

Reports of the campaigns of the 1980s list various types of tactics and methods used by women's groups. While some were directed towards legal remedies—for instance demands with regard to changes in the rape law—others were directed at perpetrators or sites of crimes (for example demonstrations in front of houses where dowry violence or murder was reported) or were seen as consciousness-raising measures (for example plays, posters, pamphlets, et cetera).

For example, a report in *Manushi* details the demonstration in front of the house of a Mr. MP Batra in Delhi, in 1982. Manushi had been approached by his third wife, Sudarshan, who complained of harassment and dowry demands. After a failed attempt to negotiate with Mr. Batra, the group decided to pressurise him by demonstrating in front of his house. In the course of the demonstration, Mr. Batra insulted and baited the group by declaring his intention to marry seven times. Incensed, a demonstrator took the brush that was being used to paint slogans on the wall of his house and covered Mr. Batra's face with black paint. The report in *Manushi* carried an image of Mr. Batra's blackened face (""Ab ham jalkar nahin marengi, Jeene ka adhikar lekar rahengi"," 1982, p. 9).

Black paint and tar were also used to cover hoardings and billboards that women's groups considered obscene or insulting to women. This was reportedly first done by

the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in Patna in 1979; tarring of hoardings was carried out, according to Gandhi and Shah, in most cities (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 69). Pennurimai Iyakkam in Madras organised a march in 1982 in which 500 women participated. The gathering burned magazines which "portrayed women in an obscene manner" and "defaced obscene hoardings by throwing cowdung, water, rotten eggs and tar on them (Girija, 1982, p. 21)."

The campaign against sati was sparked off in 1987 by an incident of sati in Deorala in Rajasthan. Roop Kanwar, a young widow, was reportedly forced to commit sati after the death of her husband. A 'chunri mahotsav' was scheduled to be held ten days after the event: the ritual cremation of a veil was traditional after sati but had never been celebrated on a large scale before. The campaign against sati hinged on the question of the glorification of the ritual.

We therefore see that women's activism covered a range of issues. In doing so, it engaged with a variety of sites of oppression and violence that women encountered. Violence within the family, however, took on a special significance, both in theorising women's oppression and in shaping the course of feminist activism.

The Family as a Site of Oppression

The manifestos of the POW and the Socialist Women's Group, quoted above, speak of the family as a site of violence and oppression of women. Though these groups were short-lived, the significance of the family in conceptualising women's oppression remained. Other institutions too were considered relevant in furthering oppression, yet the family remained a key institution through which women's issues were theorised. Issues like dowry violence and murder, and domestic violence were obvious manifestations of violence within the family. In 1979, the *Manushi* Editorial Collective wrote that

> In India, we have a glorious heritage of systematic violence on women in the family itself, sati and female infanticide being the two better-known forms. Today, we do not kill girl-babies at birth. We let them die through systematic neglect... Today, we do not wait till a woman is widowed before we burn her to death. We burn her in the lifetime of her husband so that he can get a new bride with a fatter dowry ("How We Look at It," 1979, p. 2).

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Despite this, the group considered the fight against dowry to be part of a fight against a system which reduced an individual's worth to his or her money or property. Nonetheless they stressed that dowry would have to be challenged in their own personal relations with their families, calling this aspect of the anti-dowry struggle even more urgent than a co-ordinated public campaign ("How We Look at It," 1979, p. 3).

Achala notes that dowry deaths revealed violence in women's natal families as well. Women would complain of mistreatment in their husband's homes to their parents, or would come back to their parents' homes; yet their parents would send them back to their husbands. Many dowry deaths were preceded by such cycles of violence. In such cases natal families too were collaborators in their daughter's deaths.

> After her marriage she doesn't have any space to go back to... even if it is a small jhuggi or a big house, and many many ministers and huge tycoons, their daughters had similar stories to narrate. There is no place for you to come back... A woman never has a home of her own. It's either the husband's home or the father's home et cetera. ... Through that you realise that actually a woman doesn't own anything. Neither this home or that home, and how easily she gets divested of all rights, and the family is very much responsible.[25]

For Ammu Abraham, the experience of marriage and family was common to all women.

> All of us have to look at marriage and the family as something in which there is a kind of spectrum of violence, this kind of extreme domestic violence of murder or dowry death or prolonged wife-beating is at one end of the spectrum, but they're all within a patriarchal framework and so we all share it in some sense, that is our commonality of experience. It is that structure of the family which determines our commonality of experience because we're all somewhere in that, so basically one was formulating the goal as changing the structure of the family.[26]

She recalls seeing advertisements for abortion clinics pasted on the walls of women's compartments of local trains. These started to give way to advertisements for abortions of female foetuses, at a slightly higher cost. Simultaneously she was reading

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[25] Achala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[26] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

reports of an Amritsar-based doctor who was advertising sex-selective abortions under the slogan 'spend Rs. 500 now, save Rs. 50,000 later.' Amniocentesis and sex-selective abortions of female foetuses, then, became important issues:

> You see the intermingling of patriarchy, the structure of the family and the peculiar patriarchy of India where we alone we see dowry deaths, where alone we see sex selection in such a vicious and systematic manner where this particular medical technology is systematically used all over... it was a kind of issue which pulled in all these elements, so it seemed like an ideal thing for feminists to take up, Indian feminists particularly to take up and campaign around.[27]

The commonality of oppression across social categories was also stressed by Madhu Kishwar and B. Horowitz in their article on women and family (Kishwar & Horowitz, 1982). The article discussed the different conditions and experiences of Jat Sikh women from landowning families and women from families of Mazhbi Sikh agricultural labourers in a village in rural Punjab. While it noted some differences in their experiences—for instance, that Mazhbi Sikh women reported fewer restrictions on mobility and greater decision-making power—it treated these women as a single group in its ultimate analysis. It pointed to the hegemonic nature of the Jat Sikh family form, which agricultural labourer families tried to emulate as far as their resources would allow. Kishwar and Horowitz indicated the contradictory place of the family in women's lives:

> In certain ways, being a member of a family in most societies is the only source of support and protection available to most women, though in many other ways the family structure is also a key element in ensuring their unequal position in society (Kishwar & Horowitz, 1982, p. 2).

Inside the Family, a report published by the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, tied together many of these critiques of the family (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986). This report highlighted the control of women by men and discussed how the day-to-day lives of women were governed by their families. It argued that "the larger societal oppression of women is an extension and aspect of their domestic family situation which in turn is constantly reinforced and sustained by their inequality outside the home (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 2)." For

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[27] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

example, the report linked the family and women's labour by saying that in many cases, families considered it shameful if women worked; the acquisition of skills and nature of work were dictated by the family; and that working women were still responsible for housework. The planning process and various developmental schemes treated the household as the "unit of development," ignoring women's unequal place within the family (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 13). Some treated women as basically homemakers, imparting skills like knitting and sewing.

The report listed a host of injustices perpetrated by the family itself, starting from sex selective abortions to infanticide and the neglect of daughters. Girl children were given training in household tasks much more than boys; had less access to healthcare and educational opportunities; families controlled women's mobility and marriages. After marriage, control over women passed to their matrimonial families. Control was exercised both through coercion and violence and through "benevolent protection." The report discussed violence related to dowry demands and domestic violence, including sexual violence within the home. It pointed out that, often, violence went unreported because women did not name perpetrators, out of consideration for family honour. The problems women faced due to frequent pregnancies, and issues faced by widows and single women, were also described.

The report did, however, point to the existence of many women's organisations that fight for women's rights, and increased awareness of women's issues amongst political parties and the news media. It stated that most of the cases referred to in the report came to the authors' notice because a woman's group organised a protest around it (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 33).

The report made two other important points. Firstly, it discussed the sense of isolation that women felt within their families. Oppression within the family was invisible and seen as a private matter; its social nature remained hidden.

> Consequently, the social nature of the problem as a whole never receives enough attention from the conscious public. And millions of women are expected to fight their private battles with their families, all alone (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 2).

The individuation of women's oppression itself was a source of its continuation as it curtailed possibilities of collective action, making the structures of male dominance harder to erode (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 34).

Secondly, it described familial oppression as the common feature of female experience. The report stated that women were "the single largest oppressed group in the country (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 1)." While both men and women faced various forms of oppression and exploitation due to class, caste and ethnic backgrounds, women faced oppression not only in public settings but also within the home. It held that "women as a social group...have an aspect unique to their situation – namely, that for women a major source of oppression and violence is the family itself (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, p. 2)." Male domination was a constant across the different types of family structure in the country. Men across "social groups and classes" enjoyed more rights than women, and women's inferior status was institutionalised through cultural traditions and religion. "The family structure," the report declared, valued women only as wives and mothers and reproducers of lineages (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, 1986, pp. 2-3).

Again, this is not to suggest that women's oppression was not being examined in other contexts as well, for instance in terms of health or labour. The idea of the family as the cornerstone of women's oppression, however, seems to have given greater direction to activist groups seeking ways to reach out to women. The absence of other support structures for women meant that such structures had to be created by feminist activists themselves.

Institutionalisation of Activism

The 1980s, Radha Kumar writes, saw a shift in the nature of women's activism, with women moving away from methods of agitation like "public campaigns, demonstrations, street theatre etc.," and focusing instead on helping individual women through the formation of "women's centres that provided a mixture of legal aid, health care and counselling." This shift was motivated by the experiences of the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns, which resulted in the passage of legislation but not the implementation of laws; this made women conscious of the need to follow up on individual cases through the various stages of the legal system (Kumar, 1993, p. 143).

According to Vibhuti Patel, "feminists who had been in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns felt the necessity for a women's centre" which would provide "emotional, legal and medical support" to women in distress. Such women's centres were not "forums for agitation" through "many members [were] also actively involved in agitational organisations." She lists Saheli in Delhi, Sakhi Kendra in Kanpur, Women's Centre in Bombay, and Stree Adhar Kendra in Pune as examples of centres "that provide individual support to women (Patel, 1988, p. 255)."

The media attention received by issues of violence against women resulted in several women, and their relatives, approaching autonomous groups; thus

> While doing agitations and propaganda work against a series of rape cases in custodial situation (sic), domestic violence and dowry harassment, these groups realised that to work on a sustained basis and take care of the rehabilitative aspects, it was important to evolve institutional structures for support to the women victims of violence based on feminist principles of solidarity (mutual counselling) and sisterhood (Patel & Khajuria, 2016, p. 7).

Another motivation was the need to help women before the violence they were facing reached extremes. For instance, Ammu Abraham points to the experience of dealing with domestic violence and dowry deaths, where demonstrations and agitations would be organised after reports of a woman's death. Yet there was a need to reach out to women in a more sustained way; as she bluntly puts it, before they dropped dead. This was the thinking, she says, behind the opening of the Women's Centre in Bombay.[28]

The Ahmedabad Women's Action Group, formed in 1983, took on the role of counselling women with similar cases in mind. The group spent six months studying cases of bride-burning, and concluded that there were five factors responsible for the unnatural deaths of young women, including the values of their matrimonial families, the attitudes of the hospital and police, and the woman's "cry for help going unheard." Yet the most significant contributing factor, they wrote, was a woman's own submissiveness: either her internalised "acceptance of submission" or her feeling of helplessness (Dave et al., 1986).

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[28] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

The AWAG wrote that "we realised that we could not help the dying woman at all. We turned our thoughts to those who might yet be saved from throwing themselves into the fire." They argued that women who had "moral support" would not commit suicide and that there was a need to destroy women's ingrained low self esteem. Therefore they began an awareness raising campaign, which included mounting displays, performing street plays, discussions and demonstrations, and running counselling centres. The authors describe the varieties of counselling and assistance that women required. Some merely came to "give expression to their sufferings" but others required shelter homes, legal help, individual counselling over multiple sessions, or the intervention of the police et cetera (Dave et al., 1986, pp. 2-3).

Simultaneously, the group observed and criticised the work of the police, who were often unaware of the latest legislation in dealing with domestic violence, and whose biases showed in their rude treatment of victims' families. The AWAG organised a demonstration against the police, in which sixteen other organisations in Ahmedabad participated (Dave et al., 1986, pp. 3-4).

This example shows how case work, as it was called, could continue alongside a group's other campaigns. Nonetheless case work required different resources. As Vibhuti Patel says, agitational politics did not require as much money. Donations were collected from sympathisers, and women reduced expenses as well: for instance, physically taking magazines and other documents from one place to another to distribute to others, instead of mailing them, and thus saving on postage. Meetings were held in one-another's houses. Her group's newsletters were cyclostyled and members cut stencils themselves, spending money only on ink and paper. They raised funds for a cyclostyling machine; she reports that it was kept in her drawing room.[29] Women performed many tasks voluntarily: she recalls taking photographs of various protest events on her own camera, thus reducing the cost of photography only to rolls of film. Others volunteered as rapponteurs or typists. Thus movement activity was subsidised through activists' unpaid labour. Donations of cash and kind (e.g. newsprint or meals for rally attendees) were collected from sympathisers. As she says,

> There was only that kind of work, agitational work, bringing out leaflets,
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> translation, giving public talks, organising public meetings, writing articles

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[29] Vibhuti Patel, interview with Ponni Arasu, 2011, IAWS archive, SNDT University Juhu Campus, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

and monographs, leaflets, pamphlets... So that can be done with limited, whatever money you have and resources you have.[30]

Case-work required a different approach. Sandhya Gokhale, of the Forum Against Oppression of Women, talks of how the group initially held its weekly meetings in a library; when the library closed, the group met in various other places (like parks) but had no fixed meeting place. However a woman who approached the group for assistance in a domestic violence case "need[ed] almost daily support and counselling … [she] need[ed] a place she [could] come, and ask for help."[31]

Women's Centre, formed in 1982, operated for a year out of a room in a member's house. However the group realised that they could not continue to function in this way. They organised a fundraiser jointly with the actress Smita Patil. The event, a premier of her film *Subah*, raised Rs. 1.5 lakhs, with which the group purchased a small office.

Forum, as it is known, continued working alongside the Women's Centre. Over the next few years, tensions built up between the two groups on the issues of how Women's Centre would run, whether funding would be sought, how much say volunteers would have in its running, et cetera. By 1986-87 there was a "clear bifurcation" between the two.[32]

Saheli in Delhi was formed in 1981 by women who felt that "the agitational and consciousness-raising activity" that they were doing was not adequate. "We began to feel very strongly that the women's movement had to provide an alternative support structure for women, so that they could take constructive actions for their lives." As a consciousness-raising group, however, they did not have the infrastructure to help individual women (Saheli, 1985).

Saheli therefore was formed "as a campaign group and to reach out to women facing domestic violence (Saheli, 2006, p. 5)." The group describes how all the work it did was on a "voluntary basis" and how "donations ranging from Rs. 2 to Rs. 100 were our main source of funding for two years." There were also a variety of donations of kind and services, from supporters: from furniture and typewriters, stationery,

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[30] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[31] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[32] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

cushions and bed spreads, to printers who did jobs, doctors who treated women, and artists who performed, for free or at reduced rates. However, the amount of resources required grew rapidly, and need arose for office space, a shelter home, more volunteers, and "space to take up legal matters [and] undertake educational and other activities. The need for money became acute (Saheli, 2006, p. 95)."

As a collective, Saheli decided to take funds for specific activities as and when the need arose, and to prioritise taking funds from the Indian rather than foreign governments.[33] The group also decided to "build a support base that would help [them] maintain our autonomy and yet keep us accountable to people who believe in our work and vision." Yet during 1985-86 the group split over questions of funding. It stopped case work in 1991.

Through these examples, we see a link between the issues raised and the nature of the institutions needed to tackle them. Campaign work—whether rallies, publishing magazines and newsletters, organising dharnas and street plays et cetera—required a certain type of resources, which would be arranged by activists and sympathisers. Case work, on the other hand, required a different set-up: at the very least, a fixed place where women in distress could come, staff, and the accoutrements of an office. Yet given how women's oppression was understood—as involving various types of violence and largely located in the family—it was also considered essential to be able to support women.

Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran highlight some of the tensions between campaign politics and research in their description of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana. They write that the group came together in Hyderabad after the emergency in an attempt to "find meaningful political activity." While they participated in and initiated various campaigns, they decided to remain unfunded, and to avoid "providing services to individual women which they felt was basically welfarist and would involve the need to fund-raise and to lobby (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, pp. 265-266)." As a campaign group they pressured various state institutions for the fulfilment of various demands. Questions of shifts in the group's orientation arose, however, when they decided to take up not just campaigns but also research activity. The group undertook two research projects, one on women's health, and the other on the history

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[33] Saheli is registered under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act.

of the Telangana Armed Struggle. Part of the group also decided to set up a women's studies and documentation centre, an act which the authors term a move towards institutionalisation. The shift involved "an unconscious privileging of reflective activity over activism," and meant moving away from the women's movement to "articulat[e] feminist politic[s] within academic spheres." Academic contributions may have been necessary and significant but left the group "paralysed" and "unable to respond to demands for collective action from the women's movement (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997)."

The third National Conference of Women's Studies in India in 1986 too witnessed conflicts between academic and activist feminists. Kannabiran and Kannabiran describe several sources of conflict: the resources commanded by women in the academy, the distinction between research that would be useful for groups struggling at the grassroots and that which was aimed at academic excellence within the university system, and the social backgrounds of women activists and academics (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997).

Others take a more positive view of the institutionalisation of women's studies. Chayya Datar describes her experience as an activist entering the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1988 (Datar, 2003). She writes of how she was convinced of the role of research and theory in social movements in "furthering the feminist cause." Despite activists' misgivings regarding institutionalisation, the university system provided for the documentation and dissemination of the histories of campaigns and struggles across disciplines and generations. Datar makes the interesting point that movements "behave in the manner of tides – rising and receding." In this situation, academic institutions "[anchor] a movement till it becomes a mass movement, so that both women and men internalise the principles and ethics for which they are fighting." Despite her optimism, she cautions against the "misappropriation" of activists' experiences and writes that "all strategies should be considered" before academic institutions collaborate with NGOs or activist groups (Datar, 2003, pp. 137-138).

The 1980s, then, was not only a decade of feminist activism but also of institutionalisation, through women's studies and the founding of various women's outreach centres. While there were still overlaps between these, in terms of individual

feminist activists participating in more than one activity, there began to be an institutional separation.

What has been the consequence of such institutionalisation for strictly campaign politics? The question of institutionalisation has often been raised in terms of NGOisation, with a focus on the impact of this process on younger women who enter a depoliticised sphere. Yet the questions raised by Kannabiran and Kannabiran point to the challenges faced even by older activists in continuing to participate in campaign activity. Chayya Datar's writing too hints at the choice between activism and academia. Other women activists speak of withdrawal from campaign activity for various reasons, including earning a livelihood. The largest campaigns that reflect in the literature of this movement (pertaining to dowry, rape and sati) took place before the end of the 1980s.

The 1990s and After

Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam term 1989-1992 a "truly ruptural moment in contemporary Indian history." They describe this as the period of the breakdown of the "Nehruvian consensus," which combined a secular polity, the idea of a self-reliant economy, and a foreign policy of non-alignment. The period witnessed "almost apocalyptic events," including the rise of coalition politics, the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the initiation of a structural adjustment programme, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the "defeat of secularism and secular nationalism," and the rise of new media (N. Menon & Nigam, 2007, pp. 3-5). The authors also list the "revolt of the lower castes," and globalisation, as amongst the "signal moments of the conjuncture of the early 1990s (N. Menon & Nigam, 2007, p. 13)."

Neera Chandhoke examines major campaigns—including the Right to Health, Right to Food, Right to Work, Right to Education, and Right to Information campaigns—to identify changes in civil society initiatives since the 1990s. She concludes firstly that civil society organisations functioned within parameters laid down by the state; the state could decide which organisations were "permissible." Secondly she points to shifts in such organisations' orientations, arguing that they raise questions of public policy rather than the "big issues" of the "redistribution of power and resources."

Organisations, she writes, prefer to "lobby policy makers rather than politicise civil society (Chandhoke, 2005)."

> These campaigns just do not dream the large and expansive dreams that were dreamt of by earlier generations of social activists – restructuring existing structures of power and forging new and equitable structures of social relations. But that is the nature of civil society intervention (Chandhoke, 2005).

The 1990s and 2000s posed new challenges for women's activism. Neera Desai talks of the traumatic events of this period: globalisation, identity politics, the growing dominance of the right, and the onslaught of careerism and consumerism. She also references "new concerns like Lesbianism, Dalit Movement and issues of other minority women (Desai, 2006, pp. 9-10)."

For Veena Mazumdar and Indu Agnihotri, the 1980s and 1990s were marked by growing fundamentalism and free market capitalism, which posed new challenges to the women's movement (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995).

> Fundamentalism provides an ideological framework while globalisation and glorification of the market provides the operative instrument to demolish women's claims to equality, freedom and dignity as individuals. This awesome combination poses a challenge which is forcing women's organisations into rethinking, soul-searching and questioning of their roles and identities in the reshaping of the struggle (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1870).

These changes in the political and economic landscape impacted the issues the AWM would raise and the manner in which it would strategise. Ranjana Padhi notes the kind of issues that were emerging in the 1990s, linking them to the political economic developments of the period. She notes the ways in which activists responded to these new challenges.

> The 90s were marked both by the new economic policies as well as the right wing assertion. Now our coalitions and interactions with other movements… joint work and all, are getting determined in a similar way. For example when factory closures and basti demolitions are taking place in the late 90s, Saheli did joint work with the Dilli Janwadi Adhikar Manch, they had taken up workers' issues and slum demolitions in Delhi, and according to Saheli's understanding we cannot not respond to them,

factory shutdowns and slum demolitions, they are happening in a wave. At the same time there is right wing assertion, the attack on *Fire* with the formation of CALERI, Campaign for Lesbian Rights. Now the question of lesbianism is always problematic and only some people used to work at it, but when the right-wing attack on it came and Bajrang Dal attacked the film hoardings in Regal and all, making all organisations come together, there were CPM people there too, to say no censorship, and there were other groups also saying there's nothing western about lesbianism. But both these things are happening because of the political economy and the kind of forces that are at work at that time. Why are the slum demolitions and factory closures happening, why is the right wing attacking or feeling threatened by a relationship between two women in *Fire*?[34]

Thus the 1990s were a time when new issues were emerging and new groups and alliances were being formed. Yet, simultaneously, the ability of feminists to set political agendas was diminishing; this in contradistinction to earlier decades when feminists had raised issues that they deemed important.

Ranjana: The demands to scrap the New Economic Policies and the demands to oppose the Uniform Civil Code, none of them were demands that were asking us what we wish to have or see, but we were saying no to many things that were happening. … It's like firefighting, we weren't even talking of our vision, just firefighting, we're saying no to many things that are happening around us. … Space went away I feel, the early 90s really took the wind out of our sails. All these issues and priorities that were not of our asking.

Vasudha: As opposed to the 80s, when the issues were of your making, like dowry and rape and violence issues?

Ranjana: Yes. Basically late 70s and 80s were spent more [on] giving visibility to women's issues, raising the women's question and connecting it to other struggles.[35]

According to Aruna Burte, a backlash against feminism emerged in the mid-1980s: a co-option of feminist language and the subversion of feminist politics, by various agencies, including the media, political parties, and the state. Political parties swiftly revived their women's wings; yet when issues emerged, they failed to actually work for women.

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[34] Ranjana Padhi, Skype interview, 2017
[35] Ranjana Padhi, Skype interview, 2017

> For example take the personal law issue. It was tied off to community identity… not for women's rights. Then Roop Kanwar happened in '87, chunri mahotsav could not be controlled, all political parties actually could not stop that chunri mahotsav. Despite the fact that women's groups were demanding it, that stop at least the valorisation of that sati, the political parties could not do it. Only Mrinal Gore at that time made a statement against her colleague in the party, who was not doing his job there. All other parties were looking the other way.[36]

State agencies, too, though apparently responsive to the demands of the women's movement, ended up creating structures that subverted feminist politics.

> From '85 you will see all this quick provisions, family courts, then special cells, and then family counselling centres, then women's development programs… women's policies, National Commission of Women, State Commission of Women, you name it, and state has given us. That I call co-option, backlash…because what happens is, we actually felt that yes family courts have come up, now see how they function, they don't function for women's point of view… See basically no discourse of development, of any economic policy or planning, can happen without taking into consideration gender aspect now, that is a very big achievement definitely. But when you say this in one breath you also have to say that interwoven in it are the mechanisms where gender issues will be subverted. Because when they set up family counselling centres they see to it that women go back to their marriages. So you have to be very carefully aware of it.[37]

At some times the consequences of the merger of feminist goals with the state could be deeply negative. Aruna points to Bhanwari Devi, who was raped as a punishment for carrying out her duties as a part of the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan.

> ...her salary was paltry, and she was doing her duty little realising that she is actually touching the livewire of caste power structures in Rajasthan. And having so much support there… still she had to face the rape. Bhanwari today feels that no justice is being done which is true, isn't it. … Bhanwari represents a very very tragic turn in the women's movement history in the sense that she's a product of the demands of women's movement, of setting up women's development programs. See how these

[36] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[37] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

development programs are set. So I feel it is all co-option. It is all actually subverting your own issues, revolutionary issues.[38]

Changes in the political and economic landscape had various impacts on feminist activists as well. Writing in the early 1990s, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan pointed to the construction of a "new" and "liberated" Indian woman through the media, in particular television and print advertising and Doordarshan, the state-run television channel. While the construction of this image was a response to women's increasing purchasing power and new roles in society, it also served an ideological purpose: of "making liberation a matter of individual women's achievement and choice." These forms of media, importantly, reflected a process of the co-optation of women's issues and feminist politics. Advertising reworked the key issues around which feminist politics had been articulated—"sexuality, work, marriage and family"—and trivialised or glamorised the sites of oppression that feminist politics had identified ("sexual harassment, domestic work, dowry demands, marriage rituals, the joint family"). Doordarshan's programming depicted exceptionally strong, brave and intelligent women as part of India's past. Both trends undermined the need for a feminist movement in the present: advertising in particular offering liberation via a different trajectory. Yet this model of liberation was "safe," eschewing any conflict between women's interests and those of a patriarchal society. For instance,

> contemporary liberated female figures, elite, westernised, educated, professional—as represented, for example, in such popular serials as *Rajani* or *Udaan*—simultaneously and effortlessly hold on to the traditional values of husband-worship, family nurturance, self-sacrifice and sexual chastity. Their exemplary virtue—as well as virtuosity—is a saga of an individualism that functions for the social good rather than at odds with it (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p. 135).

Perhaps of most consequence for the women's movement was that such advertisements promised liberation through exceptional attributes or individual achievement rather than a collective feminist politics or women's movement (Sunder Rajan, 1993, pp. 130-135). Successful women, Kalyani Menon-Sen points out, often credit their success to any number of factors, from parents and teachers to hard work

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[38] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

to luck, but never to the movement's opening up of possibilities for women (Menon-Sen, 2001).

Yet the liberation promised through the new economy was often superficial. Vimala, a Hyderabad-based activist, argues that the globalised economy has generated new ways in which women are controlled.

> Now in IT sector for example, [there are] no unions at all. Women, they're getting some 80,000 or one lakh salary, but their working conditions are horrible. … Managements are encouraging them to prove themselves [through] individual achievements. So they're facing psychological pressure, they can't question the management, they can't unionise, they can't demand for their rights, no proper working hours. Then they're encouraging working relationships, working companionship between girls and boys. Why? See, they need some peaceful atmosphere, no, the competition should be there but the quarrels shouldn't be there. So if they encourage their relationships, even sexual relationships, within the workplace, their work will go smoothly. … They're not supporting women's liberation. If they support women's liberation they have to give maternity leaves, or the working conditions, timings, benefits. Those benefits they are not giving. But they are encouraging women and men employees to be together. They're organising parties, get-together parties, drink parties. So the actual liberation and the actual women's rights they are not supporting. But in the name of equality, in the name of freedom they're supporting the casual sexual relationships. Ultimately if these girls enter into casual relationships, the [male] colleagues try to dominate and control these. At the same time within the family structure, they also try to control or they impose their patriarchal power on this woman. So women face the patriarchal discrimination and oppression in the name of freedom.[39]

She adds that women themselves feel that their burdens have increased, leading them to question notions of liberation through employment.

> Women should have earning power. So they can decide how to live. But that is one part. I'm travelling yesterday [in the] local train, one of passengers, she's working in TV. She's telling her experience. She's working there and she looks after her children, she cooks and she takes care of her elderly in-laws, and if her husband is busy, she'll purchase

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[39] Vimala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

vegetables and pay the electricity bills, telephone bills and all that. She's saying, "see my mother always thinks I'm working in TV, I'm having so much money, wearing good clothes, I'm a very liberated woman. But I feel my mother is better than me. She used to sit at home and cook, that was her work, looking after children. I'm doing the double burden. My husband never bothered to help me. My mother feels I'm liberated but I'm feel I'm oppressed more than my mother." Now working women, many of them are saying this. So working outside or doing some jobs, it won't liberate women. Completely. It helps them, and economical independence and social awareness, it helps them. They have to take their life in their hands. So they have to fight against the outside world and they have to fight against inside patriarchy, within the family structure.[40]

Ranjana notes the changes that liberalisation brought for activists themselves, in terms of jobs and careers. The changed financial positions of some feminist activists increased the gaps between them and those who were not benefitting from the liberalised economy.

> I feel that with the post-liberalisation period money flowed into the middle-class… our ilk itself became the beneficiaries of the policies that emerged, so somewhere that definitely has affected politics I feel. … Beyond a point [we are] being buffered by our privileges also, when crises come, when the fragmentation of the women's movement is also happening there are choices that some women are making which [are] taking them individually further in life, it's not benefiting us [feminist collectives] more…[41]

Of lasting impact was the disintegration of any idea of the unity of female experience. In the 1970s and 1980s, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana write, feminist politics aimed to "establish 'gender' as a category that had been rendered invisible in universalisms of various kinds (Tharu & Niranjana, 1994, p. 94)." Yet feminism had set up its own 'feminist subject,' overtly unmarked by other identities and structures. The events of the late 1980s and 1990s challenged both this feminist subject, and feminist analysis itself. According to Sen and Dhawan, "By [the] early 1990s, it was clear that one could no longer speak of 'women' without reference to class, caste and community (S. Sen & Dhawan, 2011, p. 25)."

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[40] Vimala, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[41] Ranjana Padhi, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

For instance, certain events and processes forced feminists to acknowledge caste as a social reality in a manner that had not happened before. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 was met by protests in many parts of the country. The gendered aspect of these protests was brought out in what is a frequently-quoted example: of a young woman protestor holding a poster that read 'we want educated husbands,' who had no answer when asked why she would not then marry a 'backward caste' man (Tharu & Niranjana, 1994, p. 99).

Uma Chakravarti has written of the influence of the experience of the post-Mandal phase:

> The anti-Mandal agitation was an important moment in defining the need to understand caste from a gender perspective. ... In the decades after the anti-Mandal agitation as caste contradictions sharpened, the analysis of caste also sharpened. ... For the first time feminist scholarship began to draw attention to the inextricable links between caste and gender (Chakravarti, 2003a, pp. 3-4).

The explication of caste and gender had consequences for what were once seen as purely women's issues. For example, Menon and Nigam describe the fate of the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill, also known as the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposed a reservation of 33% of parliament seats for women. Women representatives in the Constituent Assembly had rejected reservations for women in 1946-49, as had the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1975. In 1996, however, many women activists supported reservations for women, as did non-Dalit/OBC political parties, while parties representing backward castes and Dalits largely rejected the bill. What had changed, according to Menon and Nigam, was that both women and backward castes had become significant forces in politics; backward caste and Dalit parties argued that quotas for women were a way of keeping lower castes out of politics, as upper-caste women would largely take advantage of the quotas. (For some, the solution was a quota-within-quotas provision, i.e. quotas specifically for women of backwards castes (N. Menon, 2000).) Women, in this understanding, were "acceptable to the ruling elites as a counter-measure to deal with rising backward-class presence in parliament" because of the "cooptation and domestication of gender issues by the state and NGOs" and the redefinition of women's empowerment in terms of economic growth (N. Menon & Nigam, 2007, pp. 27-30).

The recognition of differences between women had organisational consequences as well. Kalyani Menon-Sen writes that

> The acknowledgement that women have identities and loyalties that transcend universal sisterhood has not been easy. Conflicts within women's groups – between middle class and working class women, between women from different castes, between heterosexual and lesbian women – were usually smoothed over by dominant voices within these groups by referring to them as sources of creative tension. Later accusations of domination and more aggressive assertions of difference, first by Dalit women and then by lesbian women within feminist groups, were, more often than not, seen as betrayals on the battlefield (Menon-Sen, 2001).

Strategies

Ritu Menon writes that the 1990s saw a shift in the nature of campaigning. Terms like 'advocacy' and 'lobbying' began to be used; women made representations before parliamentarians and sought to have questions raised in legislative bodies; women's groups began working with the national and state commissions on women;[42] gender sensitisation training was imparted to bureaucrats, police personnel, the judiciary et cetera. There was an underlying assumption that women would have to work with the governmental machinery to be able to positively impact policies. This manner of campaigning differed sharply from the "protest activism" of the 1980s, which had involved greater confrontations with the state (R. Menon, 2007a, p. 80). Mary John, too, refers to increasing movement institutionalisation, writing that "feminists who played an initiating role in the 1970s and 1980s are today 'spokespersons' on a number of issues (John, 2005, p. 113)."

The 1990s still saw the formation of autonomous groups. The collective Stree Sangam, for instance, came into being in Mumbai in 1995. Its membership overlapped with that of the Forum and its ideas of collective feminist politics arguably drew from that source.

Nonetheless for some women, the period saw a shrinking of feminist politics. Kalyani Menon-Sen's 2001 essay gives the reader a sense of the crisis inflicting collective

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[42] The National Commission for Women was created in 1992. The Department of Women and Child Development had been created within the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 1985 and was upgraded to ministry status in 2006.

feminist politics. Importantly, she asks not only what makes feminism "unfashionable" but also whether feminists are failing movement politics:

> If the parallels between feminism and other movements for justice and against oppression are no longer as obvious as they were in the seventies, could it be because feminists who genuinely support these other movements are disinterested in explaining themselves to the unconverted and are resistant to questioning from sceptics? Have feminists lost the missionary zeal that fuelled learning circles, discussion groups and other platforms for debate and discussion in the seventies? Or could it be a reflection of a growing separateness from other movements – a crisis of alliances that women's movements are facing today (Menon-Sen, 2001)?

Writing some years later, Apoorva Kaiwar asks similar questions of the autonomous women's movement, in particular whether feminists are "still relevant." For instance, she argues that feminists are no longer aware of the conditions of working-class women's lives; while some research into such women's lives was conducted till the 1990s, in recent years no such work has been done. Kaiwar describes various challenges faced by and successes of autonomous groups, but concludes on a pessimistic note:

> The few remaining voluntary non-funded autonomous women's groups have in turn become inward looking, rarely engaging with women outside of their class-caste positions. … The nature of our campaigns have also changed as a result of this disengagement; there is little street protest or reaching out to people, or even active sharing of our understanding with mass organisations of women (Kaiwar, 2008).

NGOisation

The earliest definitions of autonomy, as we saw above, were in terms of organisational distance from the parliamentary left. By the early 1990s, Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah examined autonomy in terms of both political parties and funding. Their definition of autonomous groups centred on organisations—autonomous groups were leaderless collectives that were the antithesis of the democratic centralism of the left (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, pp. 284-285). Funding was also discussed as an aspect of autonomy, but in less definitive terms: as a "dilemma" with which groups were struggling. Various groups' experiments with various sources of funds were discussed, including "collecting from the people," government sources,

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foreign funds and local companies (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, pp. 297-307). In recent years, however, autonomy is defined more in terms a distance from funded politics than party politics. Thus Uma Chakravarti states that scholarship on the idea of autonomy within the AWM tends to focus on "the need to establish a distance from existing political parties/formations"; yet discussing the question 'from whom is the AWM autonomous,' she points to threats of cooptation by NGOs and funding agencies, stating that these are critical to an understanding of the autonomy of the AWM (Chakravarti, 2005, pp. 44-45).

While the institutionalisation of feminism began in the 1980s, the challenges and problems caused by funding were most clearly articulated in the 2000s. Nivedita Menon wrote in 2004 that many of the groups that constituted the autonomous women's movement were, from the 1990s, "transformed into NGOs, that is, they started receiving funding from government and/or foreign funding agencies. Very few of the autonomous women's groups of the 1980s remain non-funded (N. Menon, 2004, p. 219)." This process of becoming funded organisations was termed NGOisation. Vibhuti Patel writes that

> NGO-isation clearly represents the growing dominance of a certain organisational form that is different from the early consciousness-raising organisations and also different from the mass organising that women have been very good at. ... NGO-isation has impacted structure, agenda, autonomy, agency and accountability of different types of women's/feminist organisations (Patel, 2012).

Many accounts and descriptions of NGOisation give a sense of the space of feminism being taken over by NGOs. Kalyani Menon-Sen writes of the "NGO sector storming the gender bandwagon" and of the many women's organisations that have no commitment to feminism. Yet these are posing a challenge to feminist politics:

> It is a fact that women's movements in India today are more vulnerable than ever before to having their agendas co-opted, leached of their political content and repackaged by governments and donors (Menon-Sen, 2001).

Apoorva Kaiwar, too, highlights the impact of the availability of funds on organisations' agendas: instead of working on "everyday issues that impact women," organisations work on those issues for which money is available. NGOs as

hierarchical workspaces also erode the principle and ideas behind "collective functioning (Kaiwar, 2008)."

NGOisation is seen as leading to a professionalisation of feminism: to quote Menon,

> [F]eminism need not be a political practice any longer, it can be a profession. ... The positive fallout of professionalisation is that many committed and political women are enabled to make a living being full-time activists. But...freely available funds also attract people with no great political commitment, for whom feminism is often a temporary profession (N. Menon, 2004, p. 219).

According to Menon, this process can lead to situations where, instead of concerted, co-ordinated efforts, individual organisations can act on their own, "supposedly representing the women's movement." She gives the example of the Vishaka judgement of the Supreme Court, which was "brought about primarily by the intervention of the NGO Sakshi," and says that "while the judgement has been generally welcomed by other women's groups, it did not come about as a result of prior discussion within the movement." The process of NGOisation "thus has the potential to break up the movement into separate groups with their own organisational, funder-driven, agendas... the original political thrust of autonomous women's organisations has been blunted by...'professionalisation' (N. Menon, 2004, pp. 220-221)."

Menon reiterates that the greatest threat is that of co-optation, but that "while this is a possibility, it is one most groups are quite conscious of and try to deal with (N. Menon, 2004, p. 220)." However, others argue that it is not dealt with at all. Nilanjana Biswas describes the manner in which the issue of funding came up during a meeting held in August, 2006, to celebrate the 25th year of a well-known Delhi-based collective:

> [T]he question of funding, that is, the means by which women's groups economically sustain themselves, a question critical to the identity of autonomous women's groups, came up only briefly in a general discussion... when funding was raised as a serious issue before the movement, interventions by NGO workers became tearful and emotional, and the issue rapidly dissolved out of the realm of discussion. Every attempt made in more than a decade to address the question of funding has,

as I recall, become a highly charged and polarised affair, couched in personal terms, unleashing deep feelings of guilt and defensiveness (Biswas, 2006, p. 4406).

Uma Chakravarti too points to the consequences of funding: the emergence of the 'career feminist' who specialises in a single issue but lacks an understanding of the "interrelatedness of...issues and the complexity of patriarchal practices;" the role of the donor in determining areas of intervention; the possibility that women's groups could lose their credibility amongst their constituencies. Chakravarti points out that the AWM broke away from left parties because of the lack of space for autonomous theorisation and action. She asks whether the "logic of [this] move" has been "neutralised by the global funding imperatives of the AWGs (Chakravarti, 2005, pp. 44-46)." She does point out however that not all autonomous groups accept funding (Chakravarti, 2005, pp. 48-49).

NGOisation and funding, therefore, are seen as having not only the potential but the consequence of undermining and transforming all aspects of feminist politics: the manner in which issues are conceptualised and understood, agenda-setting and campaign demands, strategies and tactics, the influx of feminist activists, and even the nature of women's institutions and the links between them.

Autonomy, then, is increasingly defined as a distance from funded NGOs, indicating that the threat of loss of autonomy is perceived as arising more from co-optation by NGOs than any other source. For instance, the concept note for a 2016 convention on autonomous politics, organised by Saheli in Delhi, stated that the group defined autonomy as "a critical distance from the state, political parties, and of course, institutional funding (Saheli, n.d.-a)." Yet there were no sessions on political parties, whereas there were sessions which examined the links between autonomous politics and the state and funding.

"Autonomy from What and Autonomy for What?"

The above formulation has been quoted at various seminars and public events, most recently at the two-day meeting organised by Saheli in Delhi in 2016. The formulation indicates two ways of looking at the question of autonomy. One is to look at autonomy as a distance from external structures and pressures, and the other as the ability to evolve one's own political vision and methods.

Uma Chakravarti points out three ways in which the AWM has looked at the concept of autonomy: as a goal of women's liberation, a way of acting independently of "structures, institutions and ideologies;"[43] as the autonomy of feminist organisations to both conceptualise patriarchy and develop strategies to counter it; and as an organisational principle, through which women's groups establish themselves as distinct from existing political formations.

As a goal of women's liberation, autonomy has various attributes:

> [It is] a necessary condition of women's emancipation that implies freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by social, economic and legal systems that prevent the possibility of exercising agency, of being able to define one's own social role and exercise choice in work, mobility, and in expressing one's sexuality – indeed bodily autonomy is a critical element of the feminist understanding of autonomy (Chakravarti, 2005, pp. 41-42).

A feminist interpretation of the term autonomy, Chakravarti argues, would stress "freedom from patriarchal control within the family and society." Thus women have demanded legal reforms that would address power imbalances within the family, and also the "right to productive resources," for instance through the reform of inheritance laws or for land redistribution in women's names (Chakravarti, 2005, p. 42).

The need for the autonomy of feminist organisations arises out of the necessity of a space where women can both conceptualise patriarchy and develop and debate "goals, tactics, and strategies," independent of left and democratic movements (Chakravarti, 2005, p. 43).

Yet organisational autonomy has itself not been considered adequate to answer the question of 'autonomy for what.' G. Ajay writes that the pre-emergency Progressive Organisation of Women in Andhra Pradesh conceptualised autonomy in terms of structural autonomy and separate constituencies from the Marxist-Leninist parties active in the state. He contrasts this to an ideological or tactical separation from these

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[43] One interesting illustration of this aspect of autonomy was given by Sandhya Gokhale's recounting of the conditions under which she joined the Forum Against Rape in Mumbai. She describes how her initial intention was to recruit women from Forum into the left group to which she belonged. Yet she became so involved, she says, and her feminist perspective grew so much, that she withdrew from the left group. This, she says, is what autonomy means: developing one's own perspective and deciding one's own path. Sandhya Gokhale, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.

groups. The POW, he argues, was unable to concretise a political vision of its own and the meaning of autonomy remained ambiguous (Ajay, 2002, pp. 137-138).

The Current Terrain of Feminist Politics

How does feminist politics today differ from feminist politics as it has occurred in the past? Firstly, feminism is far more institutionalised in forms like women's and gender studies centres, feminist NGOs, et cetera. Secondly, there is legislation on a number of the issues that feminists have identified as particularly affecting women: this is especially true of various forms of gendered violence. Definitions of rape have been extended beyond penile penetration; stalking, acid-throwing, sexual harassment et cetera have been defined and legislated. Challenges in the legislative/judicial realm do not extend today just to the enactment of legislation, but to the implementation of existing laws.

Feminist politics today encompasses a range of actors. We have already mentioned collectives and NGOs; the field of feminist politics also includes women's wings of political parties, women's and gender studies centres, websites, newspapers, feminist professionals (for example, lawyers), academics, filmmakers, and individuals who espouse a feminist politics. Discussions of feminism are not limited to collectives, NGOs or academic settings, but also take place in the mainstream and popular media.[44] Thus there are now multiple avenues for feminist politics to be expressed, and multiple actors that are active within the terrain of such politics.

Despite the various challenges before autonomous feminist politics, new organisations have arisen that espouse such a politics. These new groups represent both continuities and changes within the autonomous women's movement. For example, they may take the form of the autonomous collective, as autonomous groups have in the past; yet they may have different views on what exactly the group is to be autonomous of, and perceive threats to autonomy differently. Some examples of new collectives are given below, which espouse an autonomous feminist politics.

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[44] For some examples of discussions on feminism in the English media, see Butalia, 2017; Govindarajan, 2016; Nair, 2017; Pillai, 2017; PolicyTimes Bureau, 2017; Rao, 2017; Rattanpal, 2015; and Singh, 2017. These articles include interviews and discussions with feminists, reports of significant events and campaigns in the history of Indian feminism, and of the nature of feminism itself. They indicate a widespread interest in feminism, including its nature and history in the Indian context.

Stree Sangam (now LABIA) in Mumbai, for example, emerged as a collective of lesbian and bisexual women in 1995, and considers itself part of the AWM and the queer movement (LABIA, 2013).

Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression emerged in 2009 as a network of women activists across the country, working on the issues of sexual violence with a particular focus on state-perpetrated violence. The network terms itself a non-funded grassroots initiative, and has members from other feminist groups, mass organisations, human rights organisations et cetera (Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, n.d.).

Zehen in Mumbai terms itself a "myth busting, intersectional, body loving, sex positive, Queer* feminist collective (Zehen, 2015)." The group began in 2013, drawing on the history of autonomous groups in Mumbai to develop a non-institutionalised collective space for its activities. It also decided to remain non-funded, so as to be able to set its own agenda.[45]

Pinjra Tod is an autonomous collective in Delhi. Since its formation in 2015, it has campaigned against unaffordable, discriminatory and inadequate accommodation facilities for women students in Delhi University and other universities (Pinjra Tod, n.d.). It also campaigns around various other students' issues, for example sexism and sexual harassment (Borpujari, 2016).

Over the last few years, right-wing assertion has become a major issue around which various campaigns have been initiated. Feminists have engaged with the issue, and these campaigns, in various ways. For example, the autonomous collective Saheli has been part of the NoMore campaign, which sought to challenge communal politics like that of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), prior to the 2014 general election (Saheli, 2014). Members of the Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai have been petitioners (in their personal capacities) in a writ petition challenging the Maharashtra government's 2015 ban on the sale and possession of beef (Bhasin & Rajput, 2016). Pinjra Tod in Delhi has protested against harassment of their activists by members of the BJP student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, in Delhi University (Pinjra Tod, 2016). These challenges to the right wing must be seen against the

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[45] Shreya Sen, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.

broader understanding of communal politics are particularly harmful to women. Pinjra Tod, for instance, describes the politics of the ABVP as "brahmanical and patriarchal," which oppresses women in particular ways (see for example, Pinjra Tod, 2016; Pinjra Tod, 2017b). Saheli, too, speaks of the impact of fundamentalism on women:

> On the one hand, is the militant mobilisation of the right wing in the name of religion, culture, tradition that is increasing its control of women, both within and across communities. With aggressive moral policing, assertion of dress codes, imposition of regressive traditions, the increased ritualisation of everyday life, the restrictions on women's sexuality, mobility and freedoms are actually on the rise today. On the other hand, the growing power and violence exerted by caste and community panchayats is having a greater social impact today than ever (Saheli, n.d.-b).

Opposition to communalisation has also come through in the campaign surrounding Hadiya, a medical student from Kerala who converted to Islam, and whose subsequent marriage was annulled by the High Court of Kerala (Express Web Desk, 2018). Pinjra Tod activists have drawn attention to the manner in which the High Court infantalised the young woman, and sought an investigation into whether she had been brainwashed. They have also argued that the Supreme Court, before which the matter went on appeal, has also given in to the politics of the Hindu right:

> Seeing Hadiya's choice of religion and a partner in the RSS built bogey framework (sic) of "Love Jihad" and tangentially ordering an NIA investigation into the matter suggests a succumbing by the court to the discourse being set by the Hindu right wing (Pinjra Tod, 2017a).

Other activists have protested against the links been made between Hadiya's conversion and marriage as an instance of 'love jihad' (Mumbai for Hadiya, 2017). Thus the campaign opposing Hadiya's virtual house arrest has been conducted by both drawing on her rights as an adult, and by challenging the communalisation of her case.

In recent years, feminists have sought to make feminist politics more inclusive, in particular by examining and campaigning for the issues of those at the 'margins' – i.e. those who are not upper-class, Hindu, savarna, heterosexual and cis women. While

some attempts emphasise the women's different locations and experiences, others try to show the common structural grounds of women's oppression and their interconnections with other structures and identities. Additionally, there have been attempts by women's groups to work more closely with anti-caste organisations. For example, a two-day long seminar was organised by the national network Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) in 2015, titled 'Resisting Caste & Patriarchy: Building Alliances'. WSS stated that the purpose of the seminar was

> to strengthen our dialogues and alliances around Babasaheb Ambedkar's foundational insight – that the annihilation of caste cannot be fulfilled without the annihilation of patriarchy. The objective was also to explore the question of how our struggles against patriarchy, caste and religious orthodoxy could draw from Ambedkar's legacy to redefine feminism in the Indian context (women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, 2015).

Sexual harassment has emerged as a major issue in recent years. While the feminist engagement with sexual harassment can be traced to the advocacy attempts which resulted in the Vishaka judgment of 1997, recent years have seen a few cases of sexual harassment that involve men in senior positions of the judiciary and other establishments: Governor V. Shanmuganathan, Justice A. K. Ganguly, Justice Swatanter Kumar, and R. K. Pachauri (Ghosh, 2014; PTI, 2016, 2017; Sen, 2014). Other cases of sexual harassment too have come to light. Perhaps the best-known examples are the cases in Jadavpur University in 2014, which gave rise to the Hokkolorob movement due to mishandling by the university authorities and police action against protesting students (Choudhary, 2014; Ghoshal, 2014). Sexual harassment at Christ University, Bengaluru, and the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata received media attention, while widespread protests took place after cases of street harassment in Banaras Hindu University (Express Web Desk, 2017; FP Staff, 2016; Mukerjee, 2016; NL Team, 2017). Sexual harassment in other areas, such as the textile and film industries, has been made public, in some cases due to highly visible forms of protest ("'Constant Sexual Harassment'," 2016; Suneetha, Nagaraj, Sajaya, & Madabhushi, 2018; Yellapantula, 2018).

While sexual harassment is an issue that collectives like Saheli have taken up in the past, at present Pinjra Tod has campaigned for the establishment of Internal

Complaints Committees in colleges, as is mandated by the University Grants Commission. However the event which has brought the greatest attention to sexual harassment is the creation of the 'name and shame' list by Raya Sarkar. In October 2017, Sarkar, a US-based lawyer, invited entries to a list they were creating, of academics who have sexually harassed students. Sarkar maintained the list as a public post on their Facebook page. Within a day, the list contained nearly 60 names. It also mentioned the institute and country in which the alleged harasser was based; however, few other details were forthcoming (Sur, 2017).

The next day, 14 feminists issued a statement, published on the website www.kafila.online, expressing their dismay at the publication of such a list on Facebook, and asking that it be taken down. They appealed to those who had faced sexual harassment to follow due process, by lodging cases in their respective institutions, and stated that the larger feminist community would stand by all complainants (Kidwai et al., 2017).

The debate that emerged out of these two acts – of the creation of the list, and what came to be known as the Kafila statement – was highly charged. A large part of this debate came to revolve around feminists and the nature of the feminist movement. The latter was seen by many as fundamentally divided along lines of caste, generation, and status.[46]

The list and its aftermath illustrate certain features of contemporary feminist politics. There are two issues which can be examined here: the strategies and tactics employed by feminists, and the internal hierarchies amongst activists.

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[46] Much of the debate on the original list posted by Raya Sarkar, and at least one subsequent list that was circulated, took place on individuals' Facebook pages, within online communities, in online journals et cetera. Some pieces that illuminate the contours of this debate, other than those cited above, are Krishnan, 2017, Menon, 2017, and P. Singh, 2017 (further views of some of the signatories to the statement which appeared on www.kafila.online); Wahlang, 2017 (the author argues that the failure of 'due process' causes sexual harassment victims to turn to social media); Roy, 2017 (the author engages with the claim that responses to the list indicate a generational divide in Indian feminism); Badami, 2017 (the author engages with the list as a feminist strategy); Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, 2017 (statement of the collective on sexual harassment); Shukla & Kundu, 2017 (the authors point to the elite status of both the Kafila statement signatories and the men named on the list); and Rowena, 2017 (a Bahujan perspective on sexual harassment). Most recently, debates have taken place over Nivedita Menon's description of online activists as 'fingertip feminists' (Menon, 2018). Respondents have argued that due process itself may fail, that social media is of growing importance for activism, and have challenged the castigation of young women as apolitical and ahistorical in their views (Arni, 2018; Bhalerao, 2018; T, 2018).

One major change which has impacted feminist politics is the spread of digital technology and social media. These provide a new terrain on which politics can be done, and indeed new ways of doing politics. For instance, Sujatha Subramanian argues that digital technology not only provides a new tool for mobilisation for protest activity, but has also changed the meanings of activism:

> feminist activism in online spaces has contributed to the creation of spaces where women have been able to create new subjectivities and relationships, and contest rightwing patriarchal control over their expressions (Subramanian, 2015, p. 73).

Social media is generally credited with providing new spaces for feminist discussion. However evaluations of the role of social media in this regard, are not entirely positive. For example, Madabhushi, Wahlang and Joshua argue that discussions on the Facebook group 'Hyderabad for Feminism' frequently reflect member's defensiveness and inability to acknowledge their errors (Madabhushi, Wahlang & Joshua, 2015). Similarly, Jaya Sharma points to how social media debates can be sharply polarised. "Facebook is not conducive to debate and discussion. Someone shares a view, people either agree or take diametrically opposite views, leaving no space for nuance (Sharma, 2015, p. 11)."

The publication of the list and its aftermath were seen as indicating the emergence of new forms of feminist mobilising and strategising. Rama Lakshmi (Rama Lakshmi, 2017) writes that Indian feminism is in a phase of "networked feminism." The first stage of networked feminism, she writes, involved "mobilis[ing] online and march[ing] offline." In the second stage of networked feminism, which we see today, activists "mobilise online, act online."

> This new version follows different rules. No leader, no pressures of dealing with police lathi charge, no resources/costs, no loss of workdays. All you have to do is hashtag and share. In the "sharing" economy, decision-making is decentralised, there is no gatekeeping on laws and ethical boundaries. No lengthy discussions about risk-assessment and direction (Rama Lakshmi, 2017).

While the list was made public online and much of the debate and discussion surrounding it was also online, not all activism following the list has been online. For example, Pinjra Tod organised a discussion on the #MeToo campaign and on sexual

harassment in the media (Pinjra Tod, 2017c). Students of Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), have come together to organise events to discuss sexual harassment on their campus (Questioning the Silence, 2018a). One public event organised by the group is described as a discussion on sexual harassment in academia following the Sarkar list (Questioning the Silence, 2018b). Thus while the list itself might only exist digitally, the campaign on sexual harassment also takes place in concrete institutional settings, where encounters happen face-to-face, involve a great deal of discussion and do indeed carry risks. To see Indian feminism as being in a 'networked' phase might miss some of the activism that continues to take place in the 'real world', and which draws on tactics that have long been part of feminist activism.

Conclusion

In the following chapters, we will turn to activists' own narratives to help us understand their experiences of the movement of which they are or have been a part. These will give us an even richer view of the history and present of the AWM and the visions of its activists.

Throughout the history of the AWM, we see periods of intense growth of activism and widespread campaigns. We also see periods marked by the flagging of feminist energies, but also the maintenance and resurgence of autonomous feminist politics.

In the next chapter, we will examine these trends through the process of mobilisation, and will develop our understanding of this process through activists' narratives.

Chapter Three

Mobilising Women: Past, Present and Future

Since the 2000s, literature pertaining to the AWM has discussed the absence of young women in protests and dharnas, and within the ranks of autonomous collectives in general (see for instance Biswas, 2006; Marik, 2005; Menon-Sen, 2001; N. Menon, 2004). Young women are seen as preferring to join NGOs rather than autonomous groups, unlike an older generation of feminist activists who prioritised participation in autonomous politics and in confrontational and agitational forms of protest. Activists have expressed concern about the dwindling number of attendees at public protest events like dharnas, marches and protest demonstrations. Often this lack of numbers is seen as a sign of a crisis in the AWM, of women choosing different, and less political, forms of politics, and underrating the importance of collective protest.

This posits a fairly uni-dimensional image of mobilisation, which reduces the phenomenon to a question of personal priority, choice or taste; it implies that if women choose a certain form of politics, they will attend demonstrations/protests, and their failure to come indicates their disinterest. Simultaneously, the initial mobilisation of women and formation of autonomous groups is frequently expressed in terms of spontaneity, with women being suddenly galvanised by the open letter written by Vasudha Dhagamwar, Lotika Sarkar, Upendra Baxi and Raghunath Kelkar after the Supreme Court judgement in the Mathura rape case, and coming together to protest this judgment and then form autonomous collectives.

This formulation does not ask why women *do* embark upon collective politics; this is treated as something 'normal,' and deviation from it is what must be explained. For example, Kalyani Menon-Sen writes that

> mass mobilisation and street protests appear to be increasingly passé as
> forms of political action. Today, the older generation – women who were
> students in the seventies – constitutes a significant proportion of the
> women for whom *dharnas* and *morchas* still hold meaning as forms of

protest and who can be relied upon to 'come out on the streets' at short
notice (Menon-Sen, 2001).

However the question is not why dharnas and morchas have lost their meaning, if indeed they have; it is also, why were/are they meaningful for an older generation of women to begin with? What drew women into this form of politics? Approaching the question of mobilisation in this manner can also help us look for reasons as to why people get drawn to particular forms of politics, beyond their own personal choices and dispositions.

In this chapter, we will first examine how mobilisation to social movements has been theorised, and then discuss patterns of mobilisation to autonomous collectives.

Defining Mobilisation

Hank Johnston defines mobilisation as the process of "activating, marshalling, and putting to use groups and material resources – and often cultural resources – to achieve the success of a collective effort or campaign (Johnston, 2007, p. 3065)." The term 'activating' resonates with Charles Tilly's definition of mobilisation: "the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life (Tilly, 1978, p. 69)." These definitions indicate that while resources may exist, only under certain circumstances do they become available to movements.

The concept of resources encompasses both people and other resources like money, printing presses, offices, meeting spaces, et cetera. In this chapter, we will examine the mobilisation of people for social movements, also called 'recruitment' to movements.

Theorising Mobilisation: Structures and Networks

Theories of social movements have looked at the manner in which structures and networks contribute to movement mobilisation. While many theorists argue that people come to be part of movements due to their participation in a particular group or network, others have looked at how such membership may inhibit movement participation.

Other theories of social movements, however, stress that rather than attracting isolated individuals, movements attract persons who are already integrated into social networks.

Steven Buechler (2011) describes the trend of resource mobilisation theory (RMT) within the study of social movements as examining the structural factors which give rise to social movements. RMT challenges the idea that social movements arise from the spontaneous action of isolated individuals.

For example, Buechler describes how Anthony Oberschall uses empirical evidence to contest the idea that social movements comprise of people who are isolated and alienated. Oberschall shows how "individuals who are socially connected are more likely to join movements (Buechler, 2011, p. 112)." He describes two types of pre-existing social organisation: communal organisation (long-standing, traditional ties, which may be based on ethnicity, religion, or culture) and associational organisation (formal, contractual ties, for example of labour unions or professional associations) (Buechler, 2011, p. 112). Buechler describes the assumption of "pre-existing social organisation" as being part of the "bedrock" of the resource mobilisation approach (Buechler, 2011, p. 113).

Doug McAdam (McAdam, 1985) also highlights the importance of examining the structural factors that give rise to movements. McAdam defines social movements as "organised efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation (McAdam, 1985, p. 25)."

McAdam stresses the importance of existing organisational bases for the success of movements. He identifies four resources that such organisations make available to movements:

1.   Membership: Recruitment though existing organisations and networks can occur in two ways. First, existing organisations and networks may "serve as the associational network out of which a new movement emerges (McAdam, 1985, p. 45)." (For example, women's movement activists being recruited from abolitionist networks). Second, "bloc recruitment" may occur when the members of one organisation or movement are recruited en masse into another.

2.   Established structures of solidary incentives: If groups "defin[e] movement participation as synonymous with group membership (McAdam, 1985, p. 46)," then for individual members, group membership requires movement participation as these become synonymous. The rewards of group membership are transferred to movement participation: individuals can only access those rewards by participating in the movement.

3.   Communication networks: "the established organisations of the aggrieved population also constitute a communication network or infrastructure (McAdam, 1985, p. 46)" which also form a resource for movements. In the absence of a network, a movement will not "take hold;" conversely, a movement may spread rapidly if a strong network exists. Thus movements may tap into the existing communication networks within a population.

4.   Leadership: movements require centralised direction and coordination, and thus a recognised leadership. Such leaders come from the organisations that form the mass base of the movement, and might be amongst the first to join new movements (McAdam, 1985, p. 47).

McAdam illustrates his theory with the example of the civil rights movement in the USA, from 1930 to 1970, describing how networks within the Black population in the southern states of the country were recruited through Black churches and colleges, and civil rights organisations. Mobilisation within the northern states, he argues, was limited due to the absence of such strong organisations within Black populations, and the inability of already-existing organisations to establish themselves (McAdam, 1985, p. 190).

According to McAdam, the answer to the question, 'who participates in movements,' cannot be sought in the level of deprivation felt by a population, or any socio-psychological answer: all persons who feel aggrieved and deprived do not participate in movements. Rather, participants are those who are well-integrated into the existing organisational structures of a community. Poorly-integrated persons will not come

together to form the groups that constitute movements (McAdam, 1985, pp. 127–130).[1]

McAdam subsequently elaborates upon the idea that recruitment occurs through existing networks, and that "activists are expected to be more integrated than nonactivists into networks, relationships, or communities that serve to "pull" them into activism (McAdam, 1986, p. 76)." He describes three ways in which such recruitment may occur:

1.   New movements may draw recruits from existing movement organisations, or one movement may result from the merger of existing movement organisations.

2.   An individual movement activist may recruit a single person into a movement.

3.   A person who identifies as an activist and/or is part of an activist subculture may join a movement, even in the absence of personal contact of the kind mentioned in points 1 and 2 above (McAdam, 1986, pp. 76-77).

Jo Freeman (Freeman, n.d) examines the structural factors which contribute to social movement membership. In a paper first published in 1983, she asks how the people who form social movements initially come together, and how they come to share similar worldviews. Reviewing the existing literature on recruitment to social movements, she points to three factors:

1.   There is a need for a pre-existing communications network or infrastructure within the social base of the movement. Groups of unorganised people may come

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[1] In a later article, McAdam presents a slightly revised view of the idea of recruitment and activism (McAdam, 1986), writing that people do not "join" movements in the sense in which one may join a formal movement organisation. People may participate in social movement activity in many ways: for example, attending a single speech by a movement leader, or donating money to a movement organisation. It is difficult to say who is in a movement and who is out of it; the boundaries of a movement are not clear and finite. Thus it is more meaningful to examine varying types of activism and ask how people come to be involved within them: for example, "specific demonstrations, actions, campaigns, or other bounded forms of activism (McAdam, 1986, p. 67)." In this case, we must not assume that the same pattern of recruitment applies to all forms of activism. McAdam differentiates activism along two axes: cost and risk. He examines two forms of activism: low cost/low risk and high cost/high risk. Empirical evidence suggests that the major factor which prompts any person to participate in low cost/low risk activism is that of "prior contact with a recruiting agent." The participant need not necessarily display any kind of ideological agreement with the goals of the movement/campaign that they attend. High cost/high risk activism is embarked upon through a more complex process: "An intense ideological identification with the values of the campaign acts to "push" the individual in the direction of participation while a prior history of activism and integration into supportive networks acts as the structural "pull" that encourages the individual to make good on his strongly held beliefs (McAdam, 1986, pp. 86-87)."

together for small local protests, but will be unable to sustain any long-term action. "If a movement is to spread rapidly, the communications network must already exist. If only the rudiments of a network exist, movement formation requires a high input of "organising" activity."

2.   The communications network must be co-optable i.e. "it must be composed of likeminded people whose backgrounds, experiences, or location in the social structure make them receptive to the ideas of a specific new movement."

3.   A precipitant: either a crisis, or one or more persons organising in a new direction or propounding a new idea.

Freeman examines four social movements in the United States of America in the 1960s and 1970s – the civil rights movement, New Left/student's movement, women's liberation movement and welfare rights movement – and looks at their organisation along the lines of the factors listed above. She states that

> There appear to be four essential elements involved in movement formation: (1) the growth of a preexisting communications network that is (2) cooptable to the ideas of the new movement; (3) a series of crises that galvanise into action people involved in a cooptable network, and/or (4) subsequent organising effort to weld the spontaneous groups together into a movement (Freeman, n.d).

Freeman gives various examples: within the civil rights movement, participants in the southern states of the USA were mobilised through Black colleges and churches, while the absence of Black colleges, and the weakness of the churches, had an impact on mobilisation in the northern states. Regarding the issue of co-optability, she discusses various women's networks and associations; Business and Professional Women's clubs could not be co-opted as they had rejected feminism, while women working for commissions on the status of women could be, as their work exposed them to cases of sex discrimination and thus drove home the need for change. Crises serve to "crystallise and focus discontent": one example is Rosa Parks' refusal to vacate her seat on a bus, which became a rallying point for the civil rights' movement. However, Freeman highlights that crises can only "catalyse a well-formed communications network." A crisis may bring existing discontent into sharp relief, but for a movement to result, a network must already exist, or must be built up.

Expanding on this last point, Freeman writes that analysis of the role of organisers in social movements has been relatively neglected. She describes movement organisers within the women's liberation movement: women who had become disenchanted with student, youth and anti-war politics, and formed their own organisations. These young women were experienced organisers:

> They knew how to utilise the infrastructure of the radical community, the underground press, and the free universities to disseminate women's liberation ideas. ... Many travelled widely to left conferences and demonstrations, and most used the opportunity to talk with other women about the new movement. In spite of public derision by radical men, or perhaps because of it, young women steadily formed new groups around the country (Freeman, n.d).

The theories of movement recruitment that we have examined focus on the importance of pre-existing networks for mobilisation/recruitment to movements. McCarthy, Zald and McAdam term such networks 'mobilising structures', which they describe as building blocks of movements. Mobilising structures are the "collective vehicles, formal or informal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, p. 3)."

Jackie Smith and Tina Fetner write that "most analysts accept that without some effort to organise, no movement can mobilise a sustained flow of resources and energy toward social change efforts (Smith & Fetner, 2007, p. 28)." Nonetheless, the concept of mobilising structures has been criticised on various grounds. Scholars point to mobilisation being a process, one which has an inherent dynamism; they also point, significantly, to the different roles that structures may play during the various phases of a movement.

Jasper and Goodwin (1999) make a number of observations and critiques of the concept. Firstly, they point to the work of Jasper and Poulsen (1995) and Luker (1984), which examines mobilisation outside of mobilising structures. Luker shows that two-thirds of the recruits to the pro-life movement in California, USA, had approached movement organisations independently. Jasper and Poulsen (1995), in their study of the animal rights movement in the USA, argue that while movements mobilise members through existing networks, they also try to attract strangers. They point to different methods of recruitment for these two categories, stating that

"different mechanisms work to recruit strangers (through moral shocks and cultural meanings) and friends (through proximity, affective bonds, and cultural meanings) (J. M. Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, p. 508)." 'Moral shocks' refer to

> Event[s] or situation[s] [that create] such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts. These are usually public events, unexpected and highly publicised…but they can also be the experiences of individuals...(J. M. Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, p. 498)

Within the animal rights movement, moral shocks were provided by images of animals being subjected to laboratory tests, bleeding and looking terrified (J. M. Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, pp. 505-506). While attempts to recruit strangers may yield fewer results than attempts to recruit friends, the larger numbers of strangers, relative to friends, does make it possible to recruit more in absolute terms. Strangers are sought to be recruited through such means as direct mail, door-to-door canvassing, public displays and lectures, et cetera (J. Jasper, 1999, pp. 74-75).

Secondly, they argue that as a concept, 'mobilising structure' is too loosely defined. It denotes networks ranging from informal friendship networks to formal movement organisations. The concept becomes so broad as to lose its explanatory value, as some sort of structure would certainly be discernable behind any movement, rendering the concept trivial. Additionally, they argue that structures may result in demobilisation: individuals may be caught between competing structures; and, to paraphrase Jasper and Goodwin, affectual relationships may threaten group solidarity. The formalisation of movement organisations may result in demobilisation if such organisations are cut off from their mass bases and instead seek support from elites.

Thirdly, Jasper and Goodwin point out that mobilising structures are assumed to be "pre-existing structures," and not "creations of movement organisers (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, pp. 41-42)." The authors refer to the idea of 'emergent ties,'

> meaning that a recruit will meet people in the movement and develop personal bonds with them. ... This kind of tie, created by or within the movement itself, is crucial for the retention of members. It is not at all a preexisting "structure," but the result of a movement's own activities, guided by strategic choices (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, p. 46).

The authors refer to a kind of reification of the concept of mobilising structures – they are seen as almost "physical structures," and not the "information, ideas and emotions that flow through them (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, p. 42)."

Others have examined how pre-existing structures might prevent or impede mobilisation. Verta Taylor (Taylor, 1989) uses the concept of 'abeyance structures' to denote a particular movement form that emerges when a movement loses support, and highly committed members find themselves marginalised and isolated. "A movement in abeyance becomes a cadre of activists who create or find a niche for themselves (Taylor, 1989, p. 762)," for example in formal or informal organisations and groups. Abeyance structures allow activist networks to survive, and sustain a repertoire of goals and tactics, thus providing links between different phases of movement activity. Yet they are exclusive in nature:

> To absorb large numbers of people who are unattached to other structures requires organisations to be inclusive, as happens during the peak mobilisation of social movement organisations. In cycles of decline, however, when challenging groups lack widespread attitudinal support, organisations become exclusive and attempt to expel or hold constant their membership (Taylor, 1989, p. 767).

Taylor gives the example of the National Women's Party (NWP) in the USA. The NWP became highly exclusive from 1940 to 1960, despite a drastically shrinking and increasingly elite membership; and though it undertook various activities and formed coalitions and organisations to appear inclusive, "[it] did not seriously try to build an indigenous base of support (Taylor, 1989, p. 768)." The members, though few, were highly committed:

> Personal ties of love and friendship among members were an important cultural ideal. A willingness to shape personal relationships around the cause was, in large measure, what made possible the intense commitment of members (Taylor, 1989, p. 769).

Taylor argues that abeyance structures may become mobilising structures for a new phase of movement activity (for example, NWP members became founders of chapters of the National Organisation of Women in the 1960s). Yet they do not contribute significantly to mobilisation between such phases: "abeyance is essentially a holding pattern of a group (Taylor, 1989, p. 772)."

Francesca Polletta (Polletta, 2004) examines friendship as a basis for solidarity in the women's liberation movement in the USA. For small, localised groups, friendship formed the basis of solidarity between members, providing a sense of intimacy and trust that allowed women to take risky and creative collective action. Yet women who were excluded from the friendships circles that formed the leadership of such groups suffered the frustration of being marginalised.

Polletta argues that friendship is characterised by mutual knowledge and trust, voluntarism, and recognition between friends of one another as equals. However it is exclusive, and can only be extended to some people, after which "intensity and trust of all one's friendships suffer." Additionally, a group based on friendship ties might have a less diverse membership:

> …friends tend to choose friends who are like them, in terms of both their values and beliefs and their demographic characteristics. They probably do this both to minimise their own discomfort with difference and to avoid threatening the existing network of friends (Polletta, 2004, p. 154).

When friendship is a basis of group solidarity, activists may be unwilling to formalise any aspect of decision-making because formalisation seems unnatural and inauthentic, at odds with the "informal, voluntary, and private character of friendship." The tendency towards exclusivity hampers the expansion of the group and the diversification of its membership.

> When a movement old guard is made up of friends, its efforts to incorporate newcomers may be compromised by the subtle ways in which members reaffirm their bonds with each other, inadvertently excluding newcomers (Polletta, 2004, p. 154).

Taylor and Polletta both indicate how formal and informal structures may preclude mobilisation instead of encouraging it. Taylor's concept of abeyance structures indicates how mobilising structures play different roles at different times in a movement cycle.

To summarise some of the critiques of the idea of mobilising structures:

1.   The term is vague, and is both tautological and trivial.

2.   Mobilisation can take place in the absence of structures.

3.   Structures need not exist prior to a movement but might emerge through the process of activism.

4.   Structures might be a cause of demobilisation.

These critiques point to the need to look at mobilising structures in a more dynamic manner. Rather than merely asking what structures preceeded a particular movement, it is also important to look at structures and networks as coming into being during the course of a movement, due to the conscious efforts of activists to bring people together. Freeman's point regarding the importance of organisers is important here, as they are the individuals who work to create such networks. We can also ask if mobilising through particular channels excludes some people and/or groups from participation, and what consequences existing groups and activists would bear if mobilisation were to be successful. These points are useful to keep in mind as we examine the ways in which mobilisation to the AWM has taken place over the years. We begin with a brief review of the literature on the subject, and then move on to activists' own narratives.

Mobilisation and the AWM: A Review of Literature

In her essay "Women's Politics in India," Ilina Sen writes:

> The 70s…witnessed the emergence of the 'autonomous' women's movement. During the mid-70s, many educated women took to radical, active politics, and simultaneously promoted an analysis of women's issues. Groups of women came together in many cities. Among the incidents that played a catalytic role in crystallising these meetings into organisational efforts were the Mathura rape case (1978) and the Maya Tyagi rape case (1980). ... During the late 70s and 80s many similar urban groups emerged in Calcutta, Bangalore, Pune and elsewhere (I. Sen, 2004, pp. 196-197).

For Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, the roots of women's collectives lay in the consciousness developed over the decade of the 1970s, when women participated in "alternative development activities, mass struggles and agitations." Though this political involvement was "mainly initiated by men and political parties," the authors write, "it helped women become aware of their militancy and collective strength. It created a conscious collective basis for other influences...to act on (Gandhi & Shah,

1992, p. 19)." After the emergency, the "new consciousness of women and on women's issues concretised into a host of small voluntary women's groups (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 20)."

Gandhi and Shah describe some of these groups: the Forum Against Rape was founded in 1979 "by women who had come for a discussion on the Open Letter written by four lawyers" in the Mathura rape case. Saheli, in Delhi, "was started by a group of women who had protested together in several dowry murder cases (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, pp. 286-287)."

Describing the POW as "the first women's group of the contemporary women's movement," Radha Kumar writes that the group "comprised of women from the Maoist movement (Kumar, 1993, p. 104)." The POW was founded in 1974. In 1975, she writes, there was "the sudden development of a whole spate of feminist activities in Maharashtra." Kumar argues that though some hold that the International Women's Year in 1975 may have brought women's issues into focus, women would have organised regardless, as there was already a widespread interest in women's issues in Maharashtra. Maoist women in Pune formed the Purogami Mahila Sangathan, and in Bombay, the Stree Mukti Sangathana. The end of the emergency led to a "renewal of some of the movements of the early to the mid-seventies, and women's groups were formed all over the country, but mainly in the major cities" (Kumar, 1993, p. 106). Additionally, she describes the organisations Samta and Stri Sangharsh in Delhi as being composed mainly of university students, while members of the Bombay-based groups tended to be "from the far left, from civil liberties' organisations, revolutionary groups, independent trade unions, etc (Kumar, 1993, p. 111)."

The description of the formation of the Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad given by Radha Kumar differs from that given by K. Lalita, a former POW member (Lalita, 1988). Lalita discusses the formation of the POW in the context of political situation in the country and Andhra Pradesh in particular in the 1960s, as well as the student politics in Osmania University (OU), Hyderabad, especially the formation of a radical student group in OU that "[professed] scientific socialism as the only solution to all problems (Lalita, 1988, p. 55)."

The POW was formed, Lalita writes, by a core group of six to ten young women students of OU. These young women were from middle and upper-middle class

families, which had certain expectations of them regarding "marriage, family and traditional patterns of work at home (Lalita, 1988, p. 56)." These expectations jarred with their experiences of university life: "college should be a place of self-development in a woman's life just as much as in a man's. Unfortunately, this is not true for women in India (Lalita, 1988, p. 57)." The sense of being treated differently, and unequally, from one's brothers is apparent in this essay: women were expected to attend university but were not allowed to go out alone and were expected to return home promptly. This awareness fed into the anti-dowry campaign the group later launched.

Lalita writes that the "freedom" which was given to college-going women was not "independence." Also,

> Although the root cause for the origin of the women's movement was the oppression they faced at home, the immediate political context was the radicalism of the student movement in Andhra in the early 1970s which served to give direction to the movement for women's emancipation (Lalita, 1988, p. 57).

The group started with small study groups, and then in August 1973, participated and mobilised other women for the anti-price rise campaign in OU, and also campaigns to reverse the rustication of students in OU. Yet they noted that women were not attending in large numbers; they ascribed this to the "traditional passivity" of women, which made it difficult for them to take initiative in a mixed gathering. Thus a separate women's organisation was needed.

The POW came into being in September 1974, with 500 members and a formal structure including office-bearers. Lalita writes that "the activists insisted on the need for an autonomous organisation" and that while they were prepared to "work together with male comrades, they would never merge with them (Lalita, 1988, p. 59)."

The POW worked to build its networks within the city, visiting the women who had enrolled as members. Lalita recalls the efforts that the POW made to engage the women who had joined, including visiting them and their families.

> I remember that summer, '74, 5-6 of us and maybe 10 other women who were key members of the organisation… [We had] some 500 members in the city. So we went to each one of their houses, dropped in on their

The group then took up anti-dowry, anti eve-teasing, anti-obscenity, and anti-price rise campaigns. After October 1974, it started committees in various districts of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh; basti service committees in Hyderabad mobilised women in bastis.

POW activists and office-bearers were arrested during the emergency, in 1975 and in 1976. By 1975, "80% of the organisers of the POW had become members of the Marxist Leninist Party." Several went underground at the time; the organisation, Lalita writes, was branded as a 'front organisation' by the police, and the general members of the organisation were threatened. This brought about its "rapid disintegration (Lalita, 1988, p. 65)."

Lalita writes that the POW "lacked cadres" who would have "maintained the tempo of the growth of the organisation." The organisation was "not given time to consolidate," to focus on one or a few issues, instead of a series of diverse campaigns (Lalita, 1988, pp. 66-67).

The sense one derives of the history of POW from this account is markedly different from that given by either Kumar or Mehrotra (Mehrotra, 2001). In the latter accounts, the POW was formed by women who were members of left parties, from which they dissociated themselves. Yet Lalita's account is of a group that, once formed, slowly became closer to the formal Marxist-Leninist groups and student politics in the city and at Osmania University, while standing firm on the need to develop and retain its autonomy.

Shaila Desouza describes the formation of the Goa-based organisation, Bailancho Saad, in 1986. Bailancho Saad, she writes, was formed by a group of "educated urban middle class" women who had been "associated with the progressive students union or with the civil liberties movement" (Desouza, 2009, pp. 135-142). The group began as a discussion forum and then began taking on case work. It began with 15-20 members, and others joined over time. Some women who had approached the organisation for assistance with their personal problems, for example of domestic

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[2] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

violence, later stayed on as members. Others approached the organisation for research projects, or heard about it through the news media, and decided to join.

Desouza's description of how women came to be members of Bailancho Saad is one of the few available descriptions of the process of recruiting members after the initial group formation. Similarly, Lalita's description of the formation and disintegration of the POW is the richest available description of the trajectory of such a group.

In her book *Toward Empowerment*, Leslie Calman discusses the women's movement from the perspective of resource mobilisation theory. This model stresses leadership, communication channels, and an organisational structure as prerequisites for the initiation of movements. The autonomous groups, Calman writes, could draw upon the leadership and communication networks they already had in place, given that they were already activists. By virtue of being involved in left politics, many activists already had various skills which they could use in the new movement.

Calman draws a fairly straightforward link between the left parties and the autonomous groups. Left parties and organisations are, here, the mobilising structure upon which women drew to form autonomous groups, and also which gave them the civic skills to carry out their political activities (Calman, 1992).

In the next section, we will examine how women were drawn into autonomous politics, and the changes in patterns of mobilisation over time, through activists' own narratives.

Mobilisation to the AWM

In this section, we discuss the manner in which autonomous groups came to be formed, and how women came to be part of the autonomous women's movement. We begin with narratives of women who became politically active in the 1970s and proceed chronologically through the next five decades.

When women are asked how they came to be politically active, their answers, taken together, cover three broad areas: their personal experiences, the political atmosphere of the times in which they became active, and their knowledge of groups and networks through which they came to know and become involved in politics (whether feminist politics or other forms of activism).

Many women speak of their personal experiences of harassment, discrimination and violence. One of the most interesting accounts is that of Lalita in Hyderabad, who discusses the experiences women students such as herself had in Hyderabad in the early and mid-1970s. Women were studying, preparing themselves for public examinations and careers. Yet their socialisation at home prepared them for marriage and motherhood, and they were expected to submit to restrictions on their mobility.

This experience of discrimination fed into the campaign against dowry. As Lalita says of their understanding of dowry at the time:

> We linked it up with education, we linked it up with the kind of self-concept for the woman... You are an equal to your brother, you're members of the family and you're studying as much as they are, you're going to the University... In every way you are equal to everybody else so why is there a question of devaluing yourself by accepting to pay dowry in marriage. ... And then of course we also ha[d] this left understanding about origin of family, property, state and unless all these issues are dealt with and we struggle for a total change in society, all these things will not go away. But till such a time, we need to fight our own battles and we need to stand on our principles to fight against this dowry system. We go to [our] in-laws' house and then we are the ones providing all kinds of services to the family which is not paid, all this unpaid economic labour you provide, but when you're going as an economic asset to the family why are you paying again?[3]

Deepti Priya Mehrotra speaks of her experiences as a Delhi University student from 1979 onwards.[4] Daily journeys on Delhi Transport Corporation buses were filled with experiences of harassment and molestation, the "fear of groping hands." At the same time, the college atmosphere was unwelcoming of girl students:

> It really was, as gradually one could articulate, a place which was not meant for women really, but just allowing women in, and [with a] 'boys will be boys' kind of attitude.[5]

She speaks of the small proportion of girl students, the absence of a girls' hostel, the unavailability of sanitary napkins on the campus, the tiny, cramped girls' common room, only big enough for a single bed and chair. Male students put up 'chick charts,'

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[3] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[4] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[5] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

posters with crude descriptions and nicknames for female students. She recounts an incident where a group of men entered the college premises a few days before Holi and harassed women on the pretext of celebrating the festival. Women's clothes were torn; one woman who was dragged on the ground had feared she would be raped. The college administration forbade the filing of a police complaint; some women were afraid that if their parents heard of the incident, they would be forced to stop attending college.[6]

For Ammu Abraham, feminist consciousness arose from multiple factors and events which occurred simultaneously. Her experience of marriage was one important factor: it was this which brought home to her the fact that no matter what she thought of herself, in the eyes of the wider society, she was a woman like any other:

> Before marriage one is not thinking of oneself as a woman actually, and one is in some other world altogether, but with marriage... two years, three years down the road you suddenly realise, whether you think of yourself as such or not, you will be treated as a woman, by the entire society. So there is no way of escaping it, you will be joining the condition of women in general, whether you like it or not, whether you thought of yourself as a woman or not.[7]

Around this time she was also reading Marxist literature and Engels' *Critique of the Family, Private Property and the State*. She was critical of the book, she says, because its discussion of the community of women gave men the impression that women were property to be held in common. At this time, she was being stalked by a member of the political group of which she was a part, and her stalker felt that women were property meant to be shared.

Ammu also became aware of the torture of Naxalite women by the police, of how women had metal rods inserted into their vaginas and rectums.

> I was under shock after reading this, that this is happening somewhere in India and we didn't have a clue, and basically these are specific forms of torture meant for women. So when you're talking about feminism it has different strands from there, it's not as if I worked with a particular group of working-class women, I didn't, but some critique of the family which

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[6] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[7] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

doesn't belong to Engels but much more towards a feminist slant was there.[8]

Women in various left groups also experienced sexism and discrimination. Vibhuti Patel, on being asked how she became interested in women's issues, replies,

> [Within] the group with which I was working...I was treated as a child prodigy because [I was] going in [my] school uniform and bag and addressing a May Day rally of 5000 workers. But I saw that the same comrades were very patriarchal when it came to their daughters... They would restrict their daughters or their wives, there were cases of wife abuse [and] sexual harassment. And once I had an affair they also started treating me as my boyfriend's property, so that was very demeaning because they said that...now she will just produce children and look after the babies. So they wrote me off, that was also very humiliating because the seven years I had worked for that group and I was an independent person, I was writing, I was moving all over the country independently. ... I never used my being a woman as an excuse not to do any work, whatever male comrades did, I did. In fact even more because male comrades, after the discussion they [would] just go and sit and chat, while we women also cooked and provided meals and all. And...not only with me, all over India this was happening, because my generation of women who were ideologically inclined to [the] left and became active and started working in trade unions or peasant struggles or tribal struggles, Dalit movement, students movement, anti-price rise struggles, Sampurna Kranti movement, everywhere they were finding the same thing. ... So all of them were disgruntled and we said that there was a need to have one's own space where women's question is not subordinated under any circumstances, neither a political boss or your boyfriend or your husband or family member or not any bosses can subordinate the women's question.[9]

For some women who became active in movement politics in the 1970s and 1980s, the atmosphere of that time figures prominently in their memories and is invoked to explain how they came to be part of such politics.

Speaking of the experience of Hyderabad in the years immediately preceding the emergency, Radhika recounts,

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[8] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[9] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

> Those were heady days, you know, heady with activism, heady with the desire for knowledge. ... And also there was a thirst for knowledge, not just...to be used in careers or anything, [but] that would be beneficial for social change. And women's issues also caught on and...it was very invigorating for me to listen to people talking about women's issues and not just in hushed corners and whispers but openly. ... [I]t was really very empowering.[10]

Nandita Gandhi speaks of her experience in Mumbai, where as a college student she encountered activists from various movements. She recalls how she was exposed to a variety of political perspectives:

> I got active around after the Emergency, after '75. ... I was in university in Kalina. At that time, there were several movements going on, so you couldn't miss it. And obviously there were the people who were the pushers and the movers and shakers of these movements who were also connected. ... So all these different trends were...there, so you got exposed to a whole load of different things... I would say my own personal politicisation started from university, but...really started when I joined a group of students – what Rajni Kothari called non political party formations (sic), he coined that term, because a lot of small groups were coming up. ... [There was] lots of reading, discussion, dialogue going on, so you got drawn into that. Which was really good, because then you had a sort of cafeteria approach, you had a sample of various thoughts which you could look at all these things from. So in that sense it starts from there.[11]

Lalita, who was active in the students' and women's movements in Hyderabad in the years preceding the emergency, describes the many influences on herself and her fellow students. As a college student in Hyderabad, she learned Marxist theory, and recalls being taught by teachers who managed to make such theory interesting and to provide a way of "understanding life itself." "That way of understanding life, society, politics, was very attractive."[12]

Simultaneously, students were exposed to the various movements that had occurred and were occurring in the then undivided Andhra Pradesh and the rest of the country:

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[10] Radhika, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad
[11] Nandita Gandhi, interview with Ponni Arasu, 2011. IAWS archive, SNDT University, Juhu Campus, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.
[12] K. Lalita, interview with CS Lakshmi, 14 December 2006. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

the Naxalbari movement in Bengal, the Srikakulam movement in Andhra. Lalita talks of hearing and reading of the anti-price rise movement in Bombay in the newspapers.

Alongside this was the growing student activism within Osmania University. Students organised study circles, discussions and debates, and participated in an anti-rustication campaign within the university. While women students were sympathetic to the problems of students on the whole, they would rarely participate in demonstrations and meetings. This gave rise to the idea that women had to be organised around their own issues and demands.

The organisation that emerged out of this period of activism, the Progressive Organisation of Women, was subject to repression by the police during the emergency in 1975. While it regrouped after the lifting of the emergency, many of the original activists who had founded the organisation were no longer part of it. Some went on, towards the end of the 1970s, to form the Stree Shakti Sanghatana.

Ranjana Padhi, who participated in the anti-dowry marches in Delhi in the early 1980s, on being asked how she came to know about these events, states that "it was in the air": "it was crackling in the air, the anti-dowry marches, anti-rape, all of this".[13] She speaks of the environment of her college at the time, of being taught by teachers who were feminists and who were involved in the feminist politics of the city. Other events in the city and elsewhere contributed to her politicisation: the Asian Games being held in Delhi, and the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, drew people into voluntary work.

Nirupama, describing how she came to be involved in feminist politics, talked of how she went to university at the time of the emergency and described the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s as one of "great social ferment."[14]

> [A]t that point, very late 70s, early 80s, there was a lot of close connect
> between students, youth, and struggles on the ground. The Bodh Gaya
> movement was going on and the whole Naxalite movement had also
> started so, different streams, different factions. So there were very live
> discussions and very live interactions... It was a time of great social
> ferment, so if you want to know about my general politicisation I think that

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[13]Ranjana Padhi, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[14]Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

was when it happened. ... This was also the period when the women's movement, you know kind of the first flush, in India, Mathura rape case and Satyarani Chaddha's daughter and the dowry deaths, and Delhi was at the epicentre of that. So that kind of brought many of us together, for many of these early demos, the first discussions on starting *Manushi*, that happened on JNU lawns.[15]

She refers to students' interest in various movements and issues:

I think [students] were involved in all of these things, I think there was a lot of interest. ... Naxalbari for example... Students from Kolkata would actually go to the villages, live there, try to understand the class structure, caste structure, and many of these were people from urban backgrounds who never been there before, so it must have been difficult for them, but they made that effort to try and figure out what was happening in the rest of society. So those interconnections, and the JP movement was a fantastic example because...JP spoke of total revolution...[and] that you need a much broader social change. ... Just political change...was not enough, but you needed to work at every level. Like the relations between men and women, you needed to work about land relations in the village, caste relations, so that's what he meant by a total revolution and Bihar was a great centre, colleges and Patna and the connections with the Bodh Gaya movement, led by Patna-based students. So there was a lot that, give and take, coming and going, and many activists' homes even in urban areas, there would be peasant friends visiting there, squatting there, staying there, for as many days as they needed, and vice versa. So there was much more openness.[16]

It is in this atmosphere of activity and activism that women came to know one another and develop ties and networks. When asked specifically how they came to be part of various campaigns, collectives, or groups, women often point to networks of friends, teachers, colleagues and relatives.

Lalita describes her experience of the formation of Stree Shakti Sangathana. She had been active in the pre-emergency POW and, after the emergency, wanted to get back to activism.

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[15] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[16] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

> I want to do something, I want to get back into activism. ... I want to continue being a women's activist, I do not want to give up on that. But how do I go about it.[17]

For her the answer lay in a network of friends and associates: her former teachers, members of the pre-emergency POW, and teachers and students in Osmania University and Centre for English and Foreign Languages.[18]

Vibhuti Patel's account is particularly interesting. She was part of a new left group in her hometown before shifting to Mumbai in her early 20s, where she met other groups and individuals within the new left movement. She describes how, as a newcomer to Bombay, she spoke in Hindi at a May Day rally:

> Then I got spotted, they said "who is she," then many people came and introduced themselves, they invited me, Anuradha Ghandy came and told me you can join Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, then Jyothi Mhapsekar came [and said] we have a group called Stree Mukti Sangathana, you come to our group, so I used to go everywhere. [I was part of] the frontal activity, not in their inner circle, they wouldn't take me in their inner circle and I did not even want [to go] because then the restrictions and the control comes. [But if] they asked me to write about say…riots or any investigation committee I was in, or communal or caste riots, I would do that or I would attend their public meetings and rallies. So that kind of thing. I had friends everywhere.[19]

Nirupama describes how women came together in Delhi:

> See this was before social media, there was still a lot of bush telegraphy going on at some level, you spoke to someone, and they will tell you that there was a meeting at 4 o'clock, and at that time people were interested, to explore alternatives and they would come, and you'd call somebody, tell someone to inform someone else, and they would come.[20]

Chayanika Shah describes how, as a student in IIT in Bombay, she came to know women who were in different movements:

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[17] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad

[18] K. Lalita, personal interview, 2015, Hyderabad. CIELF is now the English and Foreign Languages University.

[19] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

[20] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

I think [in] the early 80s…there were many people of our age who were in different different things, there were women in theatre groups, there were women in people's science movements, there were women in some students politics or the other, but all these people one knew also because they used to come to the women's groups' events, or any protests that happened, and many protests used to happen in those days, so you would keep meeting them. There were women in the media who were also organising on the own, they were women architects who were organising, there were all kinds of people who were organising in the 80s, so you knew many different kinds of people who were part of various movements, and in that sense you kept getting connected to those movements.[21]

She became involved with the Forum Against Oppression of Women, and the Women's Centre, through friends from IIT:

[Women's] Centre was being formed so they needed volunteers and because I knew Sandhya and because Sandhya was part of forming of the Forum Against Rape and that was well-known, we knew people there, so one went there, and that was the only Forum at that time, so Centre was doing its fundraising, so we helped in the fund-raising for Centre, then we started volunteering for Centre, some 2-3 of us from the hostel and then they told us about the Forum meetings so we started going for the Forum meetings, so while I was in IIT I started doing all this.[22]

Not all women joined women's groups because of experiences of discrimination or a desire to be part of feminist politics. Sandhya Gokhale, a student of IIT Bombay during the late 1970s, discusses her own experiences of student politics. When she first met the feminist activist Chayya Datar, who talked to her about the women's question, she says,

I just laughed it off. I couldn't accept what she was saying. ... Girls had a lot of problems in IIT, but we never perceived it as specific to women. It was, okay, my personal problem.[23]

Girls would not confide in each other about the harassment in the institute; thus each student felt she alone was facing problems. Women only felt they were discriminated against in the matter of hostel rules, which differed for male and female students; an

[21] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[22] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[23] Sandhya Gokhale, interviewed by Neera Desai, 14 January 1991. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

agitation was launched that succeeded in changing the girls' hostel rules. "But still," Sandhya says,

> I would not say it was in any way, feminist consciousness. Discrimination at a very obvious level was there but as far as radical thinking was concerned, the class theory always came first.[24]

Sandhya was by this time involved in Bombay's trade union politics. She was part of a Bolshevik Leninist group in 1980, when the Forum Against Rape was formed in Bombay (it soon changed its name to the Forum Against the Oppression of Women). She states that she initially went to the Forum with the intention of "recruiting people." Yet as women's issues began to be taken up in the Forum, she says, "my own thinking [and] perspective of the whole problem" began to change. Though she had not faced discrimination within her natal family, the experience of having a very dominating partner also contributed to her developing a feminist consciousness.[25]

Two of the most striking aspects of the accounts of women who were involved in feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s are the intense levels of activity and the fluidity of the manner of activism. Women were involved with many forms of activism, and being part of a movement did not necessarily imply membership in any organisation. According to Nirupama, the women's movement of the 1970s was characterised by an openness, with activists simultaneously part of different formations and movements. For example, in Bombay, when women met to discuss women's issues, they did so in a group that was autonomous – that was kept independent of other groups and political pressures. But this was only a part of the activism in which they were involved.

> But the same people were also there either as members of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini or as cultural workers... Some of those people came out when the textile strike was going out in Bombay, they came out and they sang there. ... But it's the same person so you cannot compartmentalise, so that, even when they spoke of autonomy, even when they said that the women's issue should be discussed, on its own terms and on its own merits, they were still there in solidarity with many other kinds of movements. So that was the beginning of the autonomous movement and I

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[24] Sandhya Gokhale, interviewed by Neera Desai, 14 January 1991. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.
[25] Sandhya Gokhale, interviewed by Neera Desai, 14 January 1991. SPARROW collections, Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

think the ghettoisation which we had later was something which came in the future.[26]

Speaking of the experience within Delhi, she says,

> Like Manushi, Saheli in the early days did not have a defined membership, it was much more of an open space within the whole. Today it's different, it's like belonging to an organisation, so it's an organisation. I don't think it was quite like that in the first couple of years.[27]

Vani first came to Saheli in the mid 1980s, and joined it in 1990-1991. She speaks of how her first glimpse of the Saheli office and the women in it resonated with her:

> Women like me were gravitating towards places like this, that were signalling change. And that also resonated with the fact that you didn't fit in anywhere else because, something about you was different or something about you wanted to be different, there's always a part of you that is conforming and belonging and then there's a part of you which is rebelling against all of this and you're also looking for kindred souls. [When] you come in [here] you're like, hell it all makes sense, and there are older women who've done this before. ... There are lots of women in the office, there are people talking to women who were being beaten up, there are five women smoking, you have to remember this is 1985-86, its radical to just think of a space where all of this is happening but actually for them, they were already five years down the road, as a formal organisation. So I'm just saying, you start finding spaces like this...[28]

It must be noted, however, that all women who had developed a feminist consciousness at the time did not get drawn into feminist collectives. Some women speak of being interested in politics but not knowing how to get involved or where to go. For instance, Varsha describes feeling "isolated and sad" after the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984; she says that while she knew people were involved in political work following the riots, she was not part of such networks.[29] It is possible that other women who were interested in feminist politics, or had similar experiences of violence, discrimination or sexism, similarly did not know 'where to go' to actually participate.

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[26] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[27] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[28] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi
[29] Varsha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

Women discuss the decline of this form of politics and their own inability to continue to participate in it. Deepti Priya Mehrotra speaks of her journey within feminist politics, which began from the time she commenced her BA degree and continued throughout her student life. The intense activity of those years, she says, could not be sustained beyond a point.

> It was trying to do a lot of things at the same time so it was a natural burn out, it was trying to work on three fronts at least at the same time, the activism, and so much within activism, the academics, so much within it, and then personal life and so much within it, so it was like too much happening, and so some things had to drop out for a while. So the 90s were a different time...[30]

She adds, with reference to her contemporaries as well, that a time came when they had to think of employment and careers:

> Remember it's the time when we had to start thinking about earning some money... That was very much part of it, you couldn't go on being an activist only forever, and how do you make the transition.[31]

Many women who became part of autonomous politics in the 1970s and 1980s are still part of feminist politics in various ways. Yet there was a stage when a drop in the attendance at protest events became palpable. As Ranjana Padhi says, "I noticed the fall in the presence of people in dharnas and demonstrations ... [in the] late 80s very clearly, early 90s definitely."[32]

Some indication of a shift in the atmosphere is also evident from an article titled 'Reaching Out to Women in Colleges,' by Saheli, published in 1988. The article discusses the group's attempts to reach out to college-going women, and states that many women have not heard about women's organisations. The article ends with the statement that the group "need[s] to do more preparatory work":

> We need to spend more time building up informal networks with younger women, as also preparing material on issues of interest. We believe there is a vast potential among young women to carry forward the fight for women's liberation. It is for us to build the bridges and carry the movement forward (Saheli, 1988).

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[30] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[31] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[32] Ranjana Padhi, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

This is not to suggest that women did not become part of autonomous women's groups after the 1990s. Indeed women could and did. However as we turn to women who were in colleges and universities in the 1990s, a different pattern begins to emerge. Though these women are part of feminist politics today, their journeys into feminist politics have been very different. While the narratives of the 1970s and 1980s mention an overall intensity of political activity, those of the 1990s and after make no such references. Women speak of their brushes with feminist issues, with voluntary work or with the study of gender within academia.

As a BA student in Jaipur in the late 1980s, Shals Mahajan told hir classmates and friends that ze might be a feminist. When I ask why ze thought so, ze replies ze "must have read something" and describes reading about various incidents in the newspapers: the anti-Mandal agitation, campaigns against sex-selective abortion, and the Roop Kanwar sati at Deorala and the rallies that followed it. Though aware of these events, ze was unaware of the agitations and campaigns surrounding them.

> Shals: I remember reading about feminist groups condemning [the Deorala sati], and I was furious about it, and I remember fighting with some people around me, and they were like "it's our culture" and I was like, what bullshit culture is this. But I remember reading about those things and reading about dowry deaths and so on and so forth... reading about women protesting. ...
>
> Vasudha: But did you know of any, say, demonstration happening in Jaipur?
>
> Shals: There must [have been] but I wasn't part of any. It was all very peripheral to me, it wasn't very meaningful or anything.[33]

Nandini Rao states that she didn't know of any feminist organisations in Mumbai, where she grew up and attended college in the late 1980s. While in college she was part of nature clubs and various campaigns around cleaning the environment and animal rights. Yet she was not "shaped by what happened in college." She came to know of the Bhanwari Devi rape case in Bhateri, Rajasthan, and she recalls "feeling that anger, but not knowing what [she] could do."[34]

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[33] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[34] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

Though she originally intended a career in French language teaching and interpretation, her voluntary work at an HIV counselling centre during her PhD in the USA changed her plans.

> I literally just dropped by to see [what was happening] and...I [began] to volunteer. And that changed my life actually. ... For me it was like, you meet somebody today, [a] couple of days later [you] go...and say, wasn't so-and-so supposed to come in today and they would say, he died. So it was crazy, I was teaching, I was studying, life was so different, it was so academic, and then I would walk into the AIDS project and people would be dead. And then my academic work made less sense to me. ... I mean something else [was] going on where I would feel the pull already.[35]

Her career upon her return to India began with HIV and AIDS prevention counselling, in an organisation that worked with men. Yet she was interested in the impact the disease had on the women in their lives – wives, daughters, girlfriends. She describes her situation as one where "feminism is in your life but you don't know it."

> My language in my head was already rights-based, it was already feminist, a feminist outlook or perspective, it was there in my practice but it wasn't there in my theory.[36]

Women's journeys into feminist politics differ from those of the decade before them. Identifying as a lesbian, and having relocated to Bombay in the early 1990s, Shals Mahajan was keen to meet women like hirself. Ze came to know that there had been what ze terms a 'gay conference' in SNDT University, contacted the University and asked to be "put in touch with people." After some hesitation, the University put hir in touch with a feminist activist who they said might "know something." She too was initially hesitant but finally introduced hir to two women who were members of the Forum Against Oppression of Women, and who suggest that ze might enjoy coming to the Forum. It was after ze started going to meetings of the Forum, ze says, that ze began to connect the group with the various campaigns and protests ze had read of as a student. This serendipitous route took hir to autonomous feminist politics.[37]

Nandini Rao's introduction to the women's movement and to feminist politics began, however, after she took up a job in a feminist NGO in 2003.

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[35] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[36] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[37] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

> It was very exciting because [there] was so much learning which happened. And apart from this of course was actually being out on the streets with other groups, meeting different kind of groups, doing different kind of work and realising, wow, how old this movement was and how much has been happening so far. I found that super exciting.[38]

As we examine the narratives of women who became part of feminist politics in the 1990s and the 2000s, a pattern begins to emerge that is closer to this latter narrative: of women who have been introduced to movement politics through either their work in an NGO, or through women's or gender studies programmes that encouraged or mandated that students visit feminist organisations or collectives as part of coursework.

Women do still talk about feelings of discrimination and pressures within their homes. For example, Anita talks of various experiences within college, during her bachelors and masters degrees.[39] The three years of her BA degree (from 1996 onwards), she says, were a time when she and other students explored various boundaries, doing things they had not done before, like hitchhiking. College was also a place where she found a few teachers with whom she could have "slightly political discussions" about education and about the college. From this she moved to another city for her MA degree, which proved to be a very different experience.

> So from a women-only college where there was relative freedom, I land up in a co-ed college which has 6 o'clock hostel timings, dress codes and a thousand rules for women. One woman was expelled because she was found drunk once. I thought okay, that's weird, because the men are drunk, smoking and stoned in class, they come and go as they please, they can do what they want and no professor dares question them. Any professor who questions them faces violence, I have heard stories of the men turning off the mains in the men's hostel and beating up the professor or damaging his car.
>
> The 6 o' clock curfew was enforced even if there was a college/course related event, silence was observed in the hostel after 8 pm and women were not allowed into other women's rooms. The women's hostel warden was extremely unreasonable and strict, and one could get expelled, fined or complained about for just about any perceived indiscretion. I ended up

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[38] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[39] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

> getting labelled as a somewhat difficult woman because I and some others
> questioned all this. Then a professor told me, I don't think you should be
> wearing western clothes, and I responded that I don't want to take this from
> someone who is also wearing western clothes.[40]

Her experience of being different from those around her is palpable in her narrative: having short hair, looking unusual in a sari because it was not tied in the same way as others', her lack of fluency with the local language. She says she "did get labelled as a feminist, you're like this, you're like that, you have these different ideas."[41]

In both cities, i.e. where she did her BA and MA degrees, she did not know of any feminist organisations. Even though she worked within the NGO sector in organisations run by women, these were not feminist organisations. After some years of working in various organisations, she applied to a feminist organisation for a job, following which she came to know of the feminist movement in the city, and became involved with various collectives and forms of politics, in no small part because this was a part of her job.[42]

For Draupadi, a serious engagement with feminism came during her MA degree.[43] Though she previously had an interest in women's rights, and in sexuality and rights, she says, she didn't really know what this entailed and it is during the course of her MA in social work that she developed a political perspective.

> My reading on gendered issues I think happened at a very young age... I
> always enjoyed reading books that had women characters or women
> situations, and that's how I've been reading a lot of times. So I think that's
> where my leaning was, but it was never articulated till almost my Masters
> when I found language and words and stuff.[44]

At this time the stereotypes she held about feminism and feminists were challenged, in particular in a conversation with a feminist and queer rights activist.

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[40] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[41] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[42] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[43] In a later discussion, Draupadi points out that the process of becoming a political person need not necessarily be looked at in a very formal way. Rather learning to think differently has happened, for her, also through the sorts of books she read and even the stories that her mother told her. Her ideas and thinking have changed through a constant and ongoing process (Darupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon).
[44] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon

> I said I just want to be an egalitarian, I just want people to be equal. And she said what do you think feminism is doing, it is talking about equality of people. And my usual retort was, but no, it is saying women are superior. And my other argument was I don't know enough about it, have not read, I'm not engaged, to then say I'm a feminist today, I don't know all of that. She said, that makes more sense than saying that you're egalitarian because that's exactly what feminism is all about. What have you been reading?[45]

Her introduction to the various feminist organisations in the city came about as a result of her Masters in Social Work course, which involved students getting to know various types of interventions, including governmental to non-governmental organisations and movement collectives. The networks of which she became part carried forward to Delhi, where she worked after her degree, with people suggesting groups she could visit or with which she could participate.

Other young women too describe how they came to know of feminist politics after joining NGOs. Neha mentions that she only became aware of collectives and learned how they work, after she joined an NGO in 2012.[46] Lila ascribes her introduction to feminist politics to a job she took up with an NGO in 2013. Part of her job required her to attend conferences and meetings with other women's organisations and collectives in Delhi, like the Women's Day programme planning meetings. Her activism with various religious groups and with other organisations during her school and college days had not led to any knowledge of feminist politics or the women's movement.

> That was my introduction to feminist politics, and feminism, because I read a lot during [that time]. [The NGO] has an excellent resource centre, so I read half the books there. I had a friend there, she introduced me to women's studies. And she told me [these books are essential reading], and I had no clue about it, like *A History of Doing*. But even getting used to people like Uma Chakravarti, I did not know they were such big names before I joined [that NGO]. I had no clue who Urvashi Butalia was, then I realised there is something called Zubaan, there is something called Dalit feminism, there is disability feminism.[47]

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[45] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[46] Neha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[47] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

For some women, the first introduction to agitational politics that is considered part of movement politics – like protest demonstrations, sloganeering, marches, pamphlet writing – has been through their work in an NGO. It might even be part of one's job to arrange and coordinate such events or prepare and circulate such documents. (Some of these narratives will be explored in chapter four.)

Women's own experiences of discrimination and oppression form a common theme in these narratives. When women talk about having pushed boundaries in college, for instance, there is an implicit acceptance that boundaries did indeed exist. Some women talk of their experiences of domestic violence, while others refer to being pressured to marry. However the major difference is the absence of a general atmosphere of movement activity that older women reference as having been a significant cause for their politicisation and mobilisation. Many younger women make no such references; importantly, they indicate an unawareness of feminist organisations within the cities where they grew up and studied. Women were unaware of such collectives and lacked the sorts of interpersonal networks that were referenced by women of an earlier generation: the "bush telegraphy" that Nirupama referenced. While this lack of knowledge might be, and has been, ascribed to apathy on the part of younger women, it also might be due to the inability of autonomous collectives to make themselves known to and mobilise women, either for protest actions or to join collectives themselves.

Activists' Reflections on Mobilisation

The idea that women do not come into movements has been discussed at the commencement of this chapter, as has the idea that this is due to a depoliticisation of young women.

For some, the absence of young women is also an indication of depoliticisation in general. As Nirupama says,

> This is an apolitical and a depolitical time, there are not many young people who are politically active in anything. Earlier people were very passionate about their politics and everybody wore it like a badge of honour, I'm a socialist, I'm a Lohiaite, whatever. But today it's quite okay if you're not political, you're not interested in any of these things, you may

be still interested in philosophical discussion, it's an apolitical period by
and large.[48]

Others have pointed to how women are not as willing to give time to autonomous politics. Chayanika Shah feels that young women, at present, do not demonstrate as much commitment to autonomous politics as women have done in the past. She gives her own example:

> I decided my career path, so many years ago, on a notion that I will be part
> of Forum... I chose to say that, okay I will see where it goes, I will give
> two-three years of my life here and see where it takes me.[49]

Yet for the last ten or fifteen years, she says, that kind of commitment has not been visible amongst younger feminists. Many women have joined the group, but with a feeling that they will participate while they have the time and then will leave, for instance if they get jobs outside the city or after completing academic courses. A new person will learn much more about the group by working on its campaigns, rather than by only attending weekly meetings. Yet the spirit of just jumping into activity is missing.

Shals Mahajan echoes this sentiment.

> I think one of the ways of getting politicised is just talking, listening and
> learning, and also when [an] activity is happening then jumping in and
> being part of it. ... I think those are the tasks that make you get more
> involved. ... I think for a lot of people, they're studying, have their own
> lives, have relationships, everything, time is a very tough commodity. ...
> How much time do we have for a political space and political work and to
> develop camaraderie.[50]

However others question some of these ideas. Vibhuti Patel, for instance, points to the politicisation of students on campuses. Protests and other political expressions may be episodic, she says, but there has been a surge in politicisation after Rohith Vemula's suicide in 2016:

> You see the resurgence and radicalisation, the revolutionary spirit
> emerging on campuses, students are not so apolitical or only obsessed

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[48] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[49] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai. She joined an AWG in the mid-1980s and is still a member.
[50] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

about Barista and Cafe Coffee Day, they go beyond that and there is lot of political dialogue happening, especially among Dalits and tribal youth. Dalit youth I see [as] highly politically charged.[51]

Another question is of whether, and how, groups reach out to young women. Vani, speaking on behalf of Saheli, says that the group tries to seek out new members, but are "terrible failures at it." The group does not have any direct outreach, she says. Public programmes "very rarely result in someone coming to join." While the group does conduct workshops and have members give talks, these are mostly in conjunction with other organisations or institutes like colleges. However, she says these are not done "frequently enough": "Some years it's eight times in a year, ten, but sometimes it's like two, it will depend." She gives various reasons for this: many members of the collective have other responsibilities like looking after children or parents; the pressures of living in a city like Delhi; the class dimensions of this form of activism (as unpaid volunteers, members need to earn their livings elsewhere, through a job which allows enough time for voluntary work); and the impact of NGOisation (young women are less inclined to join a collective in which they do not see a trajectory of growth).[52]

Chayanika Shah states that Forum, the collective to which she belongs, has not actively sought members.

> [It has] never consistently put itself out, advertised itself in any way or gone consistently to a space to get more people, it has never been very visible, it was in the 80s much more visible than what it is today, but still…active recruiting has never happened. It's not been the style.[53]

"Nurturing and mentoring," she adds, has also not been part of the group's style. The group welcomes newcomers, but there is an "absolute autonomy to come [or] not come." Newcomers are on their own as far as learning about the group and its history. This lack of orientation, she feels, might have caused the group to lose members. Members have shared how they stayed on because older members "paid attention to [them]"; they have highlighted "the time that it takes to feel part of this group." The

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[51] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[52] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi
[53] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

collective itself does not have any process for engaging with people who wish to join. As Chayanika says,

> There's no system by which you figure out how to deal with new people, and every new person finds their own way of how to figure out this mess, but as a collective I don't think we figured out a way of doing it.[54]

The age difference between older members and newcomers is also important:

> Those who came in the 80s actually stayed back. Those who came in the 90s have gone away, and so then when people come in the 2000s, people in the 80s have tired of reaching out to them and there's a whole age gap and many, many differences that set them apart. The social space that you cohabit decreases in some sense, and that affects a group like this because this group is about friendship and politics both, it is not only politics. So people who came in the 2000s have not stayed on.[55]

It is worth reiterating Chayanika's remark that the collective is not only a place for political activity but also a locus of friendship. As Polletta says, this is an important motivating factor for the participation of those who find friends within the activist circle, but a cause of disengagement for those who do not. It is possible that the existence of friendship circles within autonomous groups prevents or dissuades outsiders from joining.

The question of the ability of the existing autonomous groups to mobilise women has taken on greater significance since the heightening of student protests over the last few years. Highly visible, vocal and enduring campaigns have indicated the readiness of students to carry out long agitations and protests in the face of repression by various authorities. Feminists too recognise the willingness of young people to be part of protest politics. Yet this does not seem to have led to any widespread attempt to mobilise young women, or young persons in general, by older autonomous groups. For example, Shals Mahajan states that politics in India has taken a different turn since the death of Rohit Vemula, and that

> ideally one should be putting time and energy into seeing how the student movements can be strengthened and what is it that people who are not students anymore but who've been part of movements, can really do to

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[54] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[55] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

take this forward because I think it's something important happening, and I think it hasn't happened in a while.[56]

Yet hir own involvement in movements is at a low, for personal reasons, including a lack of time.[57] Others, too, comment on this: for example, Nirupama points out that while some people may have attended demonstrations in JNU and in Delhi in general, there haven't really been attempts to see what these upsurges could mean for an autonomous feminist politics.[58] Thus while recognising an upsurge in various social movements, members of autonomous groups still seem unable to reach out: indeed, Vibhuti Patel asks if they are willing to reach out:

> They are more individualistic now, shun solidarity and [are] more angular and polarised, and I don't think even they are bothered about reaching out to various people's movements the way in the 80s and 90s, reaching out was a mission. Age is also a factor, those who initiated the autonomous women's movement are in their mid-sixties, many of them are NGO heads or are in women's studies.[59]

Meena states that groups do not promote their form of politics and ask people to join: "if people believe in [its] value, then they will automatically come."[60] However, young women's narratives indicate that they may not know where to go. Even if women are aware of autonomous groups, and are willing to be part of movement politics, coming to autonomous groups might not be so easy. For instance, Anuradha, of Saheli, refers to her own hesitation in approaching the collective:

> I never had any friends who were into any kind of activism at all and I felt very shy and hesitant in reaching out. Now I feel foolish, but I remember just how many times I have actually gone through Saheli's website and [thought], "oh these people are so cool."... I think their email ID was also there, but I didn't have the confidence [to] actually write. ... It happened through a friend, she was like "oh you must just come and visit us some day" and then yeah. ... I was hesitant to reach out to these groups... I would go to the dharna or someplace and just stand like a wallflower, so that interaction also did not even exist for me.[61]

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[56] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[57] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[58] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[59] Vibhuti Patel, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[60] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[61] Anuradha, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi

Draupadi, too, notes that there is less of a sense of being drawn into a movement; she provides a younger feminist's view of what Chayanika Shah has termed the absence of nurturing and mentoring. Draupadi points to descriptions of how collectives functioned in the past:

> Some of the senior feminists…or senior activists also, talk about their mentors and how their mentors taught them and engaged with them, I see that engagement missing … When I read Radha Kumar and hear about these movement spaces, it's a very dreamy world… [that] people would stay up till night writing parchas, engaging and discussing with them. I don't see that happening around me, I don't see that happening with me.[62]

These narratives indicate that the limited mobilisation that some activists reference, can be ascribed to two reasons. One is the change in women's priorities and their expectations from autonomous politics (or indeed, feminist politics in general). The second is the inability of some feminist groups to reach out to younger women. This latter issue cannot be overlooked or underplayed in explaining mobilisation. The last few years have indicated an upsurge in feminist agitational politics, and new organisations have emerged that have attracted and politicised young women. In the next section we will see how Pinjra Tod, a feminist student collective based in Delhi, came into being, and how it mobilises young women.

Pinjra Tod

The Pinjra Tod collective was formed by a group of young women in Delhi in 2015. The collective has sought to address the issue of hostels and other student accommodation in universities in Delhi, initially mobilising around the discriminatory treatment of women students in hostels in Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI).

As a collective, Pinjra Tod grew out of the confluence of certain factors, amongst which the most significant and immediate are arguably, the growing student movement in Delhi and the presence of a group of women activists who were interested in taking up women's issues. Many more activists have joined the collective over time. Thus when we talk of the collective, we must bear in mind that

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[62] Draupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon

even within this nascent group, some women have known each other, and have been active in various kinds of politics for some years, and some for just a few months.[63]

The immediate cause around which the group crystallised was that of discriminatory hostel rules in JMI. In 2015, JMI cancelled the allotted 'night outs' for the girls' hostels. The Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) sent a notice to the university, terming this move to be discriminatory. This is the issue around which women organised, sending a petition and a report on student accommodation to the DCW, and following it up with a Jan Sunwai on accommodation of women university/college students.

We have so far looked at three broad factors in the arena of mobilisation: the political atmosphere, women's own senses of discrimination and their negotiations with patriarchy, and the links and networks that drew women into politics. All three factors can be discerned in Pinjra Tod activists' discussions on mobilisation.

When asked how she came to be interested in politics, Charu answers that her politicisation happened through feminism, as a student of English literature in a college in Delhi University. The experience of being taught feminism as part of her coursework gave her a new lens through which to look at her own experiences.

> You had various frustrations, like your mother not letting you wear certain clothes or constantly trying to surviell (sic) you, and suddenly you come to a space where all of these feelings which you had are actually being introduced to you... In your first semester itself there were just so many things which you were otherwise uncomfortable with, which now, teachers were telling you that these thoughts that you had were actually legitimate and [were] giving you political lenses to look at it.[64]

Garima, who was Charu's college classmate, echoes the same sentiment. She describes her schooldays as isolated, and herself as having "little connection with anything else." College life was very different and gave validation to her ideas:

> To be in class and to actually feel like your opinion matters, that people were critiquing the family, making you think, the fact that you can think and you should think, as being a valuable kind of thing. ... to have a set of

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[63] While Pinjra Tod has women and trans* members, at the time of writing it does not have male members.
[64] Charu, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

people with whom you could think that you could actually do something, that you could intervene, which is very difficult to imagine just as an individual.[65]

Garima also speaks of her experience of patriarchy within a left organisation with which she worked during her MA and after. The members of the organisation were almost all male, leaving her "the one woman for as far as you can see, in a sea of thousands of men." She describes her experience as one of invisibilisation: of male comrades, themselves working-class men, who would not look her in the eye, shake her hand or otherwise acknowledge her.

> Garima: So you knew of, say sexual harassment and sexual violence, you had faced sexual harassment, but you had never been invisiblised because you're a woman, you never felt like...
>
> Charu: "No matter what I do, it doesn't matter."[66]

Garima describes how, on one occasion, after completing the work of the organisation, she was asked to help a comrade's wife make rotis. This is one example of the casual ways in which her status as a woman in a male space was reinforced on an everyday basis.

> Garima: So things like that, and it will happen on an everyday, every minute kind of basis, with people just like, "you are a woman, what are you doing here." Things like, [at] a dharna, after sundown, random people will keep coming to you and saying, "come, we'll drop you back." "No, no, I'll not go now." "Okay, you're not going, I thought you must be leaving." Three minutes later somebody else will [tell another male comrade], "Yaar, go and get the bike." "What happened, are you going somewhere?" "No, no, just going to drop you."
>
> Beena: So how did people respond to this?
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> Garima: At that time you can't say anything, just, "yes I'll make the roti. Roti should be made or how will people eat." That's all you can say. But for myself also it was this very important reality check, because...you felt like you knew about gendered oppression but you aren't ever facing it in that everyday kind of way, and you also have this narrative in your head that if you actually did things in a particular way, if you did things right,

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[65] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[66] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

you could actually negotiate some of those things. So the sense of being a woman and how specific it is and how it locks you in a place from which you cannot wriggle out, do whatever you may, work however hard you might, read whatever you do, it's just, if you're a woman you are a woman. That sense I got from the [union] movement.[67]

She describes how she reached a "breaking point":

There was [a] meeting, all the union guys came and said hello to everybody and shook hands et cetera, and they just completely ignored me, as if I was not sitting there. I kept looking at people expectantly. ... At that moment it just crashed for me, I just couldn't stop crying, this is too much, they are doing all of this to me just because I'm a woman....

After some 5-6 hours of sitting and crying, one worker's wife comes to me and says, "you felt very bad, no, because they don't talk to you properly." I think that moment was very important for me because no-one at all used to talk to her, and it also did not strike me as much because she wasn't occupying the space as a political activist. ... But that made me think about how, if there is not a change in where women stand collectively across all kinds of spaces, as an individual woman you cannot move out of being a woman. ... Till then to me that anger was individual still, it was happening because I was a woman but it had not occurred to me that I cannot come out of it without coming out of patriarchy collectively as women. And I think that was the point where I felt that I wanted to work in the women's movement. I continued to work in a communist organisation within the left, but the fact that the women's movement is where I must work, must contribute, was something that struck me in that one epiphanic moment.[68]

Mala describes herself as having no interest in politics, despite her father being active in politics, and having read politics as a subject in school. For her, the "turning point" came during December 2012. On the night of the 16th, she and another friend had taken a night out from their hostel. The gangrape of Jyoti Pandey, then, affected them deeply because they felt it was something which could have happened to them or which they could have witnessed. The election of the NDA government in 2014, with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, left them with a great impulse to do something:

I was the least political person but even then I was sure that Modi was not the person who had to come to power, regarding the Gujarat riots and all.

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[67] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[68] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

> ... So [my friend and I] can remember the night when Modi won the elections and the celebrations going on everywhere, but we were like, "oh shit, what to do now." But we didn't have resources, the most we could do then was to put up a post on FB. We didn't know how really to put our thoughts into action. So the most that we thought was, why not contact Arundhati Roy. ... Like maybe we could upturn the government, create an insurgency-like situation, then I'm sure the Modi government won't come into power. These are the thoughts we had, it was kind of crushing us that this government is going to come into power. So I could relate to the thoughts, the left thoughts, the thoughts that Pinjra Tod was associating with.[69]

Beena recalls events that occurred after Jyoti Pandey's gangrape:

> …our hostel deadline was reduced ... the 10:30 deadline [was] reduced to 9:30. Both the hostels [of the college] agitated, and then I had a meeting with the principal, that why did you do this? "For your safety." One girl stood up and [said], "do you think rapes don't happen in the afternoon." All these questions we were throwing at the principal and the only thing she said [was], "if you have problems just leave the hostel." [That's] the first time I realised, you can't even challenge them, they are doing some kind of charity, 'you've got the hostel, be happy' type.[70]

We saw above that for many women who became active in the 1970s and 1980s, the charged political atmosphere of those decades was a significant part of the narrative of their politicisation. Student politics within Delhi forms part of the narrative of the politicisation of some of the members of the Pinjra Tod collective. As mentioned above, there has been a very visible and vibrant student movement in Delhi, particularly against right-wing organisations (the 'Kiss of Love' and 'Shuddh Desi Romance' agitations) and also against the 2015 decision of the University Grants Commission to discontinue fellowships for research scholars in central universities (the 'Occupy UGC' campaign). Other campaigns have taken up questions of menstrual taboos: the 'Pads Against Sexism' campaign in JMI and the 'Come and See the Blood on My Skirt' march in Delhi University.

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[69] Mala, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[70] Beena, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

These various events and campaigns took place at a time when some of the older activists of the present collective were looking to make an intervention in feminist politics:

> Garima: After 'Come and See the Blood on My Skirt', [I and some other friends] had been in conversation, thinking about how, it seems that women's concerns are gaining ground and women also want to do something about it and come out but there's no space like that. At that time we were thinking of maybe a bulletin or a magazine, all those open conversations were going on. ...

> Charu: Basically one had been in touch with some other Jamia students from the pads against sexism thing, so when the late nights were cancelled, some of them got in touch with us, and one of them wrote an anonymous open letter to the Vice Chancellor, and all of it got picked up by the media. Then [the] DCW [sent] this suo moto notice saying that this is discrimination, which again was picked up in the media quite a lot. So we thought that this is an opening, and when you are having conversations with students in other places also over the summer, the hostel issue had been coming up again and again. So at that time we thought, let's have a petition which is wider, all Delhi colleges, universities, where people are saying this is not just a Jamia issue. Then we said okay, let's make a Facebook page through which the petition circulates and for it to circulate more, ask people to send in their experiences. So one wrote one's own experiences, contacted old college friends, "send something," and then it circulated on Facebook. I don't think, those days or those moments when we actually started the thing, one actually anticipated it to become what it is one year down the line.[71]

The backdrop of student activism has enabled some young women to come to know each other and become part of feminist politics. As Charu says, "there are people who you met at various points and stayed in conversation with, which then allowed for the moment of coming together".[72] For example, Asha describes participating in various protest events in Delhi, during her BA and MA degrees, for example a protest that occurred in 2013 after the Supreme Court struck down the Delhi High Court judgement on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. However she says that it's during the Pads Against Sexism campaign that she came to know people, and also

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[71] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[72] Charu, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

campaigned amongst hostel students in JMI.[73] Mala became aware of the Pinjra Tod campaign through social media and later joined the collective when she came to know one of the members personally.[74] Sakshi, despite not having any experience of party or agitational politics, attended the Shuddh Desi Romance protest and the Come and See the Blood on My Skirt march.

> I was just clicking pictures, but that's also because I didn't know anybody, so the camera was like [a] weapon behind which I could hide. Because I had no idea who these people were, I didn't know anything, party politics, who is organising this. I just went for that event, and that's where gradually I got to know that these are the slightly familiar faces. I didn't have any interaction with any of them, [during] Come and See the Blood on My Skirt we still managed to have some kind of conversation because I was without [the] camera.[75]

The importance of these events is highlighted by the fact that they form a part of the history Pinjra Tod recounts of itself. Pinjra Tod activists have described how events like Shuddh Desi Romance and Come and See the Blood on My Skirt have given students a chance to meet each other and have pointed to ways in which students could be mobilised further, specifically through social media. Thus though the collective formed in mid-2015, its history is traced to the protest events starting a year prior.[76]

An interesting set of narratives, however, is that of the older members of the collective, who became politically active while in college in the late 2000s, i.e. before the period of heightened student activism described above. They recount their brushes with feminist activism and politics, often by referring to activists and organisations whom they met while in college. Feminist activists and academics were invited by the faculty to address the students. Charu recalls how, within a few weeks of her first year of college, a teacher announced that there was a protest within the university regarding a case of sexual harassment, and that she would not take class but would give attendance to students at the protest. Garima describes going for public meetings in Delhi University while in college, and meeting many people from various left

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[73] Asha, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[74] Mala, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[75] Sakshi, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[76] This history is recounted by Pinjra Tod members, for example Devika ("Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj Aur Kal" Convention, Delhi, 13-14th August 2016); also see Saxena, 2015.

organisations, including a research organisation of which she later became a part. This group, she says,

> helped me develop a more structural critique if you can call it, of how the state was running, what are the policies, understanding what is class, and also a close association with questions on the left.[77]

They also met with various feminist activists and came to know of women's organisations. Garima describes how, despite meeting and talking to people who belonged to various organisations, and participating in various programmes and campaigns with them, there was no pressure to join any organisation. She describes feminist activism in similar terms: though she felt an attachment to feminist politics, it was not clear how she could contribute to the existing feminist activism in the city. Yet the experience of being part of and exploring the left activist groups had its impact:

> This man [whom I met], when I first met him he said that "I'm a professional revolutionary." Before that I'd never heard the word. ... Now I have a critique of what it mean[s] to be a professional revolutionary... But the first time I heard it, to me it had been like, you can actually do something like that... It's an acceptable thing that people spend their entire lives doing, the legitimacy of activism was something that you do not have access to because you did not see so many full-time activists.[78]

The individual trajectories of both these women took them to class politics, and from there to feminist activism.

Pinjra Tod activists discuss how they have sought to draw young women to the campaign. The collective has mobilised women by contacting the Women's Development Cells of individual colleges and organising meetings with students through them, by contacting women who have signed the hostel petition, and by asking women to write in and share their own experiences. They also created a documentary film on women students and accommodation, and screened it in various colleges. Pinjra Tod members publicise their events and programmes though posters and pamphlet distribution at colleges and in other public spaces like metro stations, as well as on social media and through messaging services like WhatsApp.

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[77] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[78] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

Activists highlight the importance of shared experiences in the process of mobilisation. Charu recalls a discussion some members had with an older feminist activist, who was part of the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns of the 1980s. Her accounts of lakhs of women participating in marches sounded "crazy," but still gave them ideas on how to mobilise.

> One of the things which [she] said was how it was drawing from women's everyday experiences and how that gave it a certain power and momentum. That was one thing which I had really taken back from that whole presentation. One experience of campaigning for Come and See the Blood on My Skirt [was], every time you're entering a room people are just telling you these stories, that "yes I am locked up here, this used to happen, this is something I couldn't do." So even in Pinjra Tod that was one of the things, your daily life experience, the frustration, that anger, how one channelises it into a collective political expression, I think that has given a certain dynamic to Pinjra Tod as a movement as well. That's why I think people writing about their experiences and sending it to the [Facebook] page, or why we thought that a jan sunvai would be a good format for the first big political program that Pinjra Tod is taking...where women are just coming and talking about their own experiences.[79]

Unlike other feminist collectives, Pinjra Tod is able to draw women, both to the collective and to its protest and other events. Importantly, it makes a great effort to mobilise women to its events. Additionally, its own loose formation as a collective allows it to bring in women who are not all in agreement with each other on all issues, though they may feel that they ascribe to a certain common political vision.

Conclusion

The narratives that we have examined, of women's own journeys into feminist politics, have highlighted the complex of factors that have led to their mobilisation. At the very least, women have seen or experienced injustices which they could ascribe to their being women. Other experiences, too, have made them want to intervene: whether hearing of other protest movements, feeling that academic analysis of gender and class et cetera is inadequate to challenge these structures, or reacting to the election of a religious right-wing government.

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[79] Charu, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

Sociological theories of mobilisation have highlighted the role of structures, including informal networks, in both mobilisation and demobilisation. Perhaps these networks are so informal ('bush telegraphy') that their specifics and details fade from memory over time and what remains is a sense of dense, dynamic activity. Many respondents, speaking of the 1970s and 1980s, will explain how they were mobilised as a result of the times in which they were living. It is on being questioned further that they share more concrete details: a poster seen on a notice board, a suggestion from a teacher or friend. Some may not even remember such specifics.

For women of a younger age group, who reached colleges and universities by the end of the 1980s, there seem to have been fewer such channels. Women do not recall even hearing of women's organisations or collectives, let alone being asked to join any. Women college students today might not have heard of older women's collectives.

Yet they might have heard of Pinjra Tod. Pinjra Tod differs from other autonomous groups in that it makes a conscious effort to mobilise: whether through social media, messaging services like WhatsApp, or by physically distributing pamphlets and urging students in Delhi to participate in their events and programmes. The difference may lie in the group being composed of younger women, many still college-going. It may lie in the core of activists around which the group has coalesced, some of whom have been part of left groups and other forms of agitational politics prior to being part of feminist activism, and who may thus bring different visions, theoretical frameworks, and strategies to the collective. It may also lie in the group members being younger and being part of the populations they seek to mobilise (college and university students), thus better able to grasp ideas and events that will resonate with this demographic. It may lie in how events are held and publicised, and thus attract new people.

Regardless of the reason, Pinjra Tod's activism gives credence to the arguments made by Goodwin and Jasper, and Jo Freeman, described above. These arguments revolve around the idea that while structures and networks are important for the purpose of mobilisation, they need not necessarily precede a movement. Goodwin and Jasper argue that networks may emerge and may be deliberately created by protestors during the course of a movement. Freeman points to the role of organisers in movements, though she says that this aspect of mobilising has been neglected by academic studies

of movements. She describes organisers in the women's liberation movement in the USA as politically experienced women who travelled widely, spreading feminist ideas, and forming feminist groups across the country. In the context of autonomous feminist activism in India, we can see that networks and organisations have been important in bringing women together, and also in channelling their experiences of discrimination and misogyny into a feminist politics.

However, structures may limit mobilisation as well. Older groups are repositories, in a sense, of autonomous feminist politics. Yet they seem to be unable to transmit the agitational politics they value and practice, to others. Some of the statements made by activists indicate that some older groups resemble Verta Taylor's abeyance structures, in that they evince a desire to be inclusive while being unable to open themselves up to new people. This may be based on close friendship ties which exist between their members. As Francesca Polletta points out, these ties make it difficult for a group to open itself to new people, especially in ways that might change the group's nature. Some of these ideas will be explored while discussing collectives further in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter Four

Collectives, NGOs and NGOisation

The politics of the autonomous women's movement has been closely linked to its forms of organisation. The collective – a non-affiliated, non-funded, non-hierarchical group of women – has been seen as the archetypical movement form. Initially contrasted with the hierarchy and bureaucracy of left political parties, it has in more recent times been contrasted with the co-opted politics of funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

We saw, in chapter two, that the idea of autonomy has been articulated in terms of "autonomy from what" – from what is a group or movement to be autonomous? The answer – from funding, from control by external agencies – often takes us back to the collective, as the site where autonomy is to be played out.

The terms 'collective' and 'NGO' bring certain specific images to mind. 'Collective' suggests a non-hierarchical, non-funded group that has no party affiliations, and no paid staff (instead, people volunteer their time and other resources to carry out the collective's activities). The term 'NGO' suggests a workplace, consisting of employers and employees bound in hierarchical relationships. It receives funds from external bodies (funding agencies, governments, other donors) to whom it is then answerable. It is not involved in movement politics per se.

Actual collectives and NGOs do not fit exactly into these archetypes. For instance, the collective Saheli in Delhi is registered under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act. The collective LABIA in Mumbai has received funds to undertake a study of persons assigned gender female at birth. Various NGOs in Delhi are part of the planning process for the annual women's day programme on 8th March, for which they make financial contributions. NGOs may organise and participate in protests and dharnas, which are archetypical movement activities. Nonetheless while there are overlaps, there are still distinctions between the ways of working, ways of being funded, and activities of the two organisation forms. Feminist activists also distinguish between these two organisational forms, for reasons that shall be explored

below. Thus an analytic distinction between NGOs and collectives must be maintained.

In this chapter, we will engage with collectives and NGOs as sites of feminist politics, as well as NGOisation as a process impacting collectives and by extension, the AWM. We will look at the relations between NGOs and collectives. One might ask why, given that women's organisations take various forms (for example, women's wings of political parties, coalitions, networks of activists, as well as more informal groups like study circles), we are looking at NGOs. Despite the many ways in which women have organised, NGOisation has been seen as the process that has taken the wind out of the sails of the autonomous women's movement. Its impact on the AWM has been seen as the direst in its consequences. No other organisation form is discussed in the same way; indeed, some organisations instead discuss the ways in which they have changed due to feminist politics (for example, see Chakravartty & Chotani, 2014. Their history of the National Federation of Indian Women includes a description of the changes in the NFIW's attitudes to feminism).

The earliest descriptions of collectives drew contrasts between them and left political parties. The latter were seen as hierarchical and bureaucratic, with centralised decision-making processes. Being male-dominated structures, women's issues were given a low priority, and there were no mechanisms in place to increase women's participation. Women's oppression was not theorised, being seen exclusively in class terms (Gandhi, 1996, pp. 16-18).

Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi describe the collective as the antithesis of Leninist models of organising: as leaderless, with decision-making by consensus, an "emphasis on inter-personal relationships" and the "acceptance of political diversity (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, pp. 284-285)."

Gandhi and Shah describe the need for women's organisations as follows:

> Autonomous organisations were visualised as spaces by women where they could come together to share their feelings, thoughts and experiences, voice their protest, formulate their own theory, strategy and demands, develop organisational skills, and create an environment of support and solidarity. Actualising this meant maintaining some independence and

distance from men, political parties and the state (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 310).

Gandhi and Shah describe how women who were active within the autonomous movement were also part of left and civil rights groups, and thus still worked in mixed groups alongside men (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 310). As we saw in chapter three, women were simultaneously part of various movements, but needed a space free of male domination, where they could develop a feminist politics.

Gandhi and Shah touch upon women's groups' need for funds as impacting their autonomy. They point out that all groups need some money to be able to carry out their activities, and must balance their "need for some funding as against the need for autonomy." They describe various ways in which different groups have sought to raise funds, including from supporters, from the Indian government, from foreign governments, et cetera. They conclude that organisations which have strong political identities and "ideological direction" are the least susceptible to external influences, and that all organisations should seek to be self-sustaining (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, pp. 297-307).

Later descriptions of the AWM have, however, deal with the question of funding and its consequences for autonomous women's politics in much greater detail, and pay less attention to the question of the distance between autonomous groups and left parties (or other mixed groups like civil rights groups, of which autonomous feminists are a part). The issue raised is of NGOisation: the transformation of collectives into funded organisations. This process is seen as having various consequences:

● The autonomy of the group is impacted as it is now answerable to a funding agency and not to other movement actors or to women in general.

● The internal organisation of the group is transformed as NGOs have hierarchies which are not present in collectives (Biswas, 2006, p. 4410).

● The unity of the movement is impacted as NGOs determine and follow their own agendas, with little or no consultation with other groups and movement actors (N. Menon, 2004, pp. 220-221).

● The nature of activism changes as women can look upon feminism as a career. Women can be part of women's NGOs despite not having any feminist consciousness per se. Thus activists are deradicalised. There is little new thought about feminism itself (N. Menon, 2004, p. 220).

However Srila Roy argues that the formulation of 'NGOisation as deradicalisation' exists in implicit contrast to an idealised view of the autonomous women's movement, which holds the decades of the 1970s and 1980s as truly political and radical. The history of the women's movement since those decades is written as one of a decline (Roy, 2009). This narrative sets up a 'real' feminism, belonging to the past, and a contemporary feminism that is not adequately feminist as it fails to live up to this standard (Roy, 2011, p. 593). Roy argues that this narrative fails to see that NGOs are not "monolithic," and fails to account for the political possibilities that exist within NGOs: for example, that NGOs have been able to engage with the politics of sexuality more fruitfully than autonomous groups. It also fails to account for the fact that NGOisation is not a new phenomenon: NGOisation, Roy writes, "itself began with an earlier generation who shifted from autonomous to funded politics (Roy, 2015, p. 107)."

It must be noted that there are overlaps and links between different forms of organisations and also between activists and NGO employees. Women may be part of collectives while working in NGOs. In Delhi, NGOs participate in protest actions, such as demonstrations; or in events within the ambit of a movement, such as the annual Women's Day programme. For example, for the Women's Day programme in Delhi in 2015, NGOs contributed to the annual event by providing funds and volunteers. They also mobilised women to attend the programme, which was a large public event. Autonomous groups, with their limited outreach, provided volunteers for the programme. Many of the women who attended were mobilised by either the left-allied women's groups, including the All India Democratic Women's Association, the All India Progressive Women's Association, and the National Federation of Indian Women, from amongst their cadre, or by NGOs, from amongst the communities with whom they work on various projects. Costs of bringing women to the programme were borne by the respective organisation; also, NGOs contributed additional funds for the programme. This reduced the amount of money that the non-funded collectives

were required to contribute. These details show the links between NGOs and collectives, as well as the types of interdependence between the two.

It is interesting to ask, then, what impact NGOisation has upon existing collectives. NGOisation is described as a process wherein collectives transform themselves into NGOs. However, there is only limited discussion on the impact of this process upon collectives which do *not* undergo any such transformation. Srila Roy asks of the consequence of NGOisation on non-funded groups, writing that rather than prompting introspection, NGOisation leads instead to defensiveness. She quotes Kalyani Menon-Sen, who states that "those who consider themselves 'real' feminist groups" have displayed a "siege mentality" and have become more ideologically "rigid" (Menon-Sen, quoted in Roy, 2015, p. 106). Roy writes that NGOs may provide "politicisation and feminist consciousness-raising for professional middle-class women working in NGO spaces (Roy, 2015, p. 107)."

It is therefore necessary to ask how NGOs and collectives stand in relation to each other. What is the relationship between collectives and NGOs? What does it mean for a collective to carry out autonomous politics in an NGOised environment? What does it mean for young women to work in NGOs, in an environment that valorises movements?

In this chapter, we will explore these questions through the experiences and voices of women who are part of collectives and/or work in NGOs.

Young Women's Experiences of NGOs

Scholars, activists and NGO employees make similar criticisms of NGOs. For instance, Draupadi's views on NGOs reflect the idea that they are unable to determine their own agendas and ways of working:

> Funding makes a lot of difference, it pays your bills but it also restricts your movement, it gives you a space to articulate your politics but tends to water down things a lot. So negotiating around funders becomes a real task and challenge, because sometimes you don't have the money to do the things you'd really like to do…[1]

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[1] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon

Yet as we saw in chapter three, some women have become aware of non-funded and collective politics through their work in funded organisations, and indeed have even learned about the history of the women's movement in India after becoming part of NGOs. Some of these narratives were documented in chapter three. For example, Neha mentions that she only came to know about collectives after she began working in the development sector.[2] Lila also only came to know about feminism and feminist politics after beginning a job in an NGO, one that required her to work with collectives and women's NGOs.[3]

Nandini Rao speaks with fondness of how much she learned about feminist politics when she began working in an NGO. Her role in the organisation was initially not well-defined, which gave her opportunities to learn about and explore various dimensions of feminist politics.

> [It was] great because it gave me time to find my feet, to understand movements, to understand feminism, all of that. ... It was very exciting because [there] was so much learning which happened. And apart from this of course was actually being out on the streets with other groups, meeting different kind of groups, doing different kind of work and realising how old this movement was and how much has been happening so far. Then of course understanding about non-funded groups like Saheli and Labia and Forum, understanding all of that also, was very cool, that is something that I love.[4]

NGOs might also give women an experience of activism and engaging with people from different classes and regions, which urban feminist collectives do not. Kriti's work with an NGO requires her to visit many other organisations working with women, in various parts of the country. This has given her the opportunity to work with women from various backgrounds, which has not been the case in her voluntary activist work.

> These are mostly grassroots organisations in rural settings, working with a different set of women, coming from different locations than I'm used to seeing [in the city]. ... The challenges of doing community-based work, especially when you're working in settings that are so patriarchal and so feudal, that actual ground-based community work is something that I've

[2] Neha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[3] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[4] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

> gotten to see closely only because of my work. ... Even with my own
> activism, the kind of people that I was interacting with, were largely from
> one kind of setting. Feminist politics in action as they say, that played out
> for me more visibly in my work.[5]

For some women, the first introduction to agitational politics might also come through one's work in an NGO. There are women whose first experience of participating in a protest demonstration, shouting slogans and distributing pamphlets, came about when their employers told them to participate in protests, or organise them. For instance, Purnima Gupta recalls how she was made to attend a protest against the 1998 nuclear weapon tests in Pokhran, on her first day on the job in her organisation. She had never attended a protest event previously, but was told to attend the event and shout slogans.[6] Others may have participated in protests before, but organise such events for the first time as part of their jobs. Kriti reports having attended protest events during her MA days, but organising them only as part of her job.[7]

However work in an NGO might also constrain individuals from participating in movement activity. To begin with, it is work; absenting oneself from the workplace requires the individual to apply for a leave of absence which may not be granted. This has an impact on protests. Neha states that she felt that lack of participation could be the reason why some protest actions are ineffective (in that they do not elicit a response from the authorities at whom they are aimed).[8]

> A lot of times I or my colleagues or people I know, would not be able to
> participate because work did not allow them to. … I think for a lot of
> NGOs there is a lot of distinction between work and activism, going out
> and participating in dharnas is being an activist, but you're working, you're
> getting a salary from it, you have to put in those many hours of work, and
> activism doesn't come into a part of that, so there was a distinction
> between that. So you do your activism when you have free time, or if it's
> on a holiday you can go, but in work hours you don't…[9]

Purnima points out that NGO workers themselves become selective about the events they will attend, based on their priorities and the pressure of work. Employees

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[5] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[6] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[7] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[8] Neha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[9] Neha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

themselves say that there are certain events they definitely have to attend, though others can be skipped (for instance, if they are not particularly interested in the issues involved). Thus, she says, one's association and links with the movement diminish. NGOs might send one or two employees to represent them at a protest event or a meeting. While one might feel guilty for not attending events, one satisfies oneself by thinking that at least someone from the organisation is in attendance.[10]

Being the representative of an NGO in a meeting or coalition which has NGOs, individuals and non-funded collectives as members is not always easy or pleasant for the employees who are obliged to fulfil the role. One point which comes up in the course of interviews is the inability of most such NGO representatives to take decisions on behalf of their parent organisations, for example with regard to the commitment of resources for a joint programme. Lila describes her experience of representing her organisation within such a coalition:

> Lila: I was specifically told you're not there as [yourself]. I couldn't really voice [my] opinion, it was always [my organisation's] opinion.
>
> Vasudha: So if decisions had to be made, what did you do? Went back to your office and discussed and got a brief?
>
> Lila: Yes, I never made a decision. I could never make a decision. It felt horrible, obviously. I was very silent in the beginning as a member of the [coalition] and it's only when I quit the job that I became very active. I started taking serious engagements (sic) and making suggestions. Before that I couldn't. I've told people on record "I can't say anything, I'm here as [my organisation's] person, not [myself]".[11]

Anita describes a situation where she represented her NGO in a coalition that had come about to seek the passage of a particular piece of legislation. Initially she was sent to the coalition's meetings as a representative of the NGO, as part of her job. Though she knew very little about the issue for which the group was campaigning, she says, she found it interesting and learned a lot. Her responsibilities included attending the meetings of the coalition and then reporting the details of the meetings back to her employers. She too points to the challenges of representing her organisation in such a coalition:

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[10] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[11] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

One had to represent organisational perspectives, though one's personal perspectives may be different. This despite the fact that there were no debates at the organisational level on the organisational position on a given issue, one was somehow supposed to know the organisational perspective with no history being passed on as to why. This put one in a spot as the coalition would look at you as representing a certain political position because of your organisational background which was at odds with the coalition, and some pressure from the organisation to toe the organisational political position.[12]

After a period of time something shifted within the NGO, and involvement with the coalition began to be seen not as part of employees' professional responsibilities but their personal activism. Slowly, she says, there emerged the sense that any activism which was done was only in the individual employee's personal capacity, and not part of their work profile within the NGO.

So I think that's where it started, that if you have to do your own thing then you find your own spaces and you do it. ... And there could be some people devoting a lot of time in campaigns. And [at the] end of the year then you'd be questioned, you didn't do any of the organisation's work, you kept going for campaigns.[13]

Purnima also recalls a shift that came about in the funded organisation of which she has been a part since the late 1990s, as funders became more demanding and work had to be done in more formalised ways.

When organisations began to form in the 1990s there was a collective way of working, everyone used to do everything and there was no task division... But as the number of people began to increase, projects began to come in, funders' demands increased… How do you systematise the work, how do you do it more efficiently, if four people are doing the same task you will not be able to deliver. So an entire process of organisational development began and funders also demanded that you should organise yourselves and strengthen your financial systems. … Earlier funders gave you money, you gave them the report and no one would even come to ask you what you did, but now they want data, they want proof, they want to see the impact, were their funds used or not. And I don't see a problem in this. But there is a divide because of this, and there is a lot of pressure of

[12] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[13] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

work. If I look at myself over the last five years, on a literacy project I
have done, I have been very stressed because I have to answer to the
funders every day. … A lot of my time goes in [fulfilling their demands],
so if there is a protest or somewhere you feel you should go, you prioritise,
that is this more important or is that more important. So somewhere, the
connection with the movement started to lessen…[14]

She makes an interesting observation on the professionalisation of her workplace: that
earlier, lunch breaks used to go on for two hours at a stretch because people used to
talk and discuss issues. Now, she says, they have working lunches.[15]

Some women are palpably frustrated with NGOs, for various reasons. For example,
one woman describes how employees who have been in service for a certain number
of years are entitled to a bonus, but do not receive it. Others describe the restrictions
placed on them by their bosses. Draupadi, for example, describes how she hoped her
employer would assign her to work in the NGO's field offices, with the communities
with which the NGO works, rather than in the organisation's office; yet her work
largely involved preparing project proposals and reports. Additionally, the issues that
she was assigned to work on were not of interest to her, and occasionally she had
severe differences with the positions taken by the NGO on particular issues. She also
makes a pointed critique of the authority structure within the NGO:

They want you to have ownership and run the organisation like your own,
then keep you out of all decision-making processes or [unaware of] the
whole process. ... I never know the larger picture.[16]

Others, too, point to the fixed ways of working that exist within their organisations,
and their bosses' unwillingness to explore new and different projects, interventions or
processes. Lila describes her surprise with the overly cautious politics of her former
employer.

Lila: There was this constant narrative that "wait, your time will come, you
won't become a leader just yet." Half your ideas will be shut down. "You
are over enthusiastic, it's not possible." And that's something I hate,
people tell me "it's not possible," then that's what I'll do. Because I don't

[14] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[15] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[16] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon

understand, feminist organisations are supposed to be radicals so if you tell me to tone down [my] radicalism something is wrong.

Vasudha: Who's 'you' in this?

Lila: The feminists, the seniors in the organisations. You were radical in the 70s, to start a feminist organisation in 80s, I think that was crazy, it's not even radical it was crazy, but you guys did it. If in our time, in 2015 we're saying we want to talk about sex, we want to talk about pleasure, now it sounds crazy but it runs in our movement, no, it's part of the movement.[17]

Other women have also experienced problems when trying to introduce new programmes or activities into the NGOs where they work. For example, Anita says that

It's harder to work with some [funded] feminist organisations because they are closed to new ideas. ... It's easier to work with some women's organisations which are not feminist but which work on women's issues but don't know what to do, they are the most open to accepting new ideas and they're really excited and they go with it and then you can see drastic changes in their organisations, in their ways of thinking, but with older feminist organisations, it's like cracking your head against a wall. Because [there's a lot of] labelling and judgment analysis (sic) without really experiencing something new.[18]

She feels that certain types of activities are not possible within NGOs.

Every NGO has a certain mandate, a fixed thing and it's really difficult to get flexibility out of it and it's frustrating. ... It can feel very dead end because you're not contributing to anything because you're not meeting people, you're sitting in an office doing admin-type work. ... I think if you want to do something vibrant and actually see some change, you can't see it in this 9-to-5 [job]. At the same time there is an often-heard narrative from 'older feminists', that there is no passion in the feminists these days, that they all want a salary and want to do 9-5 feminism.[19]

For some, it is important that NGOs give women the opportunity to earn while they do activism. It is argued that autonomous politics can be undertaken only by women

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[17] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[18] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[19] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

of privileged backgrounds, who can afford to not be paid for work and can be supported by their families (Roy, 2011). In this case, NGOs allow women from less privileged backgrounds to be politically active. Draupadi argues that the fact that human rights-related work is a viable career option indicates the success of the human rights movements itself.

> The biggest achievement of the women's movement has been, not women's movement, I'll say, human rights movement has been that people are choosing social sector as a viable career option, it is not charity. I don't have property or money, that I can take social sector as an option, I come from a salaried middle class home, my mum has made her life based on her savings... I'm also going to make my own living. I don't need to buy a house tomorrow or buy a piece of land for myself but I need to be able to save enough that in case tomorrow I have cancer, I can pay my own medical bills... or I choose to have a child, biological or adopted, I can support that kid's life, I can live off my own money.[20]

Others, however, see that people from privileged backgrounds have an edge in NGOs as well. Hasina Khan describes how certain activists have certain advantages: "if [they] are a little strong from before, in terms of education, in terms of articulation, in terms of communication and in making [their] points in front of other people…" She points out that "the people who are not like that, who do not fit in that mould, they go towards the bottom."[21]

Bhavna makes a pointed critique of the propensity in NGOs towards 'networking' and what it means for people of different class backgrounds:

> …people gather in the evenings and gossip under the guise of networking. But actually, one can see the difference that class makes in those gathering, everyone is not able to do that. Because all sorts of people are coming to NGOs. So there is a class, a lower class, that goes back home, which is busy. There is an upper class that does networking, which sits and chats in the evenings, that gossips about this and that. And that keeps going on. And if you have learned those skills you will go to a higher agency. Those who have a background in all this have those skills and those resources. Those who have this background, who came from this class, they go up like this. And somewhere those who came with fewer resources get left

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[20] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[21] Hasina Khan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

behind. And often they feel disappointed, that they could not do this NGO work, nor could they fulfil their ambitions [regarding the issues].[22]

Thus NGOs might give women from various backgrounds a chance to not have to choose between a paying job and working on women's issues. Yet the various formal and informal hierarchies and processes operating in this sector might still cause women from less privileged backgrounds to lose out in comparison to those from more privileged backgrounds.

Other problems emerge that may have consequences for NGOs' contributions to collective politics. For example, Lila points out that the relations between young women workers are mediated by the fact that they are NGOs employees. Thus, she says, it is not possible to form close connections with other young women. She describes her experience of making friends with women who worked in another NGO which was working on the same issues:

> As young people when you meet others as organisations you can't talk, I never made friends when I was at [the organisation], because I was always aware, I was only allowed to make friends within [the organisation], I couldn't make friends with [other] people. Nobody says it, it's an unspoken thing. I and another young woman never became friends until I left [the organisation], because I was scared, you have these [notions of] professional integrity, conflict-of-interest... There are two organisations, they are both applying for funding, they both have similar work, this idea that we are all sisters is nonsense, it's nothing like that. So we were not allowed to make friends.[23]

Some of the issues that women raise cannot be seen as being limited to women's NGOs but appear endemic to the NGO sector. Draupadi's description of another organisation where she has worked is very similar to the women's NGO where she has also been employed.

> I'm working pretty much on all the funders' projects, putting one document there, one document here, but I still don't know what the larger picture of the organisation is like. They know I like writing, I like researching and that's where my brain works really fast. ... I can do all of

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[22] Bhavna, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[23] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

that so they've given me all the things that are going to keep me occupied

and I don't know what's happening.[24]

Thus these problems are not limited to women's NGOs or feminist NGOs. They seem to be problems associated with the structures, hierarchies and ways of working of the NGO sector. Yet when women express their frustrations, they do not describe them as frustrations with bosses or employers but with feminists. For example, the rigidity of a workplace and its fixed ways of working are articulated as "feminist organisations are closed to new ideas".[25] Draupadi describes the hierarchies of between younger and older feminists as "failing feminism at its very root"; elsewhere, she questions the lack of collective learning within NGOs.[26] Thus while the problem may lie in the *workplace*, frustration is expressed with *feminists*.

Eventually it might become difficult for young women to reconcile their expectations of their workplaces with the frustrations they feel within them. There is a sense of wanting to do something, of wanting to make a difference, which has brought them to the development sector. As Draupadi says, "We were very enthusiastic [when we joined the] movement, whatever, NGO, we wanted to change the world."[27] Yet the possibilities of interventions and change turn out to be limited. Draupadi began by saying that

> I did enter the social sector with a [sense] that you know, I want to change something. I've reached a point where I know that I will not be able to change hundred thousand people but I do want to work in a way that makes a difference of half a centimetre somewhere. ... Now I'm looking at those minor changes, I still haven't been able to reach a point where I can just be like, it's my 9-to-5 job, I'll go, work and come back. Because it's never been 9-to-5, it's been part of my very political being.[28]

Yet, over a period of time, her views have changed. She now attempts to see her work as work, as something that simply needs to be done. She says she is trying to "make it about 9-to-5":

[24] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[25] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[26] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[27] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[28] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon

I live my politics, I try very hard to live my politics… The 9-to-5 has become about the work work (sic) of it, not the politics of it… The minute you go to an office…there are some hierarchies there…and they also play up in times when…my boss will turn around and say that "boss, I am the boss." [It's] as simple as I submit my monthly reports to my boss, that is clear hierarchy showing, I'm accountable to you for the work I've done, something as simple as that, and I'm not saying this office, I'm saying every office… So you've to also then pick and choose your battles, that if I'm given 20 things to do, of which ten are completely useless and I don't want to do it, I'll quietly do them to get to the two things I want to do, so you learn those negotiating skills also…[29]

Such comments and experiences make it difficult to assess the contribution of NGOs to feminist politics. Certainly NGOs have played a role in introducing women to certain forms of agitational politics that older autonomous groups seem unable to communicate.[30] Women may go on to use these forms of politics in other contexts, outside of what is required of them by their workplaces. For instance, young women reported joining coalitions as part of their job requirements, but continued participating after resigning from their jobs.

The attempt to assess the contribution of NGOs to feminist activism throws up an ambiguous picture. It is clear from the narratives in this chapter (and chapter three) that many women's introduction to feminist politics has been through NGOs. NGOs, as we shall see below, are also able to take on tasks that cannot be done with the resources available to voluntary collectives.

But there is also evidence that while the NGOs might impart certain skills to women, they do not seem to provide a place where women can express their own feminist politics. The element of voluntarism which women do seem to associate with feminist politics, does not hold in NGOs; it is not evident that flexibility is possible or that creativity is rewarded; nor is it evident that women can raise the issues they choose. The ethical standards to which they hold feminists do not seem to be met. Women appear to struggle to develop closer relationships with their colleagues. And frustrations with one's workplace may lead to an aversion to feminists, particularly older feminists.

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[29] Draupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon
[30] See chapter three.

Women's Experiences of Collectives

Women experience and participate in collective politics in various ways. Some have visited collectives as part of their coursework in social work or women's/gender studies courses. Some may have been assigned to work with collectives as part of their work profiles. Some may, in their individual capacities, be part of collectives, as non-hierarchical non-funded spaces through which they volunteer their time and participate in feminist politics.

It is important to note that all collectives are not identical. Some collectives, such as the Citizens' Collective against Sexual Assault, in Delhi, have individual as well as organisational membership, while collectives such as Pinjra Tod (Delhi) have only individual members.

For a number of women, working in a collective can be challenging because of a lack of accountability. As Vani from the collective Saheli puts it,

> It is true that there are issues around accountability, around deliverables, among us. I can screw up for weeks not doing something, who's going to hold me accountable, I don't have a funder to give a report to, but would I do that at work? Where I get a salary, yes or no? I think there's a limit to how much I might push it. I might be very committed but I'm not necessarily as productive.[31]

This is a common critique – that while women workers in NGOs do their work in full and on time, women in collectives are lax and there is an absence of accountability. For example, Bhavna says,

> One good thing in NGOs is that here, people work. They fight as well, they tell each other that "you have not done the work for which you were responsible." That culture has disappeared from collectives. People do not have the sense that "this is my work, I must complete it." That sense of responsibility is not there, people feel that "if I have time after I finish housework, after I finish office work, then I'll do it." … I think that the women who work in collectives have a lot of clarity on issues. But they have no clarity on practical things like how work is to be done. For example in an NGO, if you and I really dislike each other, we'll still be able to work together easily. Even if we don't become friends. But in a

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[31] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi

women's group, if there's someone I don't want to work with, even if the work suffers I won't work. Because ego problems get in the way.[32]

Or as Sabah says, unlike voluntary groups, NGOs have no choice but to deliver.

> [Being an NGO] creates a sense of accountability, good or bad, because you are accountable to your board, and you are accountable to say the charity commissioner. There are ways of working around it too, but it's still there, right, so if you take on something, you've asked for money, you have to do it, you have to deliver. With voluntary groups that's not necessary. It's left to your politics, your sense of commitment and things like that.[33]

For Lila, the laxity within collectives is also a reason for their relative inability to effect change. She speaks of her own experience of being part of a collective as part of her job in an NGO, and then remaining in the collective even after resigning from that job.

> Lila: I never thought of it as something very important or something that had the power to change things. There's always this feeling that formal organisations are legitimate, they can do stuff. Collectives are informal voluntary organisations so if [work] doesn't happen, it doesn't happen, you're not held accountable. I'm not blaming the collective, I think personally I was also responsible because I never thought I was responsible for it. I never saw it as my own, so I think it's because of that I've never worked.
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> Vasudha: Even when you quit [your job]?
>
> Lila: Yeah. I did tell a lot of people that "let's meet again, let's be active, let's try something," but it didn't happen. And I don't blame people for that, I genuinely understand, because everyone had a job, priorities, I do get why collectives don't work. But I also think that how is it that [others] had a bigger hope, people who have been in the field for a longer time, will say that collectives work. … So I used to feel that there's something missing. Maybe we're living in different times. I don't know.
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> Vasudha: Is it something to do with, like you were saying, you're not held accountable?

[32] Bhavna, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[33] Sabah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

> Lila: Possible, because that's what I thought. I could miss meetings. I could not reply to emails for weeks. Recently something had happened, and I and [another member] decided that we'll write a press statement. I did not write the statement for a week. If there was an organisation hanging over my head, I would have been in trouble. I didn't write. Neither did she.[34]

However, for some, collectives can do as much as NGOs, even in spite of their problems of accountability. Thus they can be equally impactful. As Anita says, with reference to the collective of which she is a part:

> I feel that these collectives are capable of a lot, sometimes with no funding. It is equal to an NGO with full funding because the amount of time you spend in getting your reports and other admin stuff done, you just cut it out of collectives. You might do three things in a year but it will amount to what a full-time functioning NGO did the whole year. You might do things on a smaller scale but you might be quite effective and I think we've been kind of effective because as a small collective with 15-20 women, reaching out to 20,000 people in 5-6 years, I think it's a big thing.[35]

Nonetheless, even while some women critique the absence of individual accountability in collectives, some highlight that collectives have different, and perhaps freer, ways of working. Anita states that such spaces offer ways of working that may nurture experimentation and creativity:

> I think right now what we need are more of these collective because I think these are the spaces where one can explore different ways of functioning. These are small, they're manageable, they're with people you know, you can discuss, debate and experiment, evolve. … My belief is that you need those spaces to have different kinds of organisational structures, different kinds of decision-making, different kinds of people coming together to do things creatively and that's how social change happens. Social change may or may not happen but we need these kinds of spaces to nurture creativity, innovation and flexibility.[36]

Vani, speaking on behalf of Saheli, points to the greater autonomy that the collective has in terms of choosing which issues to work on and how to go about their work.

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[34] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[35] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[36] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

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> We can pick up anything. We have much more control over who we have partnerships with, who we don't. … We decided for instance, one year after the Vishaka guidelines came, to do a survey on whether people knew about the guidelines at all, and if so what is the knowledge and what is the nature of harassment. So in '99 we started a survey which we did for about a year almost and then we brought out a report called *Another Occupational Hazard*, which talked about sexual harassment in the workplace based on about 65 interviews across sectors, across classes, in and around Delhi. Then we started taking it out and talking about it and then we felt that's not good enough. So then we spent another 6-8 months developing a play out of it, that's how *Mahaul Badalna Hai* came into being. So we would go do a play, talk about the issue, give the report and come. So that evolution, it's free to have its own trajectories.[37]

Shals Mahajan indicates that members of LABIA, the collective of which ze is a part, enjoy the group's flexibility.

> In LABIA, we're much more whimsical also. So if [we] have more singers then suddenly we're making songs, we have 5-6 new songs in a year. … I think all of us like that, over time there have been different people who've liked that openness.[38]

And yet sustaining work in a collective can be challenging. Anita, though very positive in her assessment of the possibilities of working and of effecting change through collectives, also describes the challenges of working in a non-funded collective, and supporting herself on a minimal income. The collective of which she was a part conducted training sessions for young women. The group decided that though it would itself remain non-funded, women could take a small fee for the training sessions they conducted. As a trainer, then, she could be paid for her work, and she also worked as a freelance researcher and consultant to be able to support herself. She describes herself as being "very creative": she lived in small towns, where rents and costs of living were low, and also backpacked and lived with friends. Yet this way of living was very challenging. As she says,

> The three years [I worked with the collective] I got taken care of by many people in my life, some people I may never be able to repay, some people I may never meet again because they were random strangers who helped

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[37] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi
[38] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

out. I stayed in random strangers' houses without knowing who they are. I got to their homes, spent the night, got to know them briefly and then left the next day. Those days were exciting but difficult; you slept in horrible conditions, not knowing whose house you might have to stay in tomorrow.[39]

Ultimately, and after working not just with the collective but also as a fulltime employee in a funded organisation, she came to the realisation that she could not sustain this way of working.

I do need to sustain myself, I can't hope to make so much of a difference if I run around and I'm broke and [in a] 'if I fall ill tomorrow there's no future for me' kind of situation, and I did fall ill, I had a surgery. Then I realised that this system cannot work, I need a sustained salary.[40]

She points out that the challenge is that people who wish to work for collectives might not be able to sustain themselves.

I think we haven't created these alternate financial systems for ourselves to be sustained. In Europe I saw women living in collective homes. If someone doesn't have job, you know that person is not going to starve, whether they have social security or not; they'll be taken care of in some way by the others who are living there. Here we don't have any of those other examples of not earning money and living comfortably if one is outside a patriarchal family structure.[41]

It must be noted that women also look to collectives as places of support. Women point out the lack of support structures, in both their personal and professional lives. Both movement activism and the NGO sector may involve politics, ways of working, and indices of success and failure that friends and family do not understand, thus doing away with certain forms of emotional support. This is expressed in various ways. Kriti, for instance, describes her family's reaction to her participation in agitational politics:

Home visits are troubling because there is a lot of disagreement and a general lack of understanding with what the hell my daughter is doing. ... So my father for instance got me to swear on him that I will ever go out on dharna because there was a very big march here, that students had carried

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[39] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[40] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[41] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

out after Rohit [Vemula's suicide], which Times Now had shown a clip of and my father somehow saw it and for him that image, daughter just sitting on the street and raising a slogan, is just something that doesn't appeal to him. And it's a very middle class, merit sort of approach, "we have educated you so much, and you should be sitting in a certain kind of workspace instead of doing this."[42]

Anita talks about her own and another friend's parents' anxieties with their full-time work in a collective.

> My parents decided that you live your life on your terms, we're not going to support this kind of nonsense. But I knew that if I came back home, they won't kick me out, I could take that risk. The other friend I had, one fine day she lands up with a big bag and she's like, "yeah I left my house. There was a fight at home, that you're not getting married or building a career, look for a job." She said "I don't want a job, this is what I want to do." They said, "What kind of job is this, this is nonsense." She said "Alright, then I'll leave home," and she walked out. I didn't have those situations where I had to leave home drastically, but I moved away and created distance. I got tired of having my parents cry on the phone that "what are you doing, not getting married, not getting a job, you're not studying also, what are you trying to do with your life."[43]

Lila describes how she began talking about her own anxieties, stress and depression only after she quit her job, and how she then realised that all around her, women were facing the same problems:

> Once you leave the job you get your individuality back. So I started bitching about it, talked to many people, I realised I was not the only one who is getting burnt out. [I was] stressed, I was not at all earning, I was so disappointed with myself, and I met other people from other organisations who were depressed and I found it fascinating, how across organisations all young people are depressed. These are fascinating and interesting feminists who seriously want to do something. They're all burnt out. ... So when you're all depressed, your organisation is not giving you anything, you can't talk to your colleagues – your colleagues [at the] end of the day are also employees – where do you go? There's no system. ... And burn out is not just because of lack of money, [but also] emotional support. Your parents don't get you: "why can't you behave like normal people." Your

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[42] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[43] Anita, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

friends will not get you obviously, my friends were not from the academic world…. You're sitting alone with a book, the book doesn't talk back to you. So obviously [you're] going crazy. There are two options, either you go back into the system, or you continue being crazy. ... Most of my friends are on therapy right now, therapy is very expensive, people have to hide it, and these are all brilliant people who are on therapy, so definitely as a society we have failed these people, I feel. And also the way the system is working, it's a capitalist system, if you're not producing you're not good enough, if you're not earning you're not good enough, you're not a good citizen, you're not a good person, there are many narratives. It's very tiring.[44]

Draupadi describes how a collective can become a refuge from the increasingly aggressive and hostile political climate in which feminists and other activists find themselves:

I also feel that often we are part of collectives also to find certain like-minded camaraderie, to find a certain acceptance of our politics, to find a certain in-group feeling with our own spaces so it becomes voluntary in that sense but also extremely constructed in the sense that, it's the thing to do. … [It's] comfortable also, that these are my people, they think like me, they have an articulation similar to mine. You feel safe, in the times we're living in, you feel safe around people who are saying the same thing. Otherwise it can be very overwhelming when you get advertisements that are saying fuck pak, fpak, so it's very uncomfortable, but then you have the assurance of there is a group where there are 20-odd people, who speak in a language similar to yours, so you don't feel overwhelmed with that fpak, you feel like there's hope. So for me it's also become a space where we're shifting to for hope…and that feeling that you're not alone in this crazyness (sic), that there are people with you…[45]

These narratives indicate the isolation and alienation which feminists might experience, in various areas of their lives: from families to workplaces to the wider communities in which they live. In some senses, then, collectives become support structures: communities where women, or feminists of any gender, might go for the emotional support and validation that is missing from other areas of their lives.

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[44] Lila, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

[45] Draupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon. Following the 2016 'surgical strikes' by the Indian Army on a terrorist camp, a restaurant in Gurgaon offered a 20% discount to anyone placing an order with the code 'fpak'.

Thus for example, Meena describes how one "feels free" in collective spaces:

> I remember we would say that out in the general world everything is so oppressive in a way, there are so many restrictions and you don't feel free, oftentimes you can't speak what you really feel like and we live and work in constrained spaces. So coming to the collective is very, feel free, and so all of us wait [for] that time on Friday when we all meet, so in that way that personal need for the group as well as your own political, you know, get fulfilled.[46]

Sabah too speaks of Forum as a space of personal support:

> …earlier Forum was just a political space but now it's more than a political space, it's a space where you know I can, I have trouble at home, family issues, I know I'll call, if I want to kind of get out of my house and just don't want to be there and I know that there's someone's house I can go to and there'll be no questions asked.[47]

Chayanika Shah, speaking on behalf of LABIA, a queer feminist collective in Mumbai, points out that many members of the collective are financially independent, live away from and are not answerable to their families on a day-to-day basis. Yet many such women are also called upon to look after parents who are ageing and in need of care. In this situation, members of the collective too are looking for support, and the collective is such a support structure for them, one which they wish to retain.[48]

Shreya Sen, speaking on behalf of Zehen, an intersectional feminist collective in Mumbai, makes similar points. The group is intended as a space where young people can speak, ask questions and share their opinions, without fear of judgment or silencing. The need for such a space was felt because young people felt that they were occupying spaces – families, workplaces – where open conversation was not possible.[49]

Kriti's characterisation of the feminist collective of which she is a part, echoes this sentiment.

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[46] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai.
[47] Sabah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[48] Chayanika Shah, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.
[49] Shreya Sen, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.

The need to be in collectives is precisely because there is sometimes a lot of disillusionment that comes from these [professionalised] spaces, there is burnout, these spaces want you to be efficient and good with deadlines. So the need to find spaces that let you be, but are also committed to your politics, I think that is something that collectives give me, where there is no pressure, there is a flexibility and there is spontaneity.[50]

The collective to which she belongs is then a "safe space," and members have all known each other prior to joining: either having studied together, or knowing each other through their work. She points out that as a result of her own personal trajectory,

These collectives are my only social life, these are the only friends I have in the city. If I'm meeting two friends for coffee it will be a mini meeting [of the collective] even if we don't talk about [it] because these are the only people I have because of my journey, whether it is my education or my workspace, I just know these people who are also feminists and this is the only social life that I have.[51]

The challenge is then of expanding the membership of the collective. Kriti's comment is telling in this regard:

Some other members have expressed some anxiety around it because they said that, "look it's a safe space for us, and to get other people and all means starting all over again".[52]

The nature of the collective as based on friendship also impacts the ability of groups to reach out to women of different generations. Chayanika Shah describes the challenge an established group like the Forum has in reaching out to younger women:

[T]he social space that you cohabit decreases in some sense, and that affects a group like this because this group is about friendship and politics both, it is not only politics.[53]

The question does emerge, as to the possibilities for expanding collectives that structurally are friendship groups. Collectives direct their political work outside the group also; it is not limited to conversations between members wherein ideas and politics can be discussed. For example, Zehen performs a set of monologues around

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[50] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[51] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[52] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[53] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

the theme of intersectionality, which it follows up with conversations with audience members. LABIA has conducted a qualitative study of trans persons in various parts of India, which it published as a report (LABIA, 2013). Yet inter-group dynamics seem to be a vital part of the experience for many members. One wonders how these groups would cope with people who wished to join, but only to be politically active and not develop friendship ties. Indeed, how they would cope with possible members who did not share all their underlying assumptions about feminism itself? For example, Shreya Sen, in her description of the collective Zehen, stated that it believes that there is no one feminism; and that the collective's priority is not to change people or tell them that their ideas are wrong, but to encourage people to think and reflect on the political choices they make. The example she gave was that the group, if faced with a right-wing person, would tell them to look around themselves, see the consequences of supporting the right-wing, and bear those consequences in mind while extending that support. This appears to be a very open and inclusive attitude. Yet when asked whether there were right-wing supporters within the collective, she denied this and seemed taken aback at the idea. Thus it seems doubtful that the group would have members who, though feminist, supported right-wing political parties, for example.[54]

Or as Kriti says,

> If I'm meeting somebody for the first time and they tell me that they are a feminist, I will see that as an immediate marker of some kind of connection having been established. Because for me then you recognise certain kinds of oppression, you recognise your position there, you recognise what it means to call yourself a feminist.[55]

This indicates some degree of uniformity, a base of shared beliefs. For instance, an understanding of what it means to be feminist does not seem to include a commitment to a right-wing Hindutva agenda.

Shals Mahajan makes an interesting point: that only people with a certain type of politics will come to the collective of which ze is a part. The collective is, as ze puts it, a space to do work. Thus it attracts only those people who are interested in being politically active. But, importantly, it is a space that is open only to people who have a

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[54] Shreya Sen, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.
[55] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

certain kind of politics: "you can't be a right-wing person and feel very comfortable in this space."[56]

It is understandable that groups will have their own political positions and push their own political agendas, and that people who do not share that politics might not wish to participate. Yet Shals' statement is somewhat incongruent with hir own journey into the women's movement. As mentioned in chapter three, as a young lesbian, ze was seeking to meet people like hirself and happened upon a feminist collective, of which ze then became a member. Hir initiation into feminist politics came after ze came to know of the collective and began attending its meetings. Yet when asked whether collectives could, today, perform the same function for young women–of introducing them to a certain kind of politics–ze seems unsure of the possibility. One of the processes by which ze came to be initiated into the politics of collectives, having never been part of collectives or feminist politics before, was by spending time with the group, attending meetings and discussions, learning about women's issues, and participating in the work of the collective. Ze talks about the amount of time spent with other members: sitting together before meetings and chatting over tea and cigarettes, or chatting with members as they commuted together from meeting venues back to their homes.

Now, Shals says, "time is a very tough commodity." People are studying or working, have their own lives and relationships, and have less time. They also have more money: earlier women commuted by public transport, which has fixed timings. If meetings went on till late at night, people simply stayed put at the venue as it was not possible to go home; this created more possibilities for conversation. Now people are able to take taxis and go home even late at night.

Meena also notes that in general, people have less time. This impacts collectives, which require a lot of time to run. She states that earlier, people used to have more time, but now, work and life in general keep people busy. Young people too are busy managing studies and careers.[57]

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[56] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[57] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

Additionally, Shals describes how people have a heightened sense of privacy and less desire to share their lives with others. This works against the development of a sense of camaraderie.

> The personal is political also worked in very interesting ways, there's also a sense of lot of sharing of your life, in a political manner, not necessarily just "this is what happened in my life." ... But I think there is [a] much [stronger] notion of privacy, notion of 'my time', so how much time do we have for a political space and political work and to develop that camaraderie. I can totally imagine if anybody from JNU is sitting all those nights and people are on hunger strike, and you just spend time, there's a camaraderie that builds, which is very different, which will politicise you in a different manner. So I think somewhere doing things together is very crucial.[58]

What is absent here is a description of the group's own attempts to involve women who are not already politicised, who do not already share a sense of camaraderie and knowledge of feminist politics, if indeed any such attempts have been made. Shals' understanding of politicisation seems to not only include the introduction to and adoption of feminist ideas, but also the induction into a sort of feminist community: hence hir stress on the time spent with older members of the group when ze first joined, and of the development of camaraderie. The politicisation of a younger generation of feminists would then involve their induction into existing feminist communities. Both older and younger feminists would have to be willing to have this happen. Existing groups would have to accept that an influx of newer members might change the nature of the collective. Younger feminists would have to be willing to participate in groups where they might feel silenced by or hesitant to speak in the presence of older members.

At a convention on autonomous politics, organised by Saheli in 2016, questions were raised of how groups could 'scale' autonomous politics.[59] While the possibilities of continuing work in collectives is evident, the possibilities of expanding the membership of existing collectives is remote, without changing their character in ways that the current members may dislike. The very feature of collectives that makes

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[58] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai. At the time of the interview, students from Jawaharlal Nehru University were on hunger strike to pressure the University administration to roll back the report of the High Level Enquiry into the events of Feb 9, 2016.
[59] 'Scale' indicates the expansion of autonomous feminist politics.

them valuable for their members – the sense of community and camaraderie – makes them closed to new members who might disturb their internal dynamic. Thus while the number of autonomous groups might increase, it is likely that autonomous groups themselves might not become substantially bigger than they currently are.

A document recently released by the collective Saheli is interesting to examine in this context (Saheli, 2017). The document calls for new members to join the collective. It asks the reader a series of questions, which are of two types: what the group identifies as "inside jokes" about the collective, and questions about politics. Examples of the former are: "do you sing badly?" and "do you have nothing better to do on a Saturday?" Examples of the latter are: "are you a feminist, or do you wonder whether you are?", "Do you think independently, but can work collectively?", "do you want to work on campaigns and not projects?", "do you believe that our struggles are intrinsically intertwined, and the liberation of women lies in the liberation of all from brahmanical, patriarchal forces?", "is alliance-building/solidarity with others who are struggling, a central part of your politics?" The document says that if the reader "likes where the questions take [them]," they should drop into the Saheli office and explore the group further. It provides a short introduction to the collective.

The introduction tells us that the pamphlet is intended to be read even by those who are unfamiliar with the group. Yet the questions indicate that it is looking for members who already share its politics. While the group is looking to expand its membership, it is searching primarily for those who already share its vision of politics: who are not just feminists, but also share an anti-caste politics; who are able to work collectively; who have an understanding of alliance-building and solidarity and place it at the centre of their politics; who are aware of the distinction between campaigns and projects (and wish to be part of the former). The presence of 'inside jokes' indicates some sort of shared cultural references between the collective and its potential members.

This indicates that while Saheli is looking to expand its membership, it is looking at the very least for those who already share its own particular form of politics. It raises questions of the group's accommodation of new forms of politics and organisational culture that new members might bring. It also raises the question: what of those who do not share this politics? Many people may be unfamiliar with what it means to act

collectively, or what alliance-building entails. Many might lack any previous exposure to such politics. Would Saheli be a place where they could learn this politics?

The Pinjra Tod collective appears, at this time, to be an exception to the trend of collectives as friendship groups. Rather than being a close circle of friends, hesitant or unable to expand its membership, it is unsure of who is a member and who is not. Many members of the collective's WhatsApp group, for instance, might never have met each other. People who have attended a single protest organised by the group might consider themselves to be part of Pinjra Tod, regardless of whether they participate in the group's other activities. The group has members who are also active in other organisations: from other students' groups like the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party) and the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (the student wing of the Aam Aadmi Party) to the Krantikari Naujawan Sabha (a left organisation). Pinjra Tod also mobilises women and students in general to participate in their public events and protests (for example, jan sunwais on the subject of student accommodation or protests in front of the University Grants Commission on women's day).

Yet one might ask if Pinjra Tod would be able to sustain this level of fluidity. The collective is in an incipient phase. It appears similar to autonomous groups in the 1980s: loosely-bounded gatherings of persons who were part of feminist activism alongside other forms of activism. If these groups have distinct boundaries today, could that be the future of Pinjra Tod as well? Could the group shrink as some active members go on to do other forms of politics, as some drift away from the group to pursue their education, careers, or private lives, or as some lose interest in feminist politics? If it were to shrink in this manner, would the collective too become a tightly-knit group of friends, highly supportive of one another but unable to expand?

NGOisation

The process of NGOisation is described as one by which collectives become funded organisations. Discussions on NGOisation have tended to examine either the subsequent depoliticisation of feminism, or how NGOs open up possibilities for feminist politics. While in the previous sections we examined the particular meanings attached to NGOs and collectives themselves, in this section we will look at

NGOisation as a process that brings these two types of groups into a certain relationship with each other.

Funded groups are seen as changing the terrain of feminist politics. For example, Vani, speaking on behalf of Saheli, says that the manner in which young activists view collectives has changed.

> …people want to see a trajectory of growth, but when somebody comes in here and sees [older members] doing the cleaning, there can be an instinct which says "oh my, not this place, I'll still be doing this." … You can't see a trajectory of growth, and some of us may react that an NGO shouldn't be like that or feminist politics shouldn't be like that but tell me an NGO where the big boss doesn't sit in a separate room…[60]

We have already seen how NGO employees might become unavailable for protests and such collective action that is held during work hours. Hasina Khan also describes how NGOisation transforms joint events like annual Women's Day programmes: activists organise events in the different communities with whom they work, and the central joint programme suffers as a result.[61]

However, despite the image of NGOisation as transforming of all feminist organisations, autonomous groups still exist, and women and persons of other genders do come to be part of autonomous politics. Older collectives such as LABIA, Forum and Saheli continue to be active. New collectives have been formed, for example Zehen in Mumbai (2013) and Pinjra Tod in Delhi (2015). The national feminist network Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression was formed in 2009. These are all nonfunded groups (though, as noted previously, some have taken funds for specific activities).

Autonomous groups and NGOs are both part of feminist activism. As we saw at the start of this chapter, they work in the same areas, sometimes working together. Autonomous groups exist and come into being in a time when the broad feminist movement is described as NGOised. Some argue that NGOs must work in an environment that valorises autonomous politics as authentic and radical. Thus NGOs

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[60] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi
[61] Hasina Khan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

and collectives stand in a certain relationship to one another. What are the dimensions of this relationship in an NGOised environment?

Chayanika Shah argues that NGOs have taken on the task of providing services for women, for example to help women in distress. Collectives cannot undertake service provision: she argues that it is impossible for collectives to follow up on individual cases. LABIA, she says, has tried to build the capacity of NGOs to help LBT persons, but cannot reach out to them on its own. If collectives did want to reach out to persons in distress, for example in domestic violence cases, they would have to create certain mechanisms to do so. She points to other interventions made on various gender issues, including domestic violence, health, and other issues, for example a rape kit created by the NGO Cehat. These interventions came about through people's full-time work, which collectives cannot match. It is not possible, she says, for activists to do this sort of activity after a full 40-hour workweek.[62]

Shals Mahajan also describes LABIA's attempts to engage with existing groups on LBT issues. LABIA's attempt has been to work with such groups in order to make them more queer-friendly and able to engage with LBT issues.

> …we realised…that we needed to really talk about queer issues, both gender and sexuality, with as many women's groups and feminist groups as possible so that they change and those spaces become more amenable. That we'll never have as many lesbian bisexual trans groups as we need in this country, we'll never have those kind of helplines, we don't have social security, we don't have that kind of support… Feminist spaces have been really where we put in a lot of energies, so whether it's training the special cell…so that almost every special cell worker who's gone has some understanding of LBT issues, so that they can deal with it on their own. … Similarly through lawyers' groups… so whether they have their networks and we tried to work, trainings with them or just generally talk to them, have that conversation or women's groups, we also made posters and stuff which we asked all the groups to put in their offices just so that they can give this impression that it's a queer friendly space. How do you create that space, because in the 90s and early 2000s a lot of groups would say yes, but we don't have the capacity. … People would earlier say that 'no we want to be open but we don't have the capacity for it,' then we're like, 'build the capacity, we'll help you build the capacity, let's do this.' So

[62] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

> instead of starting an NGO and creating a space, how do you make existing
> spaces amenable to that, and I think that's where one area in which we
> been fairly successful, because if you look at a range of women's groups
> today, of feminist groups today, they are open to issues of sexuality at least
> and…for them it's not so hard to counsel queer people anymore, I don't
> think they're so clear on gender yet, but in terms of lesbian sexuality at
> least they figured, and so in that sense they're able to offer that support…[63]

Why do NGOs need collectives? A few respondents point out that autonomous collectives are able to avoid the problems of state surveillance and regulation. This is often presented as a reason for the need for such collectives, particularly in a situation of state repression.

For example, the NGO with which Neha worked was part of the Citizens' Collective against Sexual Assault. She states that she felt the impetus for the NGO's participation in this collective was because there were many restrictions on it, including the inability to raise certain issues and take certain positions. At the same time, both the NGO and employees like herself see themselves as part of the women's movement. Collectives then become arenas where they can voice opinions that cannot be raised in funded arenas.

> …you have certain politics that you stand by, irrespective of the work or
> the projects that you're doing, and if the collective matches, or is at par
> with what your politics is and what your views are on certain issues and
> your voice can be heard through a collective, then, you be a part of it
> because it's all part of a larger women's movement.[64]

Purnima Gupta says that there are many campaigns in which her organisation cannot participate, as they involve people accused of working against the state. She and other NGO employees participate in these campaigns in their individual capacities.[65] Thus collectives are, for many, places where political work can continue even in situations of state repression.[66] This sense is echoed by Uma Chakravarti, who argues that

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[63] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016
[64] Neha, personal interview, Delhi, 2015
[65] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[66] For some, this raises another issue: of organisations being protected at the expense of individuals. For instance, an NGO employee might sign a petition in her own name rather than her organisation's. The organisation is thus shielded, but the risk is transferred to the individual.

movements that are critical of the state cannot be funded by external donors but must be funded by activists themselves.[67]

Purnima also points to more personal reasons for wanting to be part of collective spaces. These are the spaces that keep one's feminism up-to-date, and allow one to work in a way that is not possible in NGOs.

> In today's context, often you're working in a project mode, it's very mechanical. You have to do a training, you plan for a training, [go] for the training, [come] back from the training, you have to write a report, then you have to go for another training, so it becomes monotonous. And if you believe in an ideology…there are many things which you feel will not be fulfilled there, and that's why I have to [participate in collectives]. In the project mode…you don't have that kind of freedom, for example if a woman says she is being beaten at home, will you leave the training and go to her home to talk, of course you can counsel her over there, but when you are doing it voluntarily you have a freedom, there is no one to stop you, there's no one to demand answers from you, and you can get involved in it with your own ideas, so to balance that…you look for these kind of forums...

> The other thing is that discussions and debates that are going on, you may not be able to get those things in organisations and in the project mode, so then you look for a forum to which you can relate intellectually, or so that you can understand [issues]. Because in our work there are new discourses and new things coming all the time. If we talk of gender, how we used to look at gender 30 years ago, male and female… But now we talk about how there is an entire gender transgression between male and female, and if we don't address that we can't address gender. So if you don't connect with discussions and new discourses, you will remain involved in older things. So how do we stay up-to-date, what new things are happening, how do we bring it into action, so for that you look to collectives and forums, if it isn't there in your organisation. Then only that 10-to-5 work will happen, and if you're not getting those opportunities and if you are like that, then you will try and look for different forums.[68]

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[67] Uma Chakravarti, personal interview, Delhi, June 2016
[68] Purnima Gupta, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

Neha too states that there are personal reasons for participation in collectives. These, she feels, are spaces where one can engage as an individual, and not as a member or representative of an NGO.

> …as an individual if I'm part of a collective, as opposed to an organisation being part of a collective, I have my own voice, have my own ideas, I don't have to necessarily [give] the organisation's views and ideas which I might differ with [at] some point of time, so as an individual I think it's important to be a part of a collective for that very reason, that you have certain views and ideas that you can talk about, you can discuss and that can be heard in that space. And also because…at the end of the day I might not see myself as an activist but I do see myself as a feminist and a part of a larger network, and a movement, and politics, and…I have to identify myself as that individual, I have to separate myself from the organisation and be that individual and within a collective I can do that, I can still express my own individual thoughts and ideas.[69]

Collectives also offer a different way of working, which activists who work in NGOs desire. We saw in the previous section that feminists do seek refuge from the hierarchical, a- or anti-political spaces which they occupy in their daily lives; they do not wish to replicate the same structures and ways of working in collectives. Shals Mahajan describes an occasion where an offer of funding had been made to the collective of which ze is a part. The one-time fund of a few lakh rupees was being offered without any strings attached, and the group could have used it to do whatever they wished. At first the collective found the offer appealing and began considering the various things they could do with the money. In the process of determining what activity they would take up if they accepted the offer, they made lists of what they thought they ought to do, and of what they actually wanted to do and would give time for. At this stage, they realised that this way of working did not appeal to them.

> There was no match between what we thought we should do and what we wanted to do. Then suddenly one person said "you know I work in an NGO, I work with money all day. I work for money. I actually like coming to a space where there's nothing of either somebody giving money with strings or being accountable to somebody or doing something because money is there. Actually I want to work in a non-funded space." ... They

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[69] Neha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

> work in places which tell them what to do. So they want to be in a place
> where they can decide what they want to do.[70]

Or as Chayanika Shah, speaking on behalf of the collective LABIA, states, though the work that the collective does is limited, it is still done wholeheartedly, and the group cherishes that it does work which it enjoys.[71]

Shals discusses how hir collective eventually refused requests by students for internships because none of the members of the collective wished to have to supervise them.

> We had three very brilliant, lovely interns, and we kept on telling them that
> we are [an] open sort of group, we don't have an office, we don't have
> specific work, people have to be self-motivated. But the three interns who
> came enjoyed it and two of them became part of the group. But then we
> decided we don't want any more interns because it was a crazy thing [to]
> keep track and none of us wanted to sort of say "okay, why haven't you
> done this and why haven't you done that." So basically we [felt] it doesn't
> work for us.[72]

Interestingly, young women who have not been exposed to feminist politics may desire, or at least expect, some semblance of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Vani describes how on occasion, young women intern with the collective as part of their social work or women's/gender studies courses. For some, the lack of hierarchy and the absence of the sense of a formal workplace might be bewildering. Vani describes how, though there are informal hierarchies within the Saheli collective, the group does try to minimise them. So when young women come and are asked not to address members of the collective as 'ma'am,' they find it disconcerting "because the whole world is structured around hierarchy." Though the collective has an office, it is not open every day and there are no regular office hours maintained by the volunteers. Vani recounts an exchange with an intern:

> One of the [interns] said, "All my friends are going every day, I feel like
> I'm not doing anything." So I said "are you not doing anything?" "No I've
> done this and this." I said "okay, [if] you want the slavery of getting up and
> going and sitting in the office, I'll give you the key, go and sit in the heat."

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[70] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[71] Chayanika Shah, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.
[72] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

... Non-structure is challenging for us also, it's also confusing for somebody who's new.[73]

Nonetheless, activists desire some amount of flexibility, voluntarism, and freedom when it comes to their feminist activism. They thus turn to collectives as spaces where they can undertake a feminist politics that they desire, and also as spaces for political growth and companionship. This occurs concurrently with a sort of division of labour between collectives and NGOs, where each does the work and raises the sort of issues that the other cannot.

Some see complementary roles for NGOs and collectives. For instance, Sabah is part of the Forum and has also helped found Parcham, an organisation that works with minority girls in Mumbai. She points out that the latter organisation cannot do things that Forum does, for instance working on issues of communalism after the Gujarat riots in 2002. Also, Forum cannot do the things that Parcham is able to do, like its close work with young women, involving them in sports, and having a physical presence in the neighbourhood in which they live. Forum and Parcham then, she says, have a complementary role vis-à-vis one another.[74]

Chayanika Shah points out that there are links between NGOs and collectives through which NGOs have an accountability to autonomous groups. Part of it, she feels, comes from the sense that NGO workers or bosses have, of wanting to be a part of collective spaces as well. (Though she does not elaborate, perhaps this indicates a shared feminist politics between NGOs and autonomous groups.) That sense of accountability seems to counterbalance the impact of funders' agendas to an extent:

> I remember at Saheli's 25 years, somebody from…one such [funded] group [said] that the constant questioning that comes from a group like Saheli, actually keeps us on our toes. It helps, it helps, I feel that there is no doing away, and wherever we have backed out of this kind of tension and conversation, or we've said okay we don't believe in this process and we're out, that processes taken its own path and it has become its own voice and it doesn't help anybody actually… Like the UN process I think. It has now taken off completely by the funded organisations, we are all out of it and we're not interested, I'm not saying that we should go there or we should be part of it but you can see what is happening there. So if

[73] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi
[74] Sabah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

somebody from Jagori or somebody from Swayam or somebody from Akshara, who is part of that UN process, doesn't have even this little connection to the women's movement sphere, it will just, go off in whatever direction the funders want. … The voice of the Indian feminists has been very very militant actually, and it was because there is this continuous dialogue between these various kinds of people within the women's movement sphere. I see it reducing more and more and I don't know how to replace it or what will replace it or how to build further from here… the conversation between Jagori and Saheli has to remain alive, the conversation between Jagori and Forum has to remain alive, and there has to be a sense of shared goals, between these various locations.[75]

However Pinjra Tod activists have a different perspective on NGOs. The group is exposed to NGOs both in the sphere of feminist politics (for example, being invited by funded organisations to participate in panel discussions, seminars et cetera.) and also in university spaces (for example, through Women's Development Cells (WDCs) in colleges).

Some members recollect how, when they were doing their BA degrees, their college's WDC would invite speakers who were part of feminist collectives or even political parties. Over time, however, public programs have begun to be held in association with NGOs.[76] A yearly programme called One Billion Rising, held to protest violence against women, also involves WDCs. There are mismatches that the Pinjra Tod activists describe between their own politics and that of funded groups. One example they give is of a planning meeting for the One Billion Rising programme that was attended by WDC representatives who are also part of Pinjra Tod.

Charu: [Some feminists] brought it up that Pinjra Tod as a movement is going on right now on campuses…so what should we do about it, and then someone from [an NGO] said that Pinjra Tod is against the administration and if we take such a strong position against the administration, these institutional spaces which we're using, that will diminish for us…

Garima: When we were initially getting into these WDCs it was very crazy because people would respond saying, okay so what is your program and…what are your objectives, like in a language which we had never encountered at least, and we did not imagine the WDCs speak like that. …

[75] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[76] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

> What are your long-term goals, what are your short-term goals, and what
> are your mid-term goals, and so these first year, second-year [students]
> give these really official kind of, and you can see where it's coming
> from… So in that way for us, with our own political understanding, [it] felt
> like one was up against this kind of language and this kind of imagination
> which one wanted also to distance from.[77]

Members of the collective describe how they have been approached by funded organisations seeking to collaborate with them. Yet while they feel that such groups can support Pinjra Tod's work, for example by sharing their posts on Facebook, they are not involved in any collaborations with funded organisations. Kusum states that they have an understanding that the work the collective is doing could be hindered by such collaborations.[78] Garima points to the different opinions within the group on the questions of NGOs and in what ways the group should work with them: for instance, some might feel like the group should not work with NGOs at all, while others might feel that some limited interaction is possible. Sakshi, however, states that everyone agrees that the group would not itself become an NGO: that is not a route the group would take.[79]

Conclusion

At a convention on autonomous politics in Delhi in 2016, activist Gautam Bhan asked not only what forms of structure, but also what forms of solidarity autonomy requires.[80] One attendee at the convention spoke of the need to look not only at autonomy but also at the idea of interdependence. These questions and comments are significant because they highlight autonomous groups' relations with one another, and with other forms of organisation, including NGOs.

Activists too indicate the need for these relationships. For example, the national conferences of the women's movement that were held with some regularity have not occurred since 2006; the 2006 conference in Kolkata was itself held after a nine-year gap from the previous conference in Ranchi in 1997. Though feminist groups continue to meet and interact locally, the lack of national meetings has been noted by some. Shals Mahajan talks of how connections between groups have become more

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[77] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[78] Kusum, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[79] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[80] Gautam Bhan, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.

local, and how networks between women's collectives and lesbian collectives are not as strong as they have been in the past.

> …the last conference [was] in 2006 which is again 3000-5000 people so you really have the space to meet people from very different spaces, right, so you make that connect and if you don't have that space to make that connect then how do you have that?[81]

Sandhya Gokhale notes the importance of national conferences, especially as all groups which are part of feminist politics do not work on the same issues and therefore do not meet each other frequently. Thus the national conference is an important platform for groups to meet and discuss issues.[82] These statements reflect the sense of how networks of activists are important to further feminist politics.

In this chapter, we have explored one aspect of this network: the relation between collectives and NGOs. We have examined the personal and political links between these two organisational forms. Activists point to their personal needs for both spaces (for example, NGOs as places where one can earn one's living, where work for women can be carried out in a timely and efficient manner, and collectives as places where their personal and political connections can be expressed). At the same time, the need for both spaces is felt at a broader political and organisational level as well (for instance, NGOs can assist women in distress in a sustained manner, while collectives can be critical of the state in a manner in which registered organisations cannot).

Despite the felt need for both types of spaces, activists are still critical of both collectives and NGOs. While the role of NGOisation in transforming the terrain of feminist politics has received the heaviest criticism, autonomous groups too have come in for their share of criticism for their own failures to take many marginalised communities into consideration.

Even within the autonomous movement, different groups have different approaches to the question of NGOs. For example, we have seen Shals Mahajan speak of the attempt made by the lesbian group LABIA to work with NGOs and women's groups to build their capacities to engage with lesbian women and make their offices welcoming to

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[81] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[82] Sandhya Gokhale, 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' Convention, Delhi, 13-14 August 2016.

persons of non-normative sexualities. Chayanika Shah is more vocal on the need for NGOs which can do the outreach work that autonomous groups cannot. However, we also saw that Pinjra Tod activists were not as ambivalent on the role of NGOs, nor did they express much need for support from NGOs for their political campaigns.

How can we explain the difference in ways in which these activists view NGOs? One important reason is Pinjra Tod's commitment to autonomous politics and the belief that there are differences in the political understandings that inform funded and autonomous politics. Thus there are political and ideological differences that keep Pinjra Tod at a distance from funded organisations.

However other factors might also contribute to this distance. To begin with, the collective has come into being at a different time. We saw in chapter two that the most pressing issues for the incipient autonomous women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s were to do with violence, and the family was identified as a key site of the perpetuation of violence. The need then was to provide individual women with support, which necessitated the setting up of counselling and other service-oriented centres. Pinjra Tod has come into being at a time when these centres are already in existence. Howsoever minimal, there are structures to which women can turn for help (for example, shelter homes). When the group comes across women in distress, there are other institutes to which they can turn. Thus institutionalisation through NGOisation might not need to be a future it sees for itself, to be able to carry out its feminist commitments. Additionally Pinjra Tod's campaigns are focused on issues facing women students in higher education. It attempts to challenge discrimination against women students in terms of hostel timings and fees, to ensure that committees against sexual harassment are established in colleges and universities as mandated by the UGC, et cetera. Thus they do not have to make the same decisions that women in the 1980s did, of whether to set up counselling centres to help individual women, and of whether to and from whom to take funds for the same. In fact, it would be interesting to see if Pinjra Tod members look to institutionalisation in other forms: for instance as a formal student group in the university system.

Perhaps, also, the networks of which the group is a part are different. It is part of the broader feminist movement within Delhi, for example participating in academic and activist events like panel discussions within universities. Yet as we saw above, it

maintains a distance from funded spaces, and its political expression is more protest-oriented. Since its inception, it has not participated in the common annual women's day programme jointly organised by funded groups, autonomous collectives, women's wings of political parties, and academic and service institutions in Delhi. Instead it has used the occasion to organise protest events in the furtherance of its own campaigns for student accommodation and against sexual harassment in universities. One cannot read this fact as a sign of any ideological or organisational difference with the broader feminist movement in the city. Yet it does take the group out of certain networks, which together plan the common women's day programme.

Older feminists have shared histories with women in NGOs, particularly older NGO activists. A critical view of NGOs may be perceived as personal criticism; as Biswas says, discussions of funding are awash with "feelings of guilt and defensiveness (Biswas, 2006, p. 4406)." In this case, perhaps a group which is not part of such networks has fewer personal stakes in taking a more critical view of NGOs and funded politics.

The study of the various organisational forms that feminism has taken – collectives, NGOs, academic institutions, to name a few – adds to the understanding of the various processes through which this movement has developed. It adds to a greater understanding of what we saw termed as 'interdependence': the relations of dependence into which various organisation forms are drawn. It also gives us a deeper understanding of the commonalities–of community, politics, and shared histories–which, howsoever unevenly, bind these various organisations together.

Chapter Five

Contemporary Feminist Thought: Theory and Practice

One significant aspect of autonomous organising has been the space it provides to feminists to develop their own understandings of women and society, as well as their own political agendas. In this chapter we will look at feminist thought and action in three contexts: one is of the changes to feminist thinking brought about through the idea of 'difference'; the second is of the manner in which feminists have engaged with differences of caste and gender; and the third is the link between feminist theory and autonomous feminist activism.

Changes in how feminists think and understand the world have been linked to their forms of politics. The major shift in feminist theorising has been the increased focus on differences between women, associated by some with the influence of postmodern and poststructuralist theories.

Not all scholars and activists subscribe to such theories, or agree on their role and contribution to feminist activism. Yet these shifts are significant because they have contributed to the changed terrain of feminist politics: feminists must take these changes into account, regardless of their opinions on them.

Such shifts have emerged from intellectual exercises, political events, trends in academia, the feminist movement, and other movements. Some political events feature frequently in histories of feminist politics, for example the Shah Bano controversy or the anti-Mandal agitations.

Challenges and insights have come from other social movements. For example, Nivedita Menon discusses the influence of queer and caste politics on feminism (N. Menon, 2004, 2009, 2012). This shall be explored later in the chapter.

Other forms of politics are not equally incorporated within the history of feminist activism. For example, Uma Chakravarti (Chakravarti, 2003b) describes women's studies in India as continually pushed by the women's movement and the issues it has raised; women's studies has been stimulated by the "vitality of the women's

movement." Many women's studies scholars have been activists, involved in campaigns on rape, dowry, sati et cetera. These campaigns, she says, are where understandings of patriarchy and gender began to take shape (Chakravarti, 2003b, p. 364). However, this is a relatively unexplored area, academically, especially with regard to the specific campaigns of the autonomous women's movement.

We begin this chapter by examining what is arguably the most significant theoretical shift in the AWM: the weight given to the idea of difference in women's experiences.

Woman, Women, Gender

In chapter two, we saw how, within feminist politics in the 1990s, the question of difference came to displace the idea of the commonality of female experience. This displacement is linked to the debates and questions raised by the events of the 1980s and 1990s, in particular the Shah Bano controversy, the Roop Kanwar sati at Deorala, the anti-Mandal agitations, and the debates surrounding the Uniform Civil Code. These events are seen as bringing the differences between women to the forefront (N. Menon, 2009; Saheli, 2006; S. Sen & Dhawan, 2011; Tharu & Niranjana, 1994), and thus forcing a change from a form of politics which ignored them.

Some argue that differences had previously escaped feminists' consciousness. For example, Soma Marik states that "there might have been an uncritical usage of "woman" as an overarching category in the early years, which ignored differences, particularly between women of different castes, and communities (Marik, 2005)".[1]

However, a close examination of the movement literature and academic texts reveals that many authors do mention the experiences and problems of specific categories of women. For instance, writing on the status of women, Vibhuti Patel (Patel, 1985, pp. 2-7) referenced the conditions of Dalit and tribal women, as well as middle class and working class women. She mentioned the different educational and employment opportunities available to women of these communities and classes. She added that the caste system and the joint family are agencies that oppress women in rural areas.

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[1] Similar points have been made with regard to women's studies. Maithreyi Krishna Raj, commenting on women's studies, writes that "the focus having shifted from the earlier total preoccupation with upper castes and middle classes, it has now begun to be recognised that the interests, problems and needs of different classes and groups of women are distinct despite a common core of gender oppression. What has neither been admitted nor analysed is that while all women may suffer from gender subordination, there can be areas of conflict between the different classes/groups of women (Krishna Raj, 1988: 892)."

The Socialist Women's Group in Mumbai identified the family as the source of women's oppression, but made a distinction between the bourgeois family and the working-class family (Singh et al., 1985). Indeed, in the open letter written by Lotika Sarkar, Upendra Baxi, Vasudha Dhagamwar and Raghunath Kelkar to the Supreme Court in the Mathura case, the authors pointed to the court's differential treatment of "affluent urban women" versus the "illiterate, labouring, politically mute Mathura's (sic) of India (Baxi, Kelkar, Sarkar, & Dhagamwar, 1979)." We might ask how this recognition of difference has informed feminist politics: how differences were engaged with and incorporated into feminist politics.

Some scholars argue that despite recognition, differences were elided. Gail Omvedt and Sharmila Rege argue that autonomous women's groups remained rooted in class analyses of society even as they distanced themselves organisationally from the left (Omvedt, 1993; Rege, 1998). Rege emphasises the lack of understanding and theorisation of caste as a structure in social life. She argues that for autonomous groups, the notion of 'sisterhood' was vital and "resulted into a universalisation of what was in reality the middle class, upper caste women's experience (Rege, 1998, p. WS42)." Uma Chakravarti writes that

> Caste did not feature as a substantial or pressing concern in the first feminist works, which largely emanated from urban, middle-class, and almost invariably upper-caste social groups. Indeed, in parts of India such as Bengal, feminists are known to have stated that caste was no longer relevant in the social and political life of their region... In fact, it was not until the Mandal moment that metropolitan feminists were forced to confront the power of caste in everyday life and were hit by confusion, or worse, by an ostrich-like refusal to read the signs around them. The situation was very different in those regions that had longstanding engagements with caste, such as Maharashtra and Tamilnadu (Chakravarti, 2016, p. xiii).

These remarks suggest that difference was not invisible but rather, ignored, or pressed into the service of an idea of the commonality of female experience. Ratna Kapur, for example, states that

> The women's movement, with its focus on gender, victimisation and a
> universal Indian women's identity, had not adequately addressed issues of
> religious identity and conflict… While the autonomous women's

movement recognises religious difference, it does not see it as producing conflict between women. The focus remains on the commonality of women's experiences, especially of sexual exploitation and sexual violence (Kapur, 2012, pp. 337-338).

A Saheli document makes a similar point:

> The women's movement began with a monolithic notion of universal sisterhood. When Saheli was started, we too began our work with the same notion. Our initial years of work on communalism and Uniform Civil Code (UCC) were also based on this presumption. The movement asserted that women in all religious communities are similarly oppressed (Saheli, 2006, p. 57).

Kannabiran and Kannabiran argue that the effacing of difference had political consequences (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997). They give examples of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana's activism in Hyderabad, in particular around the issue of working women's hostels. The Stree Shakti Sanghatana raised the issues of the conditions of two hostels in Hyderabad, one run by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the other by the Andhra Yuvati Mandali. The problems of hostel residents revolved around two sets of issues: poor infrastructure (electricity and water shortages, poor quality food, and unhygienic conditions) and the discourse of protectionism that applied only to young women and restricted their mobility.

Kannabiran and Kannabiran write that "the emphasis and articulation of the issue initially centred on class and there was no comprehension of the operation of caste or of the state's complicity in caste oppression (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, p. 267)." Looking back on their campaign, they argue that the group also did not give religion the weight it deserved. The Andhra Yuvati Mandali had a "strong upper-caste-Hindu majority image" while the YWCA had a "Christian minority image"; the former was able to command greater support from the state during the campaign. The authors point out that what they term the group's uncritical absorption of majority-minority differences shaped its strategies: in the case of the YWCA hostel, protests took place in the church compound during Sunday service, while protests against the Andhra Yuvati Mandali hostel management took place in front of the hostel itself. Additionally, the group framed the issue as impacting 'single women' and focused on the common features of their oppression, thus "precluding any kind of

investigation into the intersection of caste and community on this issue (Vasanth Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1997, pp. 268-270)."[2]

The political events listed above have eroded both the idea of a common core of female experience, and also, the idea of grounding solidarity in a shared experience of femininity. These events are held to be especially significant in changing not just the terrain on which the AWM must operate, but also the manner in which feminist politics must be conceptualised. Nivedita Menon (N. Menon, 2009) writes of the implications of caste and sexuality politics for feminist politics: the dissolution of 'woman' as the subject of feminist politics. Caste politics, she writes, challenges the assumption of the commonality of women's experience, and highlights that "Woman is not simply an already existing subject that the women's movement can mobilise for its politics." Debates over the Women's Reservation Bill (which mandates 33% reservation for women in Parliament), she writes, have brought these issues to the fore. The argument that the reservation would result in the entry only of 'upper' caste women into Parliament led to the demand for quotas for backward caste and Dalit women. Opposition to this proposal, she argues, can only be seen as a "discomfort with…the entry of these caste groups into Parliament (N. Menon, 2009, p. 96)."

Sexuality politics[3] too, she says, has impacted feminist politics, in particular by questioning the idea that women are necessarily the subject of feminist politics.

> Queer politics and counter-heteronormative trends complicate notions of women and gender. They also complicate the answer to the questions: Who is the subject of feminist politics? Can gay men be the subject of feminist politics? How about transpeople - both male-to-female and female-to-male (N. Menon, 2012, p. 104)?

Women's groups in general have taken note of these challenges, though again, one may ask how far they have been accommodated. National conferences of the

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[2] There are parallels here with the study of rural families in Punjab, conducted by Horowitz and Kishwar, referred to in chapter two. There too, though the different situations and experiences of Jat Sikh and Mazhabi Sikh women are discussed, the focus is on the commonalities of their oppression in the family.

[3] Nivedita Menon writes that "In India, from the 1990s, there came to be visible a range of political assertions that implicitly or explicitly challenged heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage. Such challenges - we could term them 'counter-heteronormative' - are seen around the demand for the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and various kinds of political action around issues related to the lives and civil liberties of *hijras,* gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people and sex workers. (N. Menon, 2012, p. 98)"

women's movement[4] have since 1994 affirmed the diversity of the participants. The declaration preceding the 5th National Conference of Women's Movements in India in Tirupati in 1994 highlighted that though the women in attendance were from different regions, religions, caste and class backgrounds, and spoke different languages, they all worked to challenge the oppressive structures of society ("The Fifth National Conference," 1994, p. 7).

Sessions on sexuality, and on the specific issues of Dalit and Adivasi women, were organised for the first time as part of the 5th national conference. The session on Dalit and Adivasi women was attended by 1000 women, who discussed the specific forms of oppression and discrimination faced by women of these communities. These reflected the challenges from within and without their communities: discrimination and patriarchy, as well as a host of social, economic, legal and other issues. Women spoke of the distinctness of Dalit and Adivasi women's situations and issues from other women, including poor women, and from the men of their communities. Ruth Manorama described Dalit women as "thrice oppressed": by caste, class, and gender, and by class, caste and women's movements. She pointed out that Dalit women are marginalised by such movements; while they participate in large numbers, they derive no benefits from such participation, nor are they in leadership positions. Thus, she said, Dalit women need to organise separately ("The Fifth National Conference," pp. 47-49).

In the session on sexuality, women discussed experiences of sexual desire, puberty and menstruation, increasing restrictions on their mobility as they grew up, and pressures to marry, amongst other issues ("The Fifth National Conference," 1994, pp. 57-58).

A subtheme on lesbianism was also organised as part of the conference. Attendance was closed to heterosexual women. Discussions amongst the lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual women who attended enabled them to get to know each other and share their experiences in a safe, affirming and supportive environment ("The Fifth National Conference," 1994, p. 58).

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[4] National women's movement conferences have been held seven times since 1980. The last such conference was at Kolkata in 2006.

Though sexuality and lesbianism were issues raised at the conference, they were met with some hostility. During the session on sexuality, a set of women demanded that a resolution be passed declaring lesbianism to be unnatural and abnormal, a reaction to a patriarchal society and bad experiences with men. Many others in attendance decried this characterisation of lesbianism. Additionally, posters for a follow-up session on the lesbianism subtheme were torn down ("The Fifth National Conference," 1994, p. 58).

Subsequent conferences too noted the diversity amongst participants. The declaration of the 6th National Conference of Women's Movements in India in Ranchi in 1997 noted the varied backgrounds of the participants ("Mahila Andolan ka Chata Rashtriya Sammelan," 1997, p. 5). By the seventh National Conference on Women's Movements in India in Kolkata in 2006,

> …diversities as a reflection of the trajectory of the women's movement(s) had been affirmed, emphasised, reiterated, and made an emblem of sorts. It was the core theme of the conference. For the first time, there was an acknowledgement of the diversity amongst us as women and due respect for this difference (Gopal, 2007).

Diversity here was understood in terms of different identities:

> We believe that as women, we share common interests and goals, and hence come together in our collective struggles. But caste, nation, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, ability or disability are deeply rooted social constructs which create multiple identities for many of us. Consequently, the politics of identity throws up several contradictions, yet we remain committed to recognising and respecting these 'diversities' even as we seek justice for the inequities that result from them. In particular, we seek support for the struggles of women who are made further vulnerable by specific facets of their identities – as adivasis (sic), Dalits, poor and working class, religious minorities, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, sex workers, disabled, and women of other socially marginalised groups ("Towards a Politics of Justice," 2006).

A recent debate regarding questions of identity and difference has centred on the concept of intersectionality. Nivedita Menon (N. Menon, 2015, p. 38) states that in India, intersectionality generally means either ""double and triple burdens," or that "Woman" must be complicated by caste, religion, class." In both cases, she argues,

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the term reiterates ideas that have already been in circulation in India and in the global south more generally. Menon states that "the politics of engaging with multiple identities, their contradictions and interrelations, goes back to the early 20th century and the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles in the global South." Additionally, she argues, the idea of womanhood has in India been complicated by the politics of caste, religion and sexuality.

However, Mary John (John, 2015) argues that 'woman' as the subject of feminist politics has not been destabilised to the extent that Menon holds. Referring to the debates surrounding the Women's Reservation Bill, she argues that male supporters of the position for sub-quotas are intent on preserving their caste numbers in Parliament, while those who oppose this position do not engage with the need to grant special quotas to OBC women. Thus neither side engages with difference within the population it claims to represent.

Secondly, she argues that the identification of difference need not lead to understanding the specific forms of oppression that particular women experience. The additive model ('Dalit women are triply oppressed by caste, class and gender oppression') may not help us to understand the specific issues faced by Dalit women. To apply John's analogy to the Indian situation, it might translate into thinking that Dalit women have the same problems as (generic therefore savarna) women, plus those of (generic therefore male) Dalits, plus those of the (generic therefore male) poor. That Dalit women have problems which are different from those of savarna women or Dalit men is not explored. Thus the subject of feminism remains singular by implication, with the caveat that some women have it worse, or, as the declaration to the seventh women's movement conference (quoted above) says, are 'further vulnerable'. The questions – worse than whom? more vulnerable than whom? – are not answered. Thus differences may be elided or sidelined even as they are recognised and celebrated.

We saw in chapters two and three that for many women, the discrimination, violence, sexism and misogyny that they experienced as women, and saw other women experiencing, were amongst the key factors that drew them to feminist politics. Thus the focus of the early women's movement has been women: the need to understand women's lives and work towards improving them. Much of the work done by the

women's movement has been on identifying the causes of women's oppression and finding ways to challenge this oppression.

The terms sex and gender were used to explain the positions of women in society. Sex was defined as the biological features which made a body either male or female: the presence of male or female sexual organs. Gender was defined as a social construct: the social and cultural meanings that are attached to the biological body and make it masculine or feminine. Thus the roles and stereotypes that make up masculinity and femininity were defined as social/cultural as opposed to natural. This formulation allowed for femininity (the roles and meanings attached to being a woman) to be seen as a social/cultural artifice and therefore changeable (Bhasin, 2000, pp. 1-3). This formulation thus provided the base for feminist politics to challenge the unjust and oppressive conditions in which women were placed, and to refute their justification as natural and therefore immutable.

Over time, however, the 'naturalness' of sex has been questioned. Scholars have argued that sex too is not 'natural' but is impacted by culture: that the materiality of human bodies is also an artifice (N. Menon, 2012, pp. 64-65). Arguing against the naturalness of 'sex' opens up feminism to genders that fall outside the binary of male and female and poses a further challenge to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality (Mahajan, 2008).

Alongside this are changes in the meaning of feminism itself. Feminism must identify how specific types of womanhood and manhood come to be constructed at specific historical moments in particular societies and cultures. As Menon writes,

> In this second decade of the 21st century, we all know that feminism is not in fact about "women" but about recognising how modern discourses of gender produce human beings as exclusively "men" or "women" (N. Menon, 2015, p. 37).

Feminists thus must identify the processes of gendering: the processes by which persons come to be gendered, i.e. "produced as 'proper' men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts (N. Menon, 2012, p. ix)." Gendering may also extend to physical objects, spaces, and other constituents of social life: for example, feminists may look at how articles of clothing, jobs, buildings, emotions et cetera,

come to be gendered, i.e. associated either with men or women, masculinity or femininity.[5]

Feminists must also recognise that processes of gendering open up some ways of being men and women, while closing off others. They impose limits on human beings' physicality, gender identity and sexual orientation, which are not in themselves necessarily fixed one way or another.

Also, while feminism must take particular care to see how the social world is structured by gender, it must be mindful of other structures and identities that play equally significant roles in shaping human beings and their lives and interactions. Thus feminism must be attentive not only to gendered power relations, but to all power relations. It must recognise that women too have power; not necessarily gendered power, but power due to other identities and structural locations. Thus a woman is not, on account of her womanhood, necessarily the most powerless person in a given interaction; rather, the power or powerlessness of persons in a given situation depends upon the nature of that situation, as well as the people in it.

Within this framework, feminists must challenge not patriarchy alone (as a specific social structure which oppresses women) but all power relations and structures which, through the creation of stereotypes and fixed ways of being men and women, limit the variety of being of which humans are capable. Indeed, feminists must challenge women's movements too, if they perpetuate stereotypical notions of femininity. Ratna Kapur, for instance, argues that the autonomous women's movement has retained and perpetuated stereotypical notions of Indian womanhood, and that feminists should incorporate the insights of postcolonial theory in order to surmount these stereotypes (Kapur, 2012a).

Woman, Women, Gender: Responses

These shifts within feminism–of centring differences, of looking at gender rather than women–have had a mixed reception within feminist theory and activism.

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[5] These trends resonate with what has come to be known as poststructuralist feminism. Ratna Kapur argues that "feminist poststructuralist perspectives allow us to examine the competing and complex discourses that constitute women…(Kapur & Cossman, 1996, pp. 33-34)." Due to its focus on the multiple discourses that women live through, she says, "Poststructuralist feminism does not reduce women's oppression to singular or universal factors, but rather examines the multiple and shifting dimensions of women's oppression (Kapur & Cossman, 1996, p. 34)."

For some, they give a direction to feminist politics. For example, Supriya Akerkar (Akerkar, 1995, p. WS2) argues that recognising that the category 'woman' is discursively constructed, does not "exclude possibilities of emancipatory practices around that category." Rather,

> different articulations around the category 'woman' could open up a possibility of different, localised emancipatory practices based on solidarity, but without suppressing differences under the overarching category woman. This opens up a possibility of plural practice of feminism (Akerkar, 1995, p. WS2).

For others, they do not go far enough. Ratna Kapur argues that Indian feminism has based its politics in ideas of sex and gender, and conservative stereotypes of Indian womanhood (Kapur, 2012a). While approaching the law and making claims for women on the basis of a discourse of rights, it has perpetuated stereotypical notions of womanhood. Pointing particularly to issues of violence, she argues that representations of women as victims of sexual violence have still traded in conservative constructions of shame and honour.

Gender, as the meanings and stereotypes attached to being a woman, is a site of power; it may be deployed by feminists but also by the Hindu right, in pushing its own conservative agenda. Kapur states that "it is this power in the hands of those who use gender that must be understood—not its lack of ability to transform women's lives (Kapur, 2012a, p. 347)." Thus neither sex nor gender will serve the cause of feminist politics, which must instead look to postcolonialism to reinvigorate itself.

For some, they take feminism in the wrong direction. Sharmila Rege (Rege, 1998, p. WS40) lists various factors which have given rise to the feminist preoccupation with differences. Amongst these is a postmodern "position of nominalism" which argues that a single category "woman" cannot exist because women differ across different structures. Rege points to two consequences of this position. One, feminism loses its political content as its primary task becomes that of deconstructing difference. Two, feminist analysis focuses on "identities, subjectivities and representations" at the expense of structures, and downplays the role and analysis of political economy.[6] One

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[6] For academic feminist perspectives on the links between gender, caste and economy, see Chakravarti, 1993, Gopal, 2012, and Velaskar, 2016. It should be noted that there are feminist groups that look to structural factors to understand and explain women's situations. For example, a report by the national

may talk of a multiplicity of identities without reflecting upon the structures through which they come into being, and without seeing how difference is "convert[ed] into oppression," which she argues is "imperative for feminist politics."

Some argue that the term gender does not contribute to feminist politics. Kamla Bhasin describes the term as "sanitised" and writes how she found it "neither politically sharp nor very useful for feminist struggles…[it was] academically useful but politically blunt (Bhasin, 2011, pp. 77-78)."

For some, these debates impact feminist activism, but without giving clarity or direction. Ranjana Padhi describes her sense of bewilderment as an activist in the 1990s, caught between the struggles of women facing incalculable devastation, and postmodern deconstructions of identities (Padhi, 2012, pp. xviii-xix). When women were facing losses of land, livelihoods, identities, she says, it was impossible to ask how they were "differently impacted."

Her language in describing the disconnection is both poignant and sharp:

> Many trees have since been felled in the cause of arguing that there is no such thing as "ordinary" and no generic "woman". Many women of privilege have passionately critiqued such generalisations by subjecting the "ordinary woman" to many extraordinary critiques. And yet, my sense that we were losing feminist ground in the context of current realities filled me with a persistent, nagging confusion (Padhi, 2012, p. xix).

One point, made above, is worth reiterating here: the knowledge that women are indeed different does not imply the accommodation of those differences in a meaningful way into feminist politics (or indeed, any politics). We saw this to be the case in the incipient feminist movement. Subsequently, too, there are indications that differences have been received unevenly within feminist politics.[7]

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women's network Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, on the rapes of Dalit girls in Haryana, presents an understanding of those rapes that link caste, political economy, and gender. The report points to changing land usage, the relations between Jat and Dalit castes, and the gendered nature of violence to explain the widespread incidence of rapes of Dalit girls (Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, 2014). Thus there are streams of activism which are informed by understandings of structures and political economy.

[7] Indeed, differences that were recognised may cease to inform politics. For example, Deepti Priya Mehrotra says, "Even the class issues, the way they were being raised in the earlier years, there's been a retreat from that. The actual working across class, doing activities and events where there are women from different classes right there, doesn't happen any more.…Meetings were not being held in [India International Centre] and [India Habitat Centre], meetings were be held in people's homes or in

For example, disability is seen as an abiding omission of feminist politics. In 2002, Anita Ghai termed disabled women an "excluded agenda of Indian feminism (Ghai, 2002)," arguing that Indian feminists had failed to both engage with disabled women as a group, and to incorporate disability into feminist theory: "the impaired body has not been considered as having analytical consequence (Ghai, 2002, p. 55)." In her more recent work, she argues that since the 2000s, women's groups have made more attempts to include disabled women, in terms of participation and decision-making. However issues of accessibility persist (for example, the absence of wheelchair-accessible toilets at conference venues), and disabled women's economic problems are not adequately understood. Significantly, Ghai notes the absence of any disabled women's groups which could collectively pursue disabled women's interests and "influence both the disability movement and the women's movement (Ghai, 2015, pp. 145-146)."

Another indication of the uneven reception of difference is in the manner in which queer and Dalit women's groups articulate their relationships to autonomous groups. While some queer groups see themselves as a part of the autonomous women's movement, Dalit women's groups may maintain their distinctness from this movement.

For example, Rajni Tilak describes how issues that Dalit women prioritised (like access to water, employment, sanitation et cetera) were not raised by the women's movement. She mentions the different meanings of feminism for upper-caste, economically independent feminists, and Dalit women, who bear the additional burden of caste stigma (Navarro-Tejero, 2005, pp. 102-103).

Wandana Sonalkar explores the relationship between Dalit women and the autonomous women's movement at greater length (Sonalkar, 2008). She argues that the urban, upper-caste feminist movement, with its links to communist and left politics, has worked amongst rural and working-class women. Dalit feminists now assert their right to self-representation; they do not wish to have savarna women speak on their behalf and have, since the 1990s, been organising independently (Sonalkar, 2008, pp. 10-11). She points out that Dalit feminists analyse issues differently from

bastis… They were not in English always, there were…many meetings where we spoke in Hindi, we had people of different backgrounds there, equally contributing… They were part of the organisers, they were there before us sometimes…" Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, 2015, Delhi.

mainstream feminists, illustrating this point through the debate surrounding the ban on bar-dancing in Maharashtra. For mainstream feminists, the ban was an instance of moral policing and impacted the dancers' livelihoods, and therefore had to be struck down. Dalit women's groups, on the other hand, saw bar-dancing as part of a long history of the sexual exploitation of women of particular communities, welcomed the ban, and demanded that the dancers be rehabilitated. In this sense, Dalit women's groups posed a challenge to the mainstream women's movement (Sonalkar, 2008, pp. 16-18). Gopal Guru further argues that the contradictions between upper-caste and Dalit women lead the latter to organise independently (Guru, 1995).

Dalit women stress their distance from mainstream feminist politics, unlike lesbian and queer groups. For instance, the queer feminist LBT collective LABIA situates itself within the autonomous women's movements (LABIA, 2013, p. 114). This is not to suggest that the relationship between queer politics and feminist politics is without its stresses. However it indicates the space for queer politics within feminist politics – a space which Dalit feminists have not necessarily found.

This review of some of the shifts within feminist politics raises various questions. The first is of how some issues and problems become part of feminist politics while others struggle to gain recognition and attention. The second is of the shifts in politics itself, and what it means to 'do politics' or 'be political.' The third is of the relative scope and possibilities thrown up by different forms of politics. We will examine these questions through activists' voices.

Voices from the Field

Examining how issues of difference and in particular differences between women come into feminist politics is interesting because it brings to the fore the fact that this inclusion is a political process. This is indicated by Anita Ghai's statement above, which notes the absence of disabled women's organising and linked it to the inattention that disability as an issue has received from mainstream feminists. Her words indicate that to become part of the agenda of a movement, an issue has to be pushed, in a sense, by interested parties.

Engaging with 'Difference'

In this section, we will examine some of the other ways in which ideas and issues have been incorporated, or have failed to be incorporated, within feminist politics. We will examine the understandings of caste and sexuality and their interaction with mainstream feminist politics.

Caste

For some women who have been part of the AWM since the 1980s (or prior), caste was not an issue that many feminist activists were aware of to any degree. Deepti Priya Mehrotra, for instance, talks of how caste was not part of her consciousness as a feminist activist in Delhi in the 1980s.

> Caste was absolutely missing from our consciousness even, it was hardly there. Personally I remember meeting Anganwadi workers who were demonstrating sometime early or mid-80s, and…going for a demo of theirs and there finding somebody called Karuna who lived in old Delhi who said she's a neo Buddhist, so to me that was kind of a revelation to find this person. … But the Dalit question was not very much prominent at this time. My M. Phil. [was] on a peasant worker, peasant freedom fighter of UP, Jaggi Devi, so there I came across caste issues, she was a Kurmi and the person she married was a Brahmin. But it wasn't part of our movement self-consciously, so there must have been other people but we weren't part of that… [I was] reading about some of the Dalit feminists and suddenly f[ound] the term savarna feminists, and it's true, so we were largely savarna feminists and are largely perhaps so. And, I don't think it's very self-conscious even now.[8]

Caste, she says, was subsumed under the issues of poorer women, and did not emerge as an issue in its own right.[9]

Ammu Abraham traces her (and her organisation's) understanding of rape over the decade of the 1980s.

> Ammu: We were thinking of rape as rape, everybody's rape, we didn't think of…the significance of rape for certain sections of women and how they experience it. … But looking back I don't think we had nothing to say, we had something to say, we just didn't have the further definitions

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[8] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, Delhi, 2015
[9] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, personal interview, Delhi, 2015

and it's because we were against rape we were also people who would have been enraged about caste when we found out about that. It is true that I knew nothing about caste, I never thought about it… I was not aware of it.

Vasudha: When did it strike you?

Ammu: … Towards the end of [the] 1980s one started reading and hearing about this, and also…there were Dalit women attending the national conferences and they have raised the issue in 1990 definitely, but some discussion has gone on before that, so it's through them that one became aware of the issue and got into some kind of debate and exchange of opinion about the whole issue. … One didn't go much into it at that time, but one started getting a sense that maybe we have not looked at rape through the glasses of caste, especially of former untouchable groups, so-called untouchable groups. We have not looked at it. Then the issues were raised more strongly in 1990.[10]

Chayanika Shah states that theoretical understandings of caste and gender have also taken a long time to emerge.

The predominant frame of Marxism, to understand gender, has in my understanding, hampered some of our understanding of caste. … The connections between gender, caste and patriarchy did not get articulated in the same manner as gender, class and patriarchy got articulated, to begin with. So we were talking of family and private property much earlier than we spoke about endogamous and exogamous marriages… The obvious connection [between] caste, gender [and] patriarchy, that came very late.[11]

For some, the social backgrounds of autonomous feminists have led to caste issues not being raised. Sandhya Gokhale, for example, describes herself and other AWM activists as being "caste-blind" until they took up the issue of the ban imposed on bar-dancing in Maharashtra by the state government in 2005. The Forum Against Oppression of Women, of which she is part, conducted a survey of bar dancers, whose livelihoods were threatened by the ban; this revealed, she says, that bar dancing was a "caste-based occupation." This issue opened their eyes to the social reality of caste more than events like the anti-Mandal agitations of the 1990s.[12]

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[10] Ammu Abraham, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016
[11] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016
[12] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016

> See, politically agreeing with reservation, politically saying that there is
> caste discrimination, is not taking up the caste issue. You have to
> understand how caste operates in your daily life, it's not just in the
> structures and the government. All of us were pro-reservation, so we were
> against the anti-Mandal agitation, in that sense we were caste-conscious
> but we were not caste-conscious in the same sense that we started realising
> what it means to be part of a caste and…how your life gets controlled,
> right from your birth, you yourself get moulded. … See, upper-caste
> people can afford to be caste-blind, they are caste-blind because all of us
> say that in city, caste system doesn't function, but it functions.[13]

Shals Mahajan explains hir lack of familiarity with the work of Ambedkar and
Periyar, as coming from hir various locations, biographical as well as activist:

> That's also part of my lacunae which comes from many places, from my
> location as an individual, from my location as part of the group I belong to,
> and somewhere also because we're working in Bombay we've worked so
> much on religion, we worked so much on communalism, so we read more
> on Muslim women, we read a lot of those texts, but we didn't read enough
> on caste…[14]

Uma Chakravarti also argues that caste as an issue has not arisen within autonomous
feminist politics due to the social backgrounds of autonomous feminists. These she
describes as urban and university-educated, often with at least two generations of
English education behind them.

> These are urban women who have not experienced caste, caste oppression,
> or there's no single friend, there's no single person who will be able to talk
> about caste oppression experienced as caste oppression.[15]

Meena states that while the caste question has come up strongly in parts of the
country, it has not impacted autonomous feminist politics much. She feels that this is
because of the social backgrounds of feminists.

> I think it's because of our own location no, we're all largely upper caste
> and unless somebody raises it as a caste issue we don't engage with it…

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[13] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016
[14] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016
[15] Uma Chakravarti, personal interview, Delhi, 2016

> It's your own location in a way, and so issues of caste are dealt with in some other domain…[16]

Meena and Sandhya Gokhale both argue that this is a feature of autonomous politics: as autonomous groups have no external affiliations, they are free to raise issues as per their members' interests. Members tend to raise issues which draw on their own experiences, which in turn reflect their social backgrounds.[17]

Meena sees autonomous spaces as the space where "you're bringing your personal and then your political…also emerg[es]."[18] The autonomous group's selection of issues upon which to act is thus closely linked to members' lives and lived experiences. She gives the example of her collective's close association with a Muslim women's group in Mumbai; some activists are members of both groups. This has enabled a deeper engagement with Muslim women's issues, an engagement that is only now being forged with other communities.

> So it's only close alignment with people whose lived experience comes to that, then you engage it with a new politics, right. Today in the Women's Studies Centre we are really engaging with caste because we have representation from the SC group and [a] couple of [faculty members]. We see everything as gender, gender, it's so easy for us to say, any practice and any type of dynamic immediately we can see its gendered aspect but today we are open to the casted (sic) aspect because there are people amongst us who constantly tell us, "look, he's behaving like a Brahmin, this is how Brahmins behave." So then the caste consciousness comes, whereas for us in our group, now we have people, but earlier and even now it's not very dominant, if we have people from Dalit communities, women, Dalit feminists, then it makes a difference, the questions are constantly raised.[19]

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[16] Meena, personal interview, Mumbai, 2016

[17] Chayanika Shah makes an interesting observation regarding the Forum, of which she is a member: that the issues raised in some ways reflect the members' vision of the nature of the city of Mumbai. She gives the example of an instance when a taxi driver was stopped and harassed by the police for having a single woman passenger late at night. The taxi drivers' union issued a statement that henceforth, taxis would not take single women passengers after midnight. Forum took up the issue immediately, taking a morcha with the union to the Police Commissioner's office at midnight. The riots following the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002, she says, also changed something in the city, for the worse; thus the group has been swift to react to these events. "Anything that seems to change the character of Bombay bothers us much more … it is something that we react most urgently to. … I think that's where our personal is actually." Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai.

[18] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

[19] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

This argument critiques not only the autonomous women's movement but also autonomy as an organising principle of feminist politics. As Sandhya says, the issues taken up reflect the members' own experiences. Therefore those experiences that members have not had, are taken up with greater difficulty and with less understanding. Additionally, the autonomous nature of the collective means that it is under less pressure to take up a diverse set of issues, unlike other organisation forms, which may have to raise issues if even just to pay lip service to them. As Sandhya says,

> See ultimately that is the shortcoming of any autonomous group, that your group's politics and understanding gets formed and informed by the people who participate in that group. So we had people participating from Christian or other religions so we could learn from each other and our experiences, people with queer identities, we could learn. We had one or two people coming in from the caste background, but you know that is the specificity of caste in India, because the caste background also determines your articulation. … Forum was very, to a large extent continues to be upper-caste, upper-class, so people from other religions who have grown up with certain privileges can become part of it but it's not very easy for a Dalit activist to get the same amount of space, and that definitely somewhere hampered our understanding of caste, because of the very autonomous nature. In a way in a political party you will have various sections being represented, I don't mean meaningfully they interact and inform each other but there is a scope. That is not necessarily true in autonomous groups.[20]

Meena talks about the caste experiences of savarna women in autonomous groups: the lack of experience of caste discrimination means that activists need to strive to understand these experiences as they are felt by other communities. This view again links political understanding to lived experience.

> I think we all come with our own privilege and with that privilege only our consciousness is formed, unless we're constantly self-critical, really open our eyes to that aspect of reality, I would think it's still not enough the experience of living under caste power and caste dynamic is not affecting a whole lot of us yet, I mean it's also class privilege in that sense, and even if there's class disprivilege, still caste is not coming in that way very powerfully you know… So there's more need for really engaging with

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[20] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

lived experiences of people from Dalit communities, understand like food and relationships and many things that we really need to, we're totally not aware about, even life opportunities for people et cetera… Experience should inform our politics much more, so in that case either we work closely with groups, Dalit groups who are engaging with the concerns, everyday experiences of Dalit communities… Or we should have our own membership from those spaces.[21]

She adds that savarna women have to learn to see their experiences through the lens of caste:

We know that we're upper caste, and we don't face discrimination, some of those who may face discrimination, we don't see it in terms of caste as such, that's what I mean by blindness around caste, obviously there is caste practice within the privileged groups also, controlling [of women] and all, but then we don't see it in terms of caste in that sense.[22]

This raises interesting questions for autonomous feminist politics. Activists like Sandhya Gokhale and Meena point to the centrality of experience as driving autonomous feminist politics. Issues are seen as arising from members' lived experiences; the entries of particular women (Muslim women, lesbian and bisexual women) are seen as driving particular agendas. Yet while experiences are of all sorts, experiences of discrimination seem to drive feminist politics more. For instance, one may argue that all women have an experience of caste. Only some experience caste discrimination; yet even women of savarna castes experience being of and living in a particular caste, and may be deeply aware of how these backgrounds shape their lives. The links between caste and gender have been explored academically since the 1990s (to say nothing of other writings on caste and gender, such as those of Ambedkar or Ramabai): the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, introduced into the academic lexicon in 1993, points to the caste oppression of upper-caste women. This has not in itself caused women in autonomous groups to look more deeply at the meanings of caste for their politics. The obvious question this raises is of the complicity of savarna women in maintaining caste hierarchies. But it raises an equally important question of experience as the basis of politics (and by extension, autonomous politics): is it only

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[21] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai. It should be noted, though, that members of both the Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai and Saheli in Delhi mention that some activists have left these collectives due to their failure to take up caste issues and develop an understanding of caste. Thus the presence of members from certain backgrounds is not enough to push a certain agenda.
[22] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

negative experiences, of social devaluation, that can make their way into political agendas? Are there ways and mechanisms to bring oppression which does not present itself as discrimination and a robbing of dignity, into feminist politics?

Activists occasionally refer to caste being associated with Dalits, i.e. articulated as if only Dalits have caste. The concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, and structural understandings of caste, challenge this notion. But that does not necessarily mean that such understandings have been absorbed into feminist politics. Vani, speaking on behalf of Saheli, discusses the group's attempt to talk of caste structures during a session it conducted at the 7th National Conference of Women's Movements in 2006, in Kolkata.

> Vani: I think our effort on the caste issue, is to not look at the caste issue as being something about Dalit women. … Even in Calcutta at the session we ran…we said this is not a session on Dalit women, it's a session on how caste operates on all women, how caste creates boundaries and moralities around each caste, and how caste then creates hierarchies between women.

> Vasudha: But do you think that's an understanding which has been absorbed into the women's movement by and large?

> Vani: I think we're all working on it, we're working on articulation, we're working on understanding what that means. No it's not absorbed, because also caste has got identified with Dalits… It also emanates out of Uma [Chakravarti's] work on understanding caste as a central sort of spine that controls a lot of things, you know, including notions of endogamy, exogamy, the whole framework right, patriarchy and caste together and that's what you get, so that's actually what our session was about. Was it a great success, not yet, was it a step in the right direction, I actually think so, is there a hell of a lot more to be done, I think so too, and for me that is what it's about, we cannot talk, it's like you can't talk race and only talk black people, na?[23]

Pinjra Tod, the Delhi-based autonomous feminist collective, has raised some of these aspects of the issue of gender and caste. The collective has campaigned on the issue of women's hostels in various universities in Delhi, raising questions of the shortage of women's hostels and discriminatory rules for women. However, the group argues that the imposition of curfews in women's hostels means that the hostel functions as a

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[23] Vani, Saheli group discussion, Delhi, 2015

'pinjra' or cage, in which women are imprisoned. The purpose of this 'caging' is to control women's mobility in the attempt to control their sexuality, in order to further a system of class and caste endogamy. Women who are not under surveillance may have relationships outside of the bounds of heterosexual Brahmanical patriarchy; to prevent this, they are subject to various forms of monitoring and control. In this understanding, caste shifts from being about 'Dalits' to being a structuring principle in society in general; and the reproduction of patriarchy and caste in society go hand-in-hand. Charu draws links between this understanding and the physical space of the hostel:

> Even when we were conceptualising Pinjra Tod… it's not just gender oppression, it's also reflecting the Brahmanical society in terms of…it is a particular kind of caste endogamy which you have to maintain, I think that understanding was there in terms of, what are the many things the hostel gate or the hostel rules represent.[24]

The group also engages with a discourse of safety and security of women students. Hostel authorities often justify deadlines on the grounds that cities are unsafe and that women residents should stay within the hostel premises for their own safety. Women do also agree with these arguments, holding that the hostel timings are for their own good. Yet, following the campaign, women students have begun to look at deadlines as something which harms them, in material and tangible ways. For instance, a Pinjra Tod activist has reported how a college student described her inability to do an internship, due to clashes between working hours and hostel deadlines.[25]

Raising caste and gender together, as the group tries to do, is not without its dilemmas. For example, the group questions how it will raise the issue of caste, given that its members tend to be from savarna castes themselves.[26] The dilemma is not only one of the identities of the collective's members, but also the kind of politics they are trying to evolve.

> Charu: The Rohith Vemula struggle is going on, you're participating in it actively, you are mobilising people for the rallies, but…for an anti-caste politics to be integrally in the movement, what does it kind of…

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[24] Charu, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[25] Devika, "Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj Aur Kal" Convention, Delhi, 13-14th August 2016
[26] Asha, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

Garima: At least with me it is also connected to how do you look at women's liberation. If you wanted to really end patriarchy, how can you really end patriarchy. So how will you have to fight internal segmentation within women, because…there are caste and class differences amongst women, so the question at least in my head its articulated in terms of how, if you really want to break the cage, it cannot just be the cage of patriarchy, so you might enter it through your experiences as women but if you want to really exit at some point, you'll have to exit with all these other things also. …

So there are say Muslim women, Dalit women, Bahujan women in the collective, but how strong is that voice, is it a savarna women's collective, there are savarna women, but there are also other women… Are we standing in solidarity with the caste movement or is the caste movement internal to us, but it might be internal to us in our heads in some ways but if it's not, if that voice is not as strong…[27]

Sexuality

Sexuality too has emerged as an axis of difference within feminist politics. Here, the issues of difference have to do with non-heteronormative sexuality (for example, lesbian and bisexual women's issues) and non-binary gender identity (for example, trans persons' issues).

Sandhya Gokhale recalls that the Forum first started looking into the issues of alternate sexuality in 1987, when the case of Lila and Urmila came to light. Lila and Urmila were two policewomen in Bhopal who were dismissed from service after they got married to each other.[28]

Chayanika Shah talks of the factors which have made an open politics around lesbianism possible:

In the 80s those who came out as lesbians did not live in India, they went out, and then they would come back to find the few people here and make connections with them. The 90s was the time when actually people came back who had come out to themselves, and said that we're going to live here and we're going to live here with this identity that we have given ourselves. And that shifted something. Also the 90s was the time of the HIV AIDS, the conversation on sexuality, globalisation, all of that, so there

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[27] Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi
[28] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

is the historical point when this becomes more possible, doable… And by then, although within the women's movements the knowledge that who all are in relationships with women is not hidden, everybody knows, everybody's been talking about it, but openly coming out and openly taking on that identity and being part of a group that calls itself lesbian and bisexual women's group, or women who love women or whatever the term we used then, was a new thing.[29]

She speaks of her own experience as a women's movement activist, who came out as a lesbian and became part of the lesbian and bisexual women's group Stree Sangam. She speaks also of the relation between the mainstream women's organisations and lesbian groups.

That shift of being out as a lesbian to the same people who knew that I was a lesbian all along, was not unmarked… There are many little little things that happened which kind of erase your political past to some extent because now you're a lesbian activist, and you will speak only as a lesbian. So in a discussion on sexuality somebody can tell you that when we speak of sexuality we're not speaking only about lesbian issues. Really? Okay. Thank you. These are comrades who have been working with me [for] 15 years before that. So such things happened. But I think that there were many people in Forum who were very very supportive of some of us, who were trying to make these issues more visible, trying to make these lives more visible…[30]

Women who have raised the issues of lesbianism and bisexuality have found support and in cases, empathy, within autonomous groups. For example, Shals Mahajan talks of how ze and other lesbian activists found support from the Forum Against Oppression of Women, when they began their own collective in Mumbai. Ze discusses how, at the time ze joined the Forum, the group was in the midst of discussions on personal laws: what such laws should be like and what they should provide, what ideal personal laws would contain. Forum included provisions for both what were termed 'homo-relational realities' and 'hetero-relational realities' in its vision of a gender-just law (Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1999).

[29] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[30] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

Shals and Chayanika both speak of the overlaps between lesbian feminist politics and the mainstream women's movement, both of membership and of the claiming of feminist politics:

> In the initial few years, in fact for the longest time there was a lot of overlap, there w[ere] a lot of intersections between the people who were part of Stree Sangam and the people who were part of Forum. So when we started in Stree Sangam to articulate our politics, very clearly we were saying queer and feminist both, from the very beginning… We saw ourselves as a women's group very much part of the women's movement. We didn't see ourselves as separate from the women's movement. I think partially also because four people who were part of Stree Sangam were already part of Forum and the women's movement. And they'd been to women's movement conferences and they were very much in it. And they'd been raising issues with Forum and other groups of sexuality in the women's movement.[31]

> One thing I would like to say in this context is because I was very much a part of the women's movements, some other people who were instrumental in forming Stree Sangam were very active in the women's movements before that, that we claimed the feminist movement, we did not ever take a position that we are being excluded. So the whole stance that we took was that we are feminists, we are part of the women's movements, if we think this is part of the women's movement's agenda, this is the women's movement agenda. If you don't think so it's your problem. That's the stance that we took with the women's movements.[32]

This is not to suggest that sexuality as an issue has been accepted without question. Chayanika states that

> It has taken a long time to speak positively about sexuality in spite of the fact that women's bodies have been something that we've almost exoticised, but the more radical theories of sexuality have come much later and they're still not really discussed in the older groups in the same manner.[33]

Feminist activists make a distinction between how different aspects of sexuality have been received by the AWM as a whole. While issues of sexual orientation (lesbian

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[31] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[32] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[33] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

and bisexual women's issues) have been accommodated within feminist politics, albeit with difficulty, issues of trans persons have not been accommodated to the same degree.

Shals Mahajan points to an instance where a gender-nonconforming woman was assaulted by the passengers of a ladies' compartment of a train. Though ze and others took this issue to Forum, ze says, all members did not understand it equally well. For many, the ladies' compartment was a safe space, while those who downplayed their feminine features and did not look 'womanly' did not see it as secure and free of violence.[34]

Shals talks also of, during hir early years as an activist, not talking of transgender issues because ze (and the members of the collective ze helped form) did not have the term. In the 2000s, ze says, they started meeting more Hijras and trans persons. This made a certain language and understanding available to them.

> …so I think all of us also started speaking slowly and understanding, and
> the language of trans, and also some of us started saying we can formulate
> the discomforts that we had with gender.[35]

Kriti talks of the uneven introduction to various aspects of sexuality, in the academic and activists spaces of which she is a part. For instance, she says that understandings of sexuality within NGOs can often be in a health or protectionist framework, and not include discussions on pleasure and desire. Such discussions did take place within her academic institute, both "formally and informally." Yet even here, certain aspects of sexuality were not discussed.

> For instance it's only now that I'm beginning to read up on say trans
> feminism and understand how largely the feminism that we speak of is
> conceived of within the binary of the male and female and how the ways in
> which we talk about intimacy and relationships are very very cis fashioned
> I guess, and how strongly the challenge is posed by trans positions. But
> that has happened because of something else altogether… That was not
> spoken of in classrooms, that was spoken of to some extent in queer

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[34] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[35] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

spaces… But that has also happened because of personal relationships with certain people.[36]

Mainstream feminist politics that accommodate transgender issues and persons have been slow to develop and are not without problems. Shals Mahajan talks of the difficulty in engaging with mainstream feminist groups that restrict membership to women, or which argue that genderqueer persons may join while trans men may not. Ze argues that groups make a distinction between these groups on various grounds: due to "peoples' own resistance to things," but also on grounds that people who pass as men have male privilege. However ze holds that these assumptions are not true:

> …it's not that trans men have privilege, actually to assert their masculinity they have to go through a lot of shit and violence and to say that they're privileging masculinity is not right or they're getting the privilege of masculinity also does not make sense… It's a feminist assumption that if one person identifies as man and one person identifies as woman, then necessarily their relationship is going to be patriarchal in the same way that a cis man and a cis woman in a heterosexual marriage are. Because you're not taking into account the realities of what it means to be trans in this world and how difficult it is to assert a masculine identity… A partner just turns around and says you're not really a man, that's actually a very violent thing that could happen to you very easily. So in that sense it's not the same sort of power.[37]

This lack of understanding has impacted hir participation in certain feminist groups:

> …personally for me I didn't want to be part of Forum about 4-5 years ago, because it was getting to be a very difficult space for me, a very tiring space for me… I went back, to be party to those discussions [on gender]… I felt a lot of resistance to understanding this and so I wouldn't choose to be part of that space.[38]

Chayanika too states that the idea of the male privilege of trans men is a reason for their exclusion from mainstream feminist spaces. The question of the inclusion of trans men has been debated within the group to which she belongs, but has not been resolved.

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[36] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[37] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[38] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

My personal take is that a group like Forum should actually be today a feminist group full stop. It has to have the confidence in its robustness to open itself up to all genders... [The] not necessarily all upper-class, not necessarily all upper caste but very independent women who are part of Forum today, can survive with anybody inside, it's not a women's space. And I don't need a women's space anymore. I need a feminist space. And many others need that space. So my personal take would be that a reinvention of the space could be that, just open it out. And see where it takes us. Maybe nobody will come, I don't know. But, I mean that of course is not an answer to the dilemma that we have, or the difference of opinion that we have on understanding gender, I don't know that will get resolved. We're still where we are.[39]

Despite these various problems, sexuality politics seem to have a greater currency than caste politics within feminist spaces. For example, Kriti speaks of how, though understandings of caste politics came later for her, sexuality was a large part of the approach of the women who introduced her to feminism. Sexuality has a greater currency in both her coursework and the activist spaces of which she has been a part.

Readings around sexuality were an important part of the curriculum and also, my first point of contact were queer spaces where everybody was talking about sexuality to the point where…there was a friend who identified as asexual who said that both heteronormative and non-heteronormative spaces sometimes are so sexual, are hyper-sexualised spaces, or the larger queer movement in Bombay is hyper-sexualised… So this friend for instance said that 'I'm very uncomfortable being in these spaces because it seems like sex and sexuality is all that one wants to talk about.'[40]

When asked why there is such a difference in how caste and sexuality are absorbed within political arenas, she responds, "I think we're at that point where least in progressive spaces and campuses, urban campuses, sexuality is fashionable to talk about."[41]

For others, certain dimensions of sexuality are fashionable and can be articulated as matters of personal liberation and choice. The overt structural nature of religion and caste, however, do not lend themselves to this attitude. As Chayanika says, there is an

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[39] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[40] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[41] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

individualistic view of sexuality which has currency, a currency which does not extend to more structural notions of social reality.

> Sexuality is very easy… There's a sense of coolness about who I sleep with, what I do, this kind of individualistic understanding of sexual preference is an easy thing to do. … It's very dangerous actually, this kind of, "okay anybody can do what they want," is a very dangerous understanding of sexuality. … So how can I do that for caste, I can't do it, I can't do it for religion and because it's so structural and it's so established structurally, all I can say is that I don't believe in caste, and that everybody is willing to say.[42]

For Varsha, "queer politics is entirely compatible with a certain upper caste and upper-class identity".[43] The nature of this identity is hinted at by Uma Chakravarti: "The idea of sexual freedom or autonomy I think was strongly marked by an understanding of a properly capitalist society with the individual as a free agent, a freely choosing agent".[44] And as Varsha says, the upper-caste and upper-class character of progressive spaces "has not been eroded"; activists can belong to these social groups and also be queer.[45]

For Uma Chakravarti, there are certain theoretical and experiential affinities between queer politics and mainstream feminist politics which do not exist in the case of Dalit feminist politics.

> Both [Dalit feminist and queer politics] make a critique of patriarchy in terms of its imposition of a particular form of marriage to reproduce society. All feminists are against that. So intercaste marriage is as much a feminist critique of the structure which Indian patriarchy has reproduced, as the queer question is of patriarchy constructing desire along a particular trope. Which is to say, heterosexuality [as] the mode along which the entire structure of social relations is to be reproduced. If that is so, there is a critique which all feminists must make of that structure. To that extent the feminist position opens up possibility, and I don't think the queer question can move out of feminist understanding of patriarchy, they will add to it, but they cannot actually step out of it, that's the history that they will actually own, and to that extent there is a natural camaraderie that can

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[42] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[43] Varsha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[44] Uma Chakravarti, personal interview, 2016, Delhi
[45] Varsha, personal interview, 2015, Delhi

be ideologically constructed between these. … That doesn't happen to the same extent with Dalit feminists, because for them, in a sense what they're saying, sometimes openly and sometimes in more disguised ways, is that caste is more important than gender. … It's partly because of the family, it's also partly because, which is the oppression that is the most intensely and universally experienced by them? You can stand up against patriarchy, how do you stand up against caste? Except in terms of saying 'I'm oppressed,' to attack it back is difficult. [A Dalit woman] doesn't have a pativrata framework that she has to work with, you know. In that sense what is the oppression they experience much more? It is caste. And their children experience it, their families experience it, their entire community experiences it, the deprivation of land and water and resources and everything is experienced in a certain kind of way. So within that structure [is] the violence of patriarchy more important than the violence and the stigma of caste as a structure? I think I would say that. They all want to maintain their autonomy of being able to critically engage with patriarchy among the Dalits. They'll never say that [it's alright]. But in terms of their positionality, the reason why they are separated from feminists, to some extent, is that feminists don't understand this, and then feminists will expect them to only be against patriarchy…[46]

There are some echoes of this sentiment in Sandhya Gokhale's comments on caste and feminist politics:

> The major difference I see when I go for meetings with Dalit activists [is that] when they talk, their entire family participates in the movement, they talk of how to involve their mother or their father. That is when you suddenly realise that you are there, there's nobody from your family being part of this movement, no, it's a totally different ballgame, the way their movement gets built up, it starts from home to everywhere. That doesn't happen with us uppercaste people.[47]

Indeed, caste practices and stigmas may impact queer politics as well. Chayanika Shah speaks of the difficulty in developing a gender politics outside of a framework of personal liberation and personal choice.

> Gender in that sense is much more difficult…outside of a very, 'I choose to be who I am and do what I am,' that frame, and transgender will become more difficult in India because of the presence of the Hijra community.

[46] Uma Chakravarti, personal interview, 2016, Delhi
[47] Sandhya Gokhale, personal interview, 2016, Delhi

> Which is very marginalised, which is very stigmatised, which is like the Dalit community, like the Muslim community it is absolutely in the margins, so people will hesitate to say 'I'm transgender.' They can't say it with the same ease. Partly it is your own phobias of being associated with those people.[48]

This discussion on sexuality and caste highlights the challenges in incorporating different ways of thinking about women into feminist politics. While it is true that political events have thrown up different understandings of womanhood, it appears that changes in the thrusts and emphases of feminist politics arise from a greater complex of reasons. These can range from the presence of other social movements to the receptivity and engagement of activists to new ideas and actors. (Other factors, not explored here, could include counter-movements and engagements with authorities.) What seems significant is that shifts in feminist politics are not the outcome of thinking and reflection alone, but are part of a process that firstly includes the movement's own activities and secondly takes place in some kind of engagement with other movements and actors. Perhaps stagnation in feminist politics could arise from the absence of such engagements.

Thus far in this chapter we have examined the causes for the varying significance granted to caste and sexuality as axes of difference in feminist politics. In the next section, we will look at the links between feminist thought and action.

Feminist Politics: Seeing and Doing

How do activists involved with the autonomous women's movement define feminism?

For Meena, feminism is informed by different structures and identities:

> Feminism is really making a political statement that you need to recognise women's voices and, in a way feminism is inclusive of all other politics against oppression and injustice, I would think that way, but it will be richer when it engages with other types of politics as well. … It will be added value when you talk about class politics and anti-communal, anti-caste, all of that brings more value to feminism and hopefully those politics will also become enriched by feminism, so that way it's a very valuable

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[48] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

political stance… The meaning of feminism is inclusive of both caste and class and all of that…[49]

Draupadi states that feminism plays out differently for different people depending on their social locations:

> [The definition of feminism is] changing for me on a daily basis, like bell hooks says, it's not feminism its feminisms, and each person defines it from their lived location of caste, gender, race, religion, region, nationality, language and all that. And for me it is a powerful tool that says that people are human beings, that they're equal, and that there are power relations and structures that exist in society that is inherent, that are tied to religion and economy and society and land and other things, that hierarchise people, both men and women, and work equally in a principle of subordination and emancipation. … [As Nivedita Menon says], how subordination and hierarchy works both on women as well as on men, works on women and men with respect to their differential location in the class-caste framework, and how then you are working with your privilege and your disprivilege…and how that becomes not just a political positioning but a worldview in terms of your negotiation and articulation and everything.[50]

Chayanika Shah states that feminism is "a way to be," and also a "basic philosophy with which to look at the world."

> I belong to that school who sees feminism as this mega-frame where, keeping gender and sexuality at the focus, how does the world open up to you. And now that gender sexuality is getting expanded, body, in various ways, because of both the experience of being women and the experience of being queer and added to that the experience of disability, and caste…[51]

Kriti looks at feminism as a way of seeing:

> For me it is very important to see and call myself as a feminist because I feel that feminism is also a way of seeing more than anything else and when I declare myself as a feminist I also commit to that way of seeing and that way of being in my relationships, in my position within my family, as a friend… If I'm meeting somebody for the first time and they tell me that they are a feminist, I will see that as an immediate sort of marker of some kind of connection having been established because for me then you

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[49] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[50] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[51] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

recognise certain kinds of oppression, you recognise your position there, you recognise what it means to call yourself a feminist.[52]

Shals Mahajan points to how feminism has expanded hir understanding of hierarchies but is uncertain on the question of "solutions":

> Shals: [Feminism] means many many things, but I think what feminism did provide me initially which was the most crucial thing … Feminism gave me multiple sort of lenses to understand hierarchy. Various kinds of hierarchies but to understand them as structural hierarchies in some sense which really…
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> Vasudha: Multiple lenses?
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> Shals: Yes, like gender was never gender, there was more to it… Patriarchy is not just patriarchy, it is Brahmanical patriarchy, it is a different kind of patriarchy, then you can talk about it in many ways. So in that sense that understand[ing] hierarchy itself, in different ways, not just one way, and I think that helped to maybe also find solutions in different things, I don't know, I'm not sure about that, I'm not quite sure what I'm saying when I say solutions. I'm more sure [when] I say that, to really look at hierarchies of multiple kinds, to get a grip on how to articulate how hierarchies function. To understand power.[53]

A few common ideas emerge from these definitions of feminism. One is the idea of feminism as having been enriched by the incorporation of understandings of different structures and identities. Second, the question of feminist action or intervention, about which feminists are more ambivalent. Third, of feminism defined through terms which indicate sight, comprehension and/or other metaphors (seeing, understanding, recognising).[54]

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[52] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

[53] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

[54] This last formulation is close to Nivedita Menon's definition of feminism, which equates feminism with having a feminist perspective. Menon describes what the feminist perspective reveals:
"A feminist perspective recognises that the hierarchical organising of the world around gender is key to maintaining social order; that to live lives marked 'male' and 'female' is to live different realities. But simultaneously, to be a feminist is to imagine occupying the marginal, relatively powerless position with reference to every dominant framework that swallows up the space at the centre. ... Feminism is thus not about individual men and women, but about understanding the ways in which 'men' and 'women' are produced and inserted into patriarchies that differ according to time and place. ... To be a feminist is to understand that different identities—located hierarchically as *dominant* or *subordinate*—are produced at different times and in different spaces, but also to be aware particularly of the processes of gendering. ... To be a feminist is to recognise that, apart from gender-based injustice, there

We saw in the first section of this chapter that 'gender' and associated forms of feminism have been seen by some as depoliticising, as blunting the edge of feminist politics. For many respondents, however, the various forms of difference enrich feminist politics (albeit in different ways).

For instance, Nandini Rao argues that rather than being depoliticising, gender has broadened her perspective on issues such as violence, or sexuality.

> Sexuality as a concept, sexuality being very individual, very personalised to me, is actually an easy way to understand it, I can understand it for myself and that's fine. But when you broaden it and try to understand it in terms of caste and class and religion and this and that, you really have to push yourself to think about it.[55]

She adds that gender has politicised feminism:

> I don't think we can look at any question of gender solely from one point of view, it's not possible, our society's way too complex now… Even earlier it was just because our understanding was superficial that we were not maybe able to bring it out more, but now that understanding is developing, I think that we can't go back, unfortunately or fortunately I think we can't go back to that comfortable place of 'women, men and nothing in between,' we can't do that anymore. And for me, that is actually more politicising, rather than depoliticising… You just can't look at gender as a separate identity, we look at it in the context of caste, religion, ability, disability, sexuality, all of that, and if you don't understand it and that larger framework then sorry you are only addressing one minute part of who we are. And that I feel is more depoliticising than anything else.[56]

For Meena, 'gender' is depoliticising when used as a stand-in for 'women,' a phenomenon that she says occurs largely within NGOs. However, gender also refers to transgender and queer identities, and in this sense gender as a category is useful: to talk of identity categories, including caste and class.[57]

Shals Mahajan describes how hir own politics has changed over time, how caste is now central to hir approach to questions of sexuality and gender:

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are multiple structural inequalities that underlie the social order, and to believe that change is possible, and to work for it at whichever level possible (N. Menon, 2012, pp. viii-ix)."

[55] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[56] Nandini Rao, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[57] Meena, personal interview, 2016, Delhi

For example when I first started in '95, when I started reading and things, one looked at it differently, over time one read up much more on caste, one met many more people working on caste and so if I conducted a sexuality workshop in '97 or '98 I did it in a manner, if I do it today… I feel that the way one talks about caste, gender and sexuality together, that I cannot talk about sexuality without talking about caste, for me it's that crucial. That if I talk about sexuality and gender I have to talk about caste, I cannot not talk about these three things together today. That's also happened over time. I did not start like that, right. I did not start with talking about gender quite like how I do. So it's also a movement in our collective politics...[58]

Chayanika Shah talks of how a focus on different identities and structures has transformed her understandings of feminism, and how she would like it to continue to be transformed:

I would like to learn and practice a feminism that is informed by queer politics, by anti-caste politics and by disability rights politics, I do not see them as distinct, I see that feminism for me today has to be something that emerges out of all these together. … And I think that each one of these complicates how I understood feminism in the 80s, in different ways. And each one of these complicates each other as well, so I can't see them as separate from each other. So the feminism that I would like to understand and build is this one. … Somewhere when we started with the articulation of gender in the 80s, it was about body and it was about controlling of sexuality, controlling of reproduction et cetera and somewhere all of that gets enmeshed in each of these three locations as well. And each of these three get coloured by the normative understanding of sex and sexuality. … Disability I feel that I still need to know much more, in the sense of how it will alter my understanding of what is autonomy, what is independence, what is freedom, what is care, what is family, it is going to affect all of this, and I have not engaged with it enough.[59]

Gender, as a term that allows feminists to engage with difference, is thus viewed positively. The contribution of the term is that it allows women to see social structures and locations that a focus on the commonality of womanhood rendered invisible. However, though many feminists talk of the richness and depth of the feminist lens, the question of feminist action and intervention brings up feelings of inactivity, helplessness, an inability to push feminist agendas, of not knowing what to do.

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[58] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[59] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

For example, Vani, speaking on behalf of Saheli, points to changes within feminist thought, but is not as clear on how these changes in thought have transformed feminist strategies.

> Vani: In my understanding, I think the sort of reluctance to engage with even Dalit women's issues as was I would say in the 90s and even the early 2000s, is not where we stand today. I don't think we have that choice, I don't think any women's group has the choice today to not to some extent engage with caste, or to factor it into your understanding, right, Dalit women have pushed us to that, pushed us that far, and I think it's to their credit, whatever else we have done, but also because there is that push, right, and it's a good thing. … I think it's showing in work, I think it's showing in people's beginnings of work, I think it will show more.

> Vasudha: For instance?

> Vani: I don't know, in many small things, I think if we were making a presentation on women and safety to the Chief Minister, 10-15 years ago, 15 years ago, I don't think we would be talking as clearly, pulling out issues of caste, of region, of ethnicity and race, as much as we do today… I'm saying as a fundamental thing of being, I think more integrated in our understanding, and that's what I'm trying to say, are we doing more, I'm not sure. Are we doing as much as needs to be done, no, because the nature of activism has changed.[60]

Shals Mahajan speaks of shifts in hir understandings of issues of gender and sexuality. Yet when asked about political strategies, ze describes a feeling of 'malaise.' Ze identifies an upsurge in student activism, particularly since the death of Rohith Vemula, but is unsure of how existing and established groups could contribute to the growing student movement. The feeling of helplessness is heightened by the unresponsiveness of the state to students' demands. Thus though ze feels that movements ought to be more active, there is no clarity on what older groups could possibly do in the current conjuncture.

> Vasudha: So a shift in your understanding, has it also given a shift in your way of doing politics, your strategies, how you seek to intervene, or how [your] group seeks to intervene in situations?

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[60] Vani, Saheli group discussion, 2015, Delhi

Shals: I think that's also part of a large malaise in today's time, I mean from the beginning of this year, when Rohith [Vemula] died, again politics in this country has taken a different turn… Ideally one should be putting time and energy into seeing how the student movements can be strengthened and what is it that people who've been part of movements, can really do to take this forward because it's something important happening, and it hasn't happened in a while. … At the same time you're questioning yourself completely, what is it that we can do which can be effective. Because you feel that a lot of what you do is so ineffective, it's something for all of us to continuously think of and deal with.

Vasudha: Is that what you mean by 'malaise'?

Shals: I think so, it is.

Vasudha: Ineffectiveness?

Shals: You feel that at one level you're trying to have a nuanced discussion on everything, at one level the kind of repression is…just so ridiculous, you don't know what weapons you have to fight what, it's people acting with such impunity. … Now if 'Bharat mata ki jai' becomes the benchmark of whether you should live in this nation or not or whether you have rights or not, how do you fight this. So I think it's something that everybody deals with, this depression, this ineffectiveness, this malaise, and at the same time, FTII strike went on for what, 140 days? And the state didn't give a fuck. JNU people [have been on] a hunger strike for 15 days now, the state doesn't give a fuck. So what will work, I don't know. So all of us have to rethink on what we want to do, maybe…the middle-class privileged activists, maybe we've become very comfortable in our places where, I recognise the privilege of sitting here and talking… At the same time you know maybe the activism required is making myself much more vulnerable continuously. … Why should one exercise the privilege more and more, maybe one has to give it up less and less. I don't know. So I'm sort of trying to think through all these spaces while I actually take time off to sit and write….

I've always said to LABIA that we should shut down, if we can't function very well, if we can't do things, just to stay in a comfortable space in the head is not enough. It's okay till we're doing work. But just to be a think tank sort of group who just talks to itself or doesn't do much. I'm like, what are we doing.

Vasudha: So what is work then?

> Shals: I don't know what work is but sometimes I think that activism shouldn't be something that makes you feel good about yourself. Because that's what sometimes happens, that you feel you're an activist, you feel you're doing something, actually you're not doing anything. At the same time maybe the most effective thing we have done is to talk to women's groups. Maybe the most effective thing that has to be done is…being in touch with different people from different parts of the country, maybe raise money for them to study and have lives of their own, for them to be in places where they're doing well, I don't know.[61]

Saheli and LABIA are older feminist collectives, having been active since 1981 and 1995 respectively. Members of newer collectives too articulate problems with making interventions. The collective of which Kriti is a part, has devised a performance of a set of monologues of different characters, who talk of their experiences of coming out or being outed. She reports that the monologues have been performed periodically for some years. Other than that, the group organised a night-long event in Mumbai where women occupied public space, to protest moral policing. The group also organised a protest after the rape of two girls in Badaun in Uttar Pradesh in 2014. However she says there is nothing that the group has done in a "sustained way."[62] This is common to the other collectives and networks of which she is a part.

> The groups that I have been part of are not really doing something in a sustained way because these are groups where people are coming from different kinds of backgrounds and have other jobs also so nobody is sort of full-time into it. … It's not much in terms of numbers or activities that I can count and tell you this is what we've done, but there has been a general dialogue, a general atmosphere of conversation and all that, it has been an ongoing sort of, like there has been there mood and setting all through, though not actual concrete activities.[63]

Thus we see that for many activists, the richness which feminist politics has to offer comes from its ability to analyse the world. However, while feminist politics has a depth and breadth of vision, the abilities of feminists to intervene or set agendas are not such as to satisfy themselves.

The decreased ability to intervene in the world, takes place at a time when definitions

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[61] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[62] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[63] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

and understandings of politics are becoming broader and all-encompassing. For many activists, politics is everywhere and everything is political. Draupadi's definition of politics extends from the activities of political parties to her own everyday acts and decisions:

> Politics is also what BJP and Congress play, politics is also what happened in Parliament, politics is also that I wear my shorts and I walk around on the streets and I give a rat's ass about who's staring at me, and if somebody stares at me to the point it makes me uncomfortable, I'll be an up in arms with him. Politics is also about not wanting to fight that battle, so I will open my phone use the privilege that I have, 3-G, connect to Ola, order an auto for myself and come home, so it's all of that, and then political for me would probably be just being aware of your location, being aware of your political location, and then articulating the world therein, I think.[64]

Kriti, too, says that politics is in everything. She adds that for her, politics is feminist politics.

> [Politics] is first of all the belief that everything is political, it also means being very critical of anything or anyone who claims to be apolitical or who is dismissive of politicality or somebody who say something like 'why are you so political' or 'why you want to do politics' because one is now at a point where one understands that there is politics to how you even move your hands and how you sit and your body language and for me politics also by definition becomes feminist politics which is about inclusion and, or inclusivity, dissent, disagreement, conversations, not necessarily vocally but in some way, to some degree, to whatever degree is possible.[65]

For some, all forms of interventions are political. Chayanika Shah, for instance, holds that the distinction between thought and action is false. She states that being political means

> Actually changing things, not just thinking about the change but in whatever way…actively contributing to change. It could even be a tiny step, but it has to be an active conscious step towards change.[66]

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[64] Draupadi, personal interview, 2015, Gurgaon
[65] Kriti, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[66] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

However she adds that there is a perception that feminists are more involved in academics than action, but that she does not agree with this formulation:

> This is something which has been floating around, that most feminists are now…not in action but only in academics, this distinction. I think that is another part of the women's movements in India, that so far it has been so linked to women's studies, that as you start reading about feminism in India you land up reading about activism in India, it has not separated itself and I think that that's the strength, so keeping both going is something that, if people are contributing to the academics or to activism, till that conversation continues, it makes sense.[67]

This implies that academic interventions too are more than 'just thinking about change.'

We saw above the preponderance of visual metaphors used to describe feminism. Similarly, politics is often described in terms of speaking, discussing, and conversing. It should be noted that these are not the only ways of defining feminism or politics, or the only meanings feminism holds for activists.[68] Nonetheless the frequency with which they arise is striking. Feminist politics then becomes about the analysis of society and the communication of that analysis.

For instance, for Draupadi, politics centres on 'articulation,' which combines both one's perspective and one's actions. Politics is also about the development and refinement of that perspective, sharing and shaping one's opinions through discussions with people who hold both similar and divergent views. Thus politics is about pushing the boundaries of understanding and finding new ways to think.[69]

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[67] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

[68] Other ideas of feminism and politics include those which lean towards the idea of intervening and changing society. For instance, Ammu Abraham states that "Politics is involvement with society, social issues, struggle for the creation of a better world, isn't it. Marx used to have [a definition of] a better world, a liberated humanity…he says how you shall be liberated from this kind of labour and you shall read philosophy in the morning and fish in the afternoon and paint in the night-time. The original curse is removed from humanity, 'thou shall live by the sweat of thy brow'…labour is not necessary and your activity becomes one of choice." (Ammu Abraham, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai.)
Sabah says that "[feminism] defines me actually, in many ways… it takes you out of victimhood to something far more empowering. And because the personal is political and you tend to not limit yourself to an individual, so it helps me to think of groups like Parcham… then you look at your privilege and you realise that there are so many people who are responsible for you being where you are and you want to extended to so many others… that's what feminism is." (Sabah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai.)

[69] Draupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon

She speaks of certain feminist groups as having contributed to discussions:

> Draupadi: Forum for me was about this collective in Bombay that was not just about meeting and discussing but was contributing to the discussions at the time, so a lot of Forum documents have been part of my pedagogical engagement with the law question.
>
> Vasudha: Which ones?
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> Draupadi: They had a report on domestic violence that I've read, they have had some reports on the bar dancers that have been used, on personal laws, so they have really in the sense pushed a lot of the boundaries.[70]

A problem that may arise with politics as perspective is that one's politics can only be judged in terms of what one says. Perhaps this sense – that what one says is a highly significant index of one's feminist vision – drives a phenomenon which Shals Mahajan observes: of people being "diffident" about what they can and cannot say, of being concerned with "articulating things just right."[71]

Feminist politics, we have seen above, is often described in terms of speaking and its synonyms. Occasionally, 'conversation' is spoken of as a movement strategy. For instance Uma Chakravarti recounts some of the difficulties and problems that have arisen in the course of autonomous groups trying to engage with caste issues. When asked if any changes in strategies have come out of these engagements, she responds that the first thing is for the different actors to start a dialogue and begin talking.[72]

Ranjana Padhi, however, argues that there has to be a balance in discussion and action. She looks at the period of the 1990s as throwing up many new challenges for the autonomous women's movement, especially of communalism and the right-wing Hindu assertion, and the rollout of liberalisation and the new economic policies. These were issues on which there was not always agreement between feminists; additionally, the new economic policies were causing changes in women's lives that were undermining the gains of the AWM in the 1980s. Within feminist politics too, identity politics and questions of advocacy were on the rise. While autonomous groups had spoken of the concerns of ordinary women, now questions of

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[70] Draupadi, personal interview, 2016, Gurgaon
[71] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai. It should also be noted that not all activists feel they can indeed speak freely in all settings, including autonomous organisations.
[72] Uma Chakravarti, personal interview, Delhi, April 2016

representation (of who could speak on behalf of whom) were being raised. Against this backdrop, she says,

> …in terms of concrete measures, the art of coming together as a pressure group, putting forward demands, all of that was decreasing, and the discussion and debates around discourse analysis was becoming much more. Action was suffering at the cost of discussion. True, the discussions were happening and doing away with the monolithic notion of universal sisterhood; it was high time the inequalities among women were acknowledged. Feminism was a call that brought people together but it's important to articulate differences among us. … For both you and me the question right now should be how enabling such discussions have been. Are such discussions helping in figuring out what are the kinds of strategies or action plans that we need to make. When you think of a movement or any libratory movement or libratory politics across the world, it has a balance of both discussions and some introspection. It means opening up your own work to review and new strategies emerging from such discussion. That did not happen.[73]

Another dimension of feminism as perspective is, where does one learn that perspective? Where does one learn feminism? Does the space of learning feminism impact what one learns and the manner in which one does feminism?

Some feminists who became part of feminist politics in the 1980s and 1990s describe feeling that they didn't know or understand anything of the issues that were being raised, and that they had a lot to learn.

Chayanika Shah, for instance, describes the development of her political understandings as a process that took place in movements of various kinds:

> Chayanika: I have actually not read much, so it was more about paying attention to all the various things that are happening around me, [in] '82 the textile strike happened, so there are many things that were happening around, which then started making sense with a certain understanding of society. So I didn't actually read as much, I didn't attend any discussion groups as such, but it was just being with people and talking to people and paying attention to all that is happening, that is how I learned more about society, and this understanding of society I never had, obviously not from my schooling and not from my education.

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[73] Ranjana Padhi, 2017, Skype interview

Vasudha: What understanding was that?

Chayanika: Of structural inequalities of all kinds. Once you get into this circle you got, you had the Soviet book exhibitions in IIT which were very cheap books so you bought them, you read them … You heard somebody is having this discussion group on historical materialism so you suddenly went for one such session or the other … Then somebody told you there was a performance of a play so then you went for that play … There were many many things happening outside which you started connecting to and going to and recognising that there are things in the city that are happening. … So all this kind of education actually began from that point.[74]

Ranjana recalls that when she first joined an autonomous group in the early 1980s, she was given a petition on oral contraceptives to read.

It's a petition written with the minds of so many medical practitioners, doctors and feminists and all these minds have gone into arguing against the hazards of long-acting contraceptives and injectables. I was learning about the politics of population control as well as the technical jargon. It took me some time to figure out that pills were called oral contraceptives! Imagine, I had read the whole thing without knowing what an oral contraceptive is. But the politics were clear to me.[75]

Shals Mahajan describes hir initial experiences in Forum in 1995:

In Forum people were talking stuff which I had no idea about. … I remember the very first meeting, they were having some discussion on something called 498a. So of course I [was] clueless, that what the fuck is this. … Whether 498a is good or not good… So I asked somebody, they turned around and said domestic violence. Okay there is a law on domestic violence, all right. … Now I have to go and find out more about it and read more carefully. … So we'd sit and listen and figure out what's going on and keep on sometimes asking questions or I would reach [early], so I would hang out with whoever was there and they would tell me a bit of what was going on.[76]

Learning, for these activists, happened through the course of one's participation in a movement. For some, this sort of learning is qualitatively different from academic

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[74] Chayanika Shah, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[75] Ranjana Padhi, personal interview, 2015, Delhi
[76] Shals Mahajan, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

knowledge of issues, which is a more common way in which younger women learn about feminism. For instance, Ranjana talks of learning of both the broader women's movement, and the conditions of women's lives, through her activism:

> If I go to Tis Hazari with women petitioners and simply sit with them, meet a lawyer, file a petition, spend four hours on the petition, my learning would come from observations and the direct experience of being with these women. Being engrossed full time on analysis and discourse on personal laws without a notion or hunch of what is happening in our lower courts is not good enough for me… It is in the courts that inequality and subjugation are perpetuated round the clock in our system through daily deliberations and judgements based on religious personal laws. There are no shortcuts I feel to understanding what women go through or where are located in the system.... That's ground reality.

> We were fighting against the right wing; we were fighting against sati and amendments of laws and all that… so when we're meeting other feminists, when we're working with other organisations, we are learning on our feet. When you get to know each other your canvas is being deepened in a way that no women's studies course or classroom session can. I am in a dharna with say Vimla Farooqui, or Pimmi Loomba and getting to know they are from NFIW and then about CPI and then about its women's wings. Then, when I sit back to read Renu Chakravartty or some literature like that, I can locate [them]… and that history becomes more real. All learning was through sheer hard work, all of us were learning on our feet in that sense…[77]

What is the impact of how one learns feminism on the kind of feminist politics that are evolved? We saw above that Pinjra Tod members feel that there are challenges in working out a politics that links caste and gender. Interestingly, whether the group is indeed able to work out such a politics is described in terms of their actions, and not theoretical resolutions to these issues. Their understanding of politics stresses interventions:

> So it'll depend on how things pan out, how do we intervene, how different members engage, what is the degree of engagement of different people, what are the spaces that you create, all those things are still to be settled. And I think right now we're in a position where we're trying to sort of

[77] Ranjana Padhi, 2017, Skype interview

> think about how do we intervene in the here and now, in a way that opens
> spaces rather than closes spaces.[78]

Perhaps some of this impetus to action can be explained by the politicisation processes of the members of the collective. As we saw in chapter three, many of the activists who have had the longest association with the group have been part of workers' unions and student politics previously. Perhaps this gives them a different orientation to politics than many activists from older autonomous groups, or even young women whose first exposure to politics has been through academics and NGOs.

Conclusion

Many of the activists of the AWM, as well as scholars and commentators on feminism in general, have spoken of the push given to feminist theorising by external events and by other movements also, as well as by different actors within movements and autonomous organisations themselves.

How can we understand autonomy in light of this fact? Autonomy is most commonly defined, as we saw in chapter two, in terms of an organisational distance from those bodies and institutions that might impinge on a feminist groups' ability to make its own decisions and set its own agendas. Autonomy was also seen as enabling feminists to develop their own understandings of women and society.

Yet as we have seen, that understanding has developed through interaction with various other actors. Many feminists talk of having been pushed by various other social movements, to explore dimensions of social life and integrate them into their theorisations of both society and feminism. Thus autonomy does not preclude the need for networks and relationships with other actors, be they other activists, organisations, movements, or institutions. It is through a process of engagement that understandings have developed.

Of course, as we have seen, understandings may fail to develop or not acquire much depth even in light of such engagements. Despite the existence of Dalit women's organisations, or Dalit women members in autonomous women's collectives, understandings of caste have permeated autonomous spaces slowly and with great

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[78] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

difficulty. Attempts have been made to bridge the gaps between groups working on caste and gender issues: for example, through meetings between Dalit feminist activists and feminist groups in Mumbai in 2009, or through a seminar on caste and patriarchy organised by the feminist network Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression in 2015.

It might also be pertinent to ask of the kinds of networks and influences that would be necessary for autonomous groups to operationalise their understandings, and develop and undertake action plans for some kind of social change. Many activists, as we have seen, express a sense of hopelessness at the possibilities for change, especially in light of the neoliberal and right-wing onslaught that is being experienced in India today. Many wonder at what they can do to intervene in this scenario, and how they might contribute to changing society and taking it in a more feminist direction. Yet it is interesting that Pinjra Tod activists, while expressing their dilemmas over the nature of their politics and what forms their movements might take, seem to be more able to operationalise their politics in terms of finding issues around which to mobilise, and sustaining campaigns. While the links between the reproduction of caste, class and gender have been described in various ways within feminist academia, Pinjra Tod has been able to build a movement around this understanding by looking at the university hostel as a space for the reproduction of patriarchy. However it is to be noted that many activists who have had the longest association with the collective are from backgrounds either of workers' unions or student politics, and have been part of other campaigns that have been protracted and have had a significant direct action component. Perhaps the skills and orientations to the political that these activists have brought to autonomous feminist politics are of a different nature from older autonomous groups, or even younger feminists whose trainings in feminism are derived from feminist academia and feminist NGOs.

Feminists have had good reasons to organise separately from men. We saw in chapter three that mixed organisations can still be patriarchal, even if benevolently so. Thus women do need particular spaces where they can work out their theory and practice. Anita Ghai's comments on the absence of disabled women's groups that could push disabled women's issues are also important: they indicate the need for organised efforts to push particular agendas. Thus the need for autonomous feminist organising is undeniable.

Yet the history of the autonomous movement also shows us that neither theory nor practice have been worked out in isolation from other movements. Perhaps what is needed then is not just an autonomous politics, but also one of engagement with other movements, to enrich both the theory and practice of feminism.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

As I conclude my thesis, I reflect that the movement I see around me now is very different from that which I saw when I began my research in 2012. New organisations and individuals are part of the picture; social media has become increasingly important; public interest in feminism seems to be growing by leaps and bounds.

When I began my research, the autonomous women's movement was marked by a sense of crisis. This revolved around many factors: shrinking numbers at protests and demonstrations, the sense that all movement activity was limited to the same set of people ('we see the same faces at all events'), the feeling that NGOs had taken over feminist politics and replaced it with a depoliticised form of activism. Many activists and academics expressed a sense of the contemporary time being apolitical, more individualistic, having fewer opportunities for protest and collective politics. The massive protests that followed the Jyoti Pandey gangrape case in Delhi in December of 2012 did little to change this view.

Over the last few years, however, the political landscape of the country has changed. Amongst the major changes we can see are the rise of student politics and anti-caste politics. Protests at and/or involving students of Jadavpur University, Film and Television Institute of India, Hyderabad Central University, Delhi University, Indian Institute of Technology (Madras), Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia and others have been long, sustained, and sparked off by a variety of incidents (from the appointment of unqualified directors to the sexual harassment of women students to the harassment of Dalit students). Students have come together to protest against the union government's decision to withdraw the UGC NET scholarship for students in central universities (the movement in this regard came to be known as 'Occupy UGC').

Feminist activism has also grown in the last few years. In Hyderabad, young women organised a midnight march in January 2013, in the wake of the Jyoti Pandey

gangrape case. About 4000 people are reported to have participated. Within Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia students initiated the 'Pads Against Sexism' campaign in 2015. The Pinjra Tod collective also coalesced during this year, agitating against discriminatory, patriarchal, brahmanical hostel rules and policies for female students. Online campaigns have also been launched by various women – for example the 'I Need Feminism' campaign where participants take photos of themselves holding up posters saying why they need feminism and post these pictures on social media. The 'Happy to Bleed' campaign was started in response to remarks made by the head of the Sabrimala temple, who said that the temple would allow women to enter when there was a machine that could test their purity (i.e. test that they were not menstruating). The campaign began with an open letter to the head of the Sabrimala Devaswom and also included a Facebook campaign.

These last few years have thus seen a resurgence of movement politics and activism, in various ways and at various levels. In early 2012, many commentators would talk about young women being apolitical and not coming together into protest politics. Now they can do so only by ignoring the manner in which young women have taken to the streets to fight for their rights and for those of others. New organisations that are involved in mass mobilisation seem to have breathed a new life into the autonomous women's movement. At the time when I began my research, the sense of the AWM being in crisis was palpable. Now, that opinion is much less common. What differs for me as a student of a social movement, from the time when I began this study, is a sense not only of crisis but of possibility.

The aim of this study has been to arrive at a deeper understanding of the autonomous women's movement, in particular through activists' own understandings and views of the movement of which they are a part or have been in the past.

Over the course of this study we have examined the AWM from the perspective of its history, its patterns of mobilisation, and trends in the development of feminist thought and practice. We will briefly examine these aspects of the AWM in this section of the thesis.

Understanding Autonomy

The defining feature of the AMW is, of course, autonomy. We have seen, in chapter two, the question of autonomy discussed in terms of two dimensions: 'autonomy for what and autonomy from what.' This distinction provides us with a useful way of summarising our discussions of autonomy.

Autonomy from What?

Autonomous feminist groups have most often been described in terms of what they are autonomous of. Autonomy has been sought, over time, from men, from political parties, from the state, and from funding agencies. Within this framework, the focus is on autonomous women's *groups*, either singly or taken as a whole (i.e. a number of such groups existing across the country). It is within these groups that autonomous politics is to be carried out, as it is here that feminist activists can find and have found the space to develop their theories and push their agendas. As we saw in chapter four, feminist activists continue to hold onto autonomous groups as spaces where they can develop their own politics, even if they work in NGOs that have a feminist orientation. Older activists' recollections too give us the sense that without women organising as women, and creating a space for their own feminist politics, the feminist agenda would not have gained the kind of traction that it has in the present. Thus autonomy has undoubtedly been important for feminist groups.

In the 1970s, as we have seen, the impetus for autonomous feminist organising came from women who were already active in various kinds of radical politics, but needed a space to be able to work out their feminist politics. They took pains to stress that they were not apolitical. Their commitment to autonomous feminist politics did not preclude their participation in other arenas of politics, including in other social movements and various forms of radical politics.

Today, too, the need is felt by some to create new spaces that will be autonomous from various kinds of influences. Interestingly enough, some young feminists stress the need to create spaces that preclude the participation of older feminists, who are considered to be judgemental and whose presence prevents younger feminists from expressing themselves freely. Others might not articulate the threat of cooption, but

still exclude certain categories of persons from membership. For example, Pinjra Tod does not have cis men as part of its membership.

Autonomy is also seen as preserving groups from the interference of the state. This is a commonly expressed view, especially as funded organisations are increasingly pressured by the state.

The other felt need for autonomy is the nature of the group itself. Here we return to those narratives which point to the need for collectives as spaces to express, share and develop their feminist politics as they wish to, in a way they cannot in their workplaces. Secondly, the collective, in many cases, is a friendship group. Activists have discussed the need for these spaces, especially in an atmosphere that is hostile to their politics. Nonetheless the exclusionary possibilities of this sort of group structure cannot be overlooked.

When I began my research, the virtues of autonomy as a principle for feminist organisation seemed clear. Contrasted with NGOs, or with women's wings of political parties, it seemed obvious that autonomy was a goal that all feminist politics ought to seek and the basis on which feminists ought to organise, in order to maintain control over their agendas and political programmes, and in order to work out their own theories of women, gender and society.

What was not so clear to me was the idea that autonomy could have its limits, and that there could be something lacking in this form of politics. Over time these limits have become clearer, not in the least because they have been spelled out as such by my respondents. One important point that they make, albeit not in so many words, is that autonomy may become insularity. It may become difficult for groups to truly reach out, either to spread their message or to involve others in their day-to-day actions, despite their genuine desire to do so. As we saw in chapter three, the groups that face this challenge the least are those that are the least isolated from other movements.

Autonomy for What?

Exploring the question of autonomy from the perspective of what it is for, leads us to ask of the purposes and goals of the AWM. As we saw in chapter three, Gandhi and Shah list various goals of autonomous organising, including for women to develop their own theory and strategies and their organisational skills, to provide each other

support and solidarity, to voice their protest, and to share their feelings and experiences. How far have these goals been met?

While activists do not often articulate their visions in the language of goals and targets, some sense of the aims of the AWM does emerge from their narratives. For example, Aruna Burte speaks of the need to have legal and institutional structures that are responsive to women. She argues that the feminist movement must pressurise state and other authorities to make existing redressal mechanisms effective and responsive, and to create redressal mechanisms where none exist.[1]

Aruna argues that the feminist movement operates within the framework of India's representative democracy. It seeks to influence legislation and to ensure that justice-delivery mechanisms function. Its tactics (campaigns, delegations, et cetera) show that it works within the framework of the Constitution. Like other people's movements, it acts as a pressure group. Thus it is necessary for autonomous feminist groups to maintain their links with other types of organisations, including political parties.

> To make a difference in terms of law, in terms of implementation machinery, in terms of justice, I think autonomous women's groups on the street, and taking up these issues in the Parliament, it has to go together…. what has happened is there are women politicians or women parliamentarians but they won't take women's issues. … but if there is a people's movement outside, it will act as [a] pressure group. … Ahilya Ranganekar [said in a meeting], "you people, whatever you're doing is necessary for us to be powerful in Parliament, to raise the issue. Because once people are actually making noise on these issues, we can take it up further, if it is silence outside the Parliament what will we talk about."[2]

Aruna adds that links between campaign groups like Forum, and the counselling and support groups which emerged in the 1980s are equally important. As we saw in chapter four, Chayanika Shah makes a similar point with regard to the links between autonomous women's groups and feminist NGOs. Chayanika argues that feminist NGOs support individual women in distress, a task which autonomous groups would otherwise have to perform; yet given the latter's constraints, it would be impossible for them to perform this task and simultaneously retain their autonomy. The links between autonomous groups and feminist NGOs also allow for some conversations to

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[1] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[2] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

take place, through which pressure is exerted on NGOs. She contrasts this with institutional spaces where such dialogue and conversation do not exist or are limited, for example with larger NGOs working on LGBT issues. These links also allow women working within NGOs to practice a politics which is critical of the state, a politics which is not possible within NGOs. Thus if the purpose of the feminist movement is, amongst other things, to critique the state or the government, this must be done in an autonomous structure.

For both Aruna and Chayanika, the understanding of the need for relationships between different movement actors is informed by the purposes that they see for the autonomous feminist movement. In this context, Aruna Burte cautions that activists must understand the "limitations of autonomy."[3] By this, she refers to the limits of what autonomous groups can achieve acting alone. If, as she says, the purpose of the autonomous movement is to influence state structures and authorities, then this must be done in tandem with other actors, including political parties and state institutions. While the autonomous movement is necessary to raise women's issues, it is not sufficient in terms of impacting state structures and policies.

In this sense, it is important to look at the autonomous movement as part of the larger space of women's activism. The phrase 'autonomous women's movement' gives the impression of a self-contained movement, or at least a movement whose boundaries end at autonomous groups. As we have seen, this is not an accurate picture of how the AWM has operated over its history. Its alliances with other movements, service providers, academic and research institutes, governments and non-government funders have not been without their tensions. Yet perhaps these relations are what are needed to push the agenda of women's liberation that the AWM has espoused.

The AWM may not look at intervention at the level of the state as the only goal of the movement of which they are a part. We saw in the introduction that a distinction is made between movements that are directed at the state, and those that seek to intervene in cultural spheres: to change the meanings and perspectives on masculinity and femininity. This can be done in a variety of ways, and feminists have adopted many of these means: plays, posters, songs, textbook writing, writing in the popular

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[3] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

press et cetera. Such interventions can be made through organised movements, but can also be made at the individual level.

In these cases, the purpose of the AWM would be the communication of a certain feminist vision. At present, the ideas of difference and inclusivity are at the heart of the feminist vision. As Aruna says, the issues on which the AWM is active cannot be dissociated from other issues in society.

> …even if I belong to [an] autonomous group and I maybe focus on only one aspect of the issue, still I must know that this issue of violence against women touches all the power structures that we're dealing with, it's not just patriarchy. Patriarchy is one power structure, then it is a caste, then there is community, then there is religion in India. And then there is economy. All those powers are to be simultaneously addressed, simultaneously understood. … the oppression doesn't happen only in one channel, no, it is all matrix of different power structures which are bound together…[4]

She argues that if feminist groups do not take cognisance of the different structures which operate in society, they will remain limited.[5]

This brings us to the development of theory, which Gandhi and Shah list as possible only through autonomous organising. In chapter five, we discussed how the issue of differences in women's experience has been pushed by women of different social backgrounds, and has come into focus through various events in India's history. Such pushing requires the exposure of autonomous groups to many types of movements, and would be of more value than academic understandings of difference. As Nirupama notes, efforts by groups to push the agendas of movements have more impact than shifts from academic terms and concepts:

> If the women's groups today have a better understanding of caste and gender it is because of the pressure of the caste movements and is because of the pressure of the movements and the struggles of the women who have faced that kind of oppression, it is not because of a change in terminology. So historically it is the practical groundswell that really makes a difference. I don't think it's a matter of semantics.[6]

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[4] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[5] Aruna Burte, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai
[6] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

This brings us to the last point: on autonomous collectives as spaces of sharing, support and solidarity. Based on the activists' narratives discussed in the chapters above, we can say that collectives' ability to generate such spaces are mixed. Some activists point to the friendship and support that they find in the collectives of which they are a part, and how they look forward to the camaraderie these spaces offer their members. On the other hand, we have seen the difficulty that new members have had in approaching collectives, collectives' own difficulties recruiting, mobilising, and making new members feel welcome, and their desire to maintain the character of their collective at the expense of expansion. We have also seen how certain groups, like Dalit and queer feminists, have found it difficult to find an understanding reception of their experiences within collectives.

If we look at upholding autonomy at the level of movement structures, then it is an important principle for the movement vis-à-vis other movement actors like the state, political parties et cetera. If we look at autonomy in light of the possible goals of a feminist movement, and indeed the survival of an autonomous movement, then autonomy needs to go alongside relationship-building with other movement actors, such as like-minded movements and groups and institutions.

Knowledge and Politics

One question that has driven my inquiry into the AWM is, 'what does it mean to be political?' As we saw in the introduction, there have been shifts in the way social movement scholars have answered this question. One shift that we traced was that of the political as having to do with individuals and the state: of power as existing at the level of the state, to which movements then addressed themselves. The other view of power sees it as a characteristic of all relationships, including between individuals and institutions (state and non-state). This latter view is very much a part of the feminist legacy itself – the recognition of gendered power relations between men and women, between members of the same family, in non-state institutions like educational and medical establishments, et cetera.

Despite the longstanding feminist view of the diffused nature of power in society, we can identify ways in which the meanings of the terms 'doing politics' and 'being political' have changed within Indian feminism. We can do this through certain examples.

Ilina Sen's essay titled 'Women's Politics in India,' originally written in the early 1990s, examines the "nature of Indian women's participation in political life (I. Sen, 2004, p. 187)." Her essay details women's participation in collective, public political actions of various kinds: the national struggle under Gandhi's leadership, political mobilisation of peasants and industrial workers by the Communist Party of India, the JP movement in Bihar, et cetera. Sen writes that women's "participation in the political life of present-day India dates back to the early twentieth century," and references the founding of various women's associations such as the Women's India Association, the All India Women's Conference, et cetera (I. Sen, 2004, pp. 188-189).

What conceptualisation of politics can we infer from Sen's essay? Firstly, politics is in the public realm; secondly, it involves collective actors; thirdly, it aims at public interventions; fourthly, it is possible to delineate a time or condition that is not political.

We move to a more recent essay, by Sujatha Subramanian. The author narrates how one of her professors characterised the younger generation of feminists as apolitical and apathetic. Subramanian writes:

> To me, who had always held my peers in high regard for their feminist politics, this came as a surprise. … I had learnt more about feminist theory through interactions with my friends than I had inside the classroom. Where was this disjunction in opinion coming from? I realised then that while I sought feminist interaction and politically charged conversations with fellow feminists on Facebook, my professor saw the empty streets as evidence of our lack of interest in feminist politics. In the span of a generation, the political actors had not changed, but the space of politics had been transformed (Subramanian, 2015, p. 71).

While Subramanian notes that the "space of politics" has been transformed, we can also gather from her essay that the meaning of politics has also changed. Perhaps, for her professor, feminist discussion, howsoever politically charged, does not qualify as activism; for Subramanian, it clearly does. We can infer from this paragraph that the question 'what is politics' might be answered differently by Subramanian and her professor, the former looking towards a depth of thought and the latter to on-ground mobilisation.

Chapter five described how various activists understand politics. One dimension of 'political' linked it to a depth of vision and understanding. The task of a feminist is then to cultivate that depth: as Draupadi says, it is to "push the boundaries of understanding and find new ways to think."[7]

Another feature of politics that we explored in chapter five was the view that there is politics in everything and that everything is political. Activists have described politics as being a dimension of their bodies, their everyday decisions, how they dress; some say outright that politics is in everything.

What shifts can we note in the way the terms politics/political are used in Sen's essay, and in these contemporary formulations? We note that politics may be in the public realm (for example, through public demonstrations or discussions on a public forum like a Facebook page) but they need not be. If politics is about the refinement of perspective, that can be a private act of maintaining a journal, of having small discussions with friends et cetera. These acts would also qualify as political interventions. Second, it need not involve collective actors. Individuals may make political interventions (for example, writing open letters, making comments on Facebook posts, dressing in ways that challenge stereotypes et cetera). Third, a political intervention need not be public and/or overt. It might be made privately, for example, challenging the gendered division of labour within one's household. Fourthly, it is difficult to say whether something is not political or is outside the realm of politics. If politics can be read into everything, we cannot identify a situation where people are apolitical. There is a slippage here, between politics as acts of interpretation, and politics as conscious acts of intervention; this is a point to which we will return shortly.

Knowledge and Politics in the AWM

I started my research with a somewhat linear view between knowledge and politics, as I defined these terms. In particular, I thought that ideas of gender and society, and how movements ought to be, would be more pivotal in shaping activists' actions. I had in mind a movement taking a well-worked out political position and putting it into

[7] Draupadi, personal interview, 2017, Gurgaon

practice. I think this view betrays my own naïveté and inexperience of social movements.

What I found, rather, is that within the AWM, political positions and views of the place of gender and society are worked out in the course of activism. Activists enter into movements with certain views, with theoretical positions on the place of gender in society; and also with ideas and experiences of activism (of mobilising and organising, of interventions).

In her introduction to the volume *Feminism in India* (2004), Maitrayee Chaudhuri writes that when considering the history of the idea of feminism in India, it is "*almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas*" as "the conceptual debates themselves embodied the history of doing, and vice versa (Chaudhuri, 2004, pp. xi-xii, italics in original)." There is, therefore, an interplay of feminist thought and action. This interplay is not always cast in terms of progress. Rather, movements might move in directions that are seen as deviations from their main purpose; they might gain and lose their vision; they might take on activities that are seen as more or less effective.

What are the ways in which these two aspects of the AWM have impacted each other?

One of the clearest examples of the impact of political events on feminist politics has been discussed in chapter five: the impact of various political events of the 1980s and 1990s on the unity of the feminist subject. However other dynamics of knowledge and politics have been equally consequential.

The idea of experience must be examined in this regard. The weight given to women's personal experience is part of the tradition of feminist thought. As Sharmila Rege (Rege, 1998, pp. WS-40) writes, it is one of the three most important categories which have informed feminist theorising, together with "woman" and "personal politics." Feminist academics too, have "largely due to their marginal positions as women and as professionals, foregrounded women's subject positions and their lived experiences as the basis of feminist epistemological claims (Chadha, 2016, p. 272)." Within feminist activism, consciousness-raising has been a way for women to collectively examine their personal experiences and learn to see the structural factors that reflect in their common experiences.

As we have seen in chapters three and five, activists' own experiences have been and continue to be pivotal in shaping their interests in feminist politics and understandings of gender, as well as being one of the driving factors behind women's involvement in feminist activism. We have seen activists talk about their own experiences, and also those of others around them, as leading to their questioning gendered social norms and to their interest in organised feminist politics of various kinds. We have also seen how Pinjra Tod activists have looked to creating online and physical spaces where experiences can be shared (for example, by asking women to share their experiences on the group's Facebook page, or conducting jan sunwais, where women students relate their experiences). Through this sharing, they hope to politicise students and mobilise them to be part of their campaigns. Other young activists have discussed how their experiences of being part of existing feminist collectives and NGOs have led them to form their own collectives.

Both Sandhya Gokhale and Meena have pointed to the important place that activists' personal experiences have in autonomous women's groups. They both describe autonomous groups as driven by their members' experiences, as it is through these experiences that groups decide which issues to take up. Issues which do not reflect their own experiences have been raised only when other members or others with whom the group is associated (for example associations or groups which have a different composition, reflecting different social backgrounds) raise their issues and bring them to the attention of the group.

Being autonomous means the ability to set the groups' own agenda, and by extension, the ability to set the agenda for one's own movement. The issues that have found their way onto the agendas of autonomous groups, Meena and Sandhya point out, are those that are close to women activists because they reflect their own experiences of gendered injustice and patriarchy. Conversely, those issues that are not directly experienced by group members do not make it as easily onto the agenda.

The politicisation of personal experience is one of the cornerstones of feminist theory and practice. However, the statements by feminists that we explored in the fifth chapter point to one of the shortcomings of this formulation for autonomous politics. As Sandhya mentions, autonomous groups have no external affiliations. This leaves the group free to pursue those issues that it deems important, and prevents its agenda

and priorities from being derailed. However, perhaps it also insulates the group from those pressures that might have pushed it in a more democratic direction; even a direction the group might wish, in retrospect, that it had taken. As we saw through the trajectories of caste and sexuality issues in the AWM in chapter five, all issues have not had an equal reception within autonomous groups.

Another dimension of the interplay between knowledge and politics that we will examine is the influence on feminist activism of the idea of the family. The history of the AWMs engagement with the institution of the family shows us how the analysis of women's oppression may drive activism in directions which may ultimately be seen as depoliticising. We saw, in chapter two, the theoretical importance given to the institution of the family as a site of women's oppression. The family was seen as one of the primary sites of women's oppression. Activism against violence also came up against the family, as the site of and perpetrator of violence. This was most apparent in cases of dowry murder, amniocentesis, and other forms of domestic violence. Some activists referred to violence in the family as being common to all women. For some, oppression in the family was the source of women's oppression in the wider society. As we saw in chapter two, the methods employed by activists of the AWM to combat such oppression involved working with women on a case-by-case basis: quite literally, case work. This was labour- and resource-intensive, and brought about the beginnings of the institutionalisation of the AWM. What does this experience tell us about the link between knowledge and politics? It tells us of the link between the formulation of the problem and the chosen solution. But it also tells us that the solution that we find to the problem might have unintended consequences. Thus the link between understanding and action is not linear.

One of the trends we observed is that of 'seeing' as feminist politics. In chapter five, we looked at both respondents' views of politics as the cultivation of the depth of vision and sensitivity to various power structures. We also saw Nivedita Menon's definition of feminism as a perspective; a 'seeing' of the social structures and power dynamics that are hidden beneath the veneer of what is manifest and that go into reproducing it.

What are the consequences of this idea of feminism for the cultivation of feminist politics? For Ratna Kapur (Kapur, 2012), the revival of feminism requires it to take

on board certain analytical shifts. She argues that feminism must incorporate the insights of postcolonial theory in order to resolve its current crisis. Feminism has been hostile towards critical theory, she says, as it seems to sever the link between women's studies and the women's movement. Critical theory challenges the epistemological foundations of liberal thought, and in this way questions the links between feminism and liberalism, in particular feminism's reliance upon the law. Critical theory also arouses an anxiety about the dissolution of the subject of feminist politics: 'woman'.

Kapur argues that a critique of western liberalism entails an engagement with other philosophical traditions, "nonliberal traditions but not illiberal ones." These can help Indian feminists develop alternate political strategies, and alternate visions of freedom and emancipation. Such "nonliberal traditions" offer a vantage point from which to critique the liberal project and also to build new definitions of emancipation and freedom; in particular, "inner emancipation." Kapur gives certain examples of what she means by this: a Muslim woman wearing a veil, the poetry of Umrao Jaan, and the annual worship of the deity Iravan by Hijras in Tamil Nadu. In each case, the subjectivity of the actor(s) cannot be captured by either the concept of victimhood or of performance. Their liberation must not be sought in terms of a transcendence of the self but through a recognition of the self: a recognition of the subject's "is-ness." It is a process, Kapur writes, of going deeper into the self. It is therefore distinct from seeking liberation in more rights and in laws which promise but do not deliver freedom (Kapur, 2012, pp. 346-351).

This process of rethinking, Kapur argues, will open up two possibilities for feminists. Firstly, it will enable the conceptualisation of ideas of freedom and liberation without having to take recourse to the rights discourse. Secondly, it will enable Indian feminists to challenge the Hindu Right's hold over definitions of Hindu culture (Kapur, 2012, p. 351).

Kapur uses the terms 'autonomous women's movement,' 'women's movement,' and 'feminism,' apparently interchangeably, in the descriptive portion of the essay. Yet in the latter, prescriptive portion of the essay, she only uses the term 'feminism.' This is significant because a movement is, by definition, a collective endeavour, which feminism may or may not be; one can be a feminist by oneself, but it is difficult to

argue that one can be a movement by oneself. What is missing, then, is any discussion or description of the manner in which poststructuralism will contribute to collective politics: what strategies and tactics will be involved?

Kapur presents us with three examples (of Umrao Jaan, of women who wear veils, and of the worship of Iravan by hijras), and tells us how to look at these practices not from the lens of liberalism but instead of poststructuralist feminism. Thus it appears that what such feminism gives us is a different perspective; an appreciation of different conceptions of self and subjectivity. Kapur writes that her purpose in raising these points is to "put some life into a feminist project in desperate need of resuscitation-to help stage the sorely needed intellectual insurrection in the area of feminist activism." Yet the resuscitation needed within feminism is not merely intellectual, or of the transmission of ideas. Indeed, online feminism does transmit ways of seeing the world to wider audiences. Instead, the crisis of feminism has been of collectivising and undertaking collective action. It is not clear how this can be addressed through what Kapur describes. We get no sense of what sort of collective action can evolve from such a perspective. If a movement is defined as a collective endeavour, as something people have to come together to do, then what does this shift in thinking mean for a collective?

It is also worth pointing out that feminists have long provided and championed alternate ways to understand gendered social relations. For example, the basic distinction that is made between sex as biological and gender as social provides a way to look at women's conditions in society not as natural but as social and as amenable to change. Feminists' provisions of alternate ways of looking at social reality have continued even in the years that were considered crisis-ridden for the feminist movement. If, in the recent years, the sense of crisis has abated somewhat, it is because of feminist interventions that go beyond offerings of alternate perspectives, of various kinds and at various levels. Of these, those interventions which involve mobilisations of large numbers for public demonstrations and protests are no small part.

For some, also, the presence of large numbers of women makes possible certain interventions that would not previously have occurred. One experience, narrated by Pinjra Tod activist Garima, can be recounted in this context. Garima recollects a

protest event in Delhi University in 2016. Out of the 300-odd people present, she says, at least 80% were women.

> Somebody from a left organisation came up and started [saying], "these ABVP members, there are so many of our mothers here, they don't respect them, [but] they are shouting 'Bharat mata'." And immediately you were able to shut him up, and [say], apologise… And because there were so many women, they just booed him down, asked him to like change what he had said, and he did it… He came up to me afterwards and he said "comrade if a mistake has been made, take me aside and tell me, what is the need to shout." But I was like "[if I didn't shout at you] I would have done [more of a] disservice to you, because you would have said something and not said sorry immediately, and that would have stayed." But you could only do that and not have him take offence because there were so many women. In any other situation, one has sat through meetings for years where people have come and said "this government is a government of eunuchs," and "the Hooda government is wearing bangles," and it's pinched you every time but you've never been able to say it, when you said it, people have said you're making a mountain out of a molehill, but it's only when practically there's a movement which is articulating women's issues on campus strongly, and women are in huge numbers in those movements, not just as women but as students, that the terms of that conversation change, and it doesn't become a small issue. The same person could have said it's a small matter a year ago, but he just cannot say it today, and you would have not been able to challenge him in that public way a year ago, which you can do legitimately now, and [in] a larger collective.[8]

Here, we see that the presence of women in large numbers has allowed for the masculine and sexist language of Delhi University to be challenged. Conversely, we saw in chapter five that Anita Ghai noted the absence of an organised challenge to an ableist culture as amongst the reasons for the perpetuation of that culture. Thus having a feminist perspective might not be enough to make a push for interventions.

Contributions of the Thesis

One of the main contributions of my thesis is through the addition of empirical data on the AWM. As we have seen, many of the key texts on this movement date from the

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[8] Garima, Pinjra Tod group discussion, 2016, Delhi

1990s and early 2000s. Thus there is a gap in the ethnographic data on the movement in its contemporary phase, especially with regard to contemporary actors, campaigns, strategies, perspectives, et cetera. This thesis is a contribution towards filling that gap.

The thesis makes interventions in the contemporary debates within the study of the AWM. One important contribution is to the literature on mobilisation to the AWM. By looking at how mobilisation has taken place since the 1970s and 1980s, it allows us to go beyond looking at mobilisation only in terms of young women. It gives us a more balanced view of the various factors impacting mobilisation, and helps us to see trends and patterns in this phenomenon. It also engages with the concepts of abeyance structures and the idea of collectives as friendship groups, thus extending existing work in the study of social movements.

Existing literature on the AWM has often posited a sharp disjuncture between collectives and NGOs, or funded and non-funded organisations and groups. This disjuncture has been challenged, for example in the work of Srila Roy, but still holds sway. By examining the overlaps and links between NGOs and non-funded activism, this thesis describes new patterns of activists' engagement with both, and also draws our attention to the connections between collectives and NGOs themselves.

This thesis engages with the practical and action-oriented consequences of different theoretical positions and shifts in feminist theorising. It focuses on the meaning of theory for the AWM as a collective feminist endeavour, rather than examining different theories only in their own terms.

One significant contribution of this thesis is to open up the question of autonomy, to trace the shifts in this concept and the meanings of this concept for the contemporary AWM. Here, the idea of the limitations of autonomy is an important contribution to the study of the AWM. Little has been written on the shortcomings of autonomy as an organising principle for a movement, though the benefits of autonomy have been often articulated.

My thesis also leaves us with certain questions. Foremost amongst these, perhaps, is a question I have been posed by respondents and others in the field: how will my thesis contribute to the movement?

The contribution of an academic work such as this to movements is to provide information and analysis. Academics have the skills and resources to engage with movement histories, generate ethnographic data, understand and analyse patterns, and communicate the same. I believe that the data and analysis present in this thesis would be of interest and value to activists and to the AWM in general.

Another question which emerges from the thesis is of the future of the AWM. As we have seen, it emerged in 1970s and 1980s, suffered through various setbacks in the 1990s and 2000s, and is currently in a period of gaining momentum. While it faces various challenges, internal and external, it is managing to hold its own, at least at the moment. How will it continue to develop in the future? Will we see some form of institutionalisation emerge, as has occurred in the past? What forms could this institutionalisation take? What will be the lasting impacts of this phase of feminist activism?

Limitations of the Study

First, we should note that the data is primarily from the movement as it has been in urban areas. Women's organising which fits the definition of autonomy but that does not self-identify as part of the AWM has not been examined. Such organisations could also tell us a great deal about the nature of autonomous women's organising.

As we have seen in this thesis, many of the collectives that operate in the AWM are comprised of persons who are not just activists together but are also friends. As a result of the method of snowball sampling that I employed, I feel, many activists also would have pointed me to others they considered part of the movement, and thus, perhaps unconsciously on the concerned activist's part, also part of a similar friendship network. Indeed, one of my respondents told me that it would be good for me to expand the scope of my work outside such circles, as I would then hear very different views of the AWM.

In retrospect, I think that my set of respondents were critical of the movement. They described both its strengths but also its shortcomings. Indeed some spent more time highlighting the shortcomings. Thus I do not feel that my sample yielded an unrealistically celebratory view. Yet it might be argued that it is still an internal critique, and that the critiques of outsiders might be qualitatively different.

Directions for Future Research

One idea that could inform further research is of historically contextualising the phenomena I study better, and also mapping their links with the wider political economy more thoroughly. Theda Skocpol's characterisation of historical sociology provides an interesting way to look at how I might extend the thesis in the future:

> Truly historical sociological studies have some or all of the following characteristics. Most basically, they ask questions about social structures or processes understood to be concretely situated in time and space. Second, they address processes over time, and take temporal sequences seriously in accounting for outcomes. Third, most historical analyses attend to the interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts, in order to make sense of the unfolding of unintended as well as intended outcomes in individual lives and social transformations. Finally, historical sociological studies highlight the *particular* and *varying* features of specific kinds of social structures and patterns of change (Skocpol, 1984, p. 1).

This would, I think, provide a useful model for planning future research into the AWM, which could focus on a few key areas.

One such area is demobilisation. Currently we do not have a very thorough understanding of this phenomenon with regard to the AWM, except in the context of NGOisation. This leaves us with the view that demobilisation has come about only through NGOisation, which is patently not the case. For example, Vibhuti Patel has spoken of her declining participation in autonomous feminist politics as she became more involved with anti-communal politics in the wake of the Bombay riots following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Deepti Priya Mehrotra has described how she withdrew from activism as pressures of work and family life increased and impinged on her time: she makes a specific reference to having to find work, to being unable to carry on as an activist indefinitely. Activists have also left the groups of which they were a part because of what they considered to be the limits of the issues taken up in these groups. Thus there have been many reasons for activists' withdrawal from autonomous feminist politics, which are very sketchily documented if they are documented at all. In the absence of a more thorough documentation, we are left only with NGOisation as a model for demobilisation, which as we can see is quite inadequate.

Other than these, it might be useful if further research on the autonomous movement could take the form of the tracing of specific campaigns undertaken by the AWM. This might provide more detailed pictures of many dimensions of the AWM's history than are possible through overviews of the movement. To take one example, it might be interesting to examine the history of feminist engagements with the dowry issue. Such a history could explore the different ways in which dowry has been understood (for example, what have been the differences between the Progressive Organisation of Women's first articulation of the dowry issue in Hyderabad in the mid-1970s, and the manner in which dowry emerged as an issue in Delhi in the late 1970s and 1980s?). It could also throw light on how autonomous feminist groups have worked with other movements and actors (for example, left groups, cultural groups, academic and research institutions) through the course of the campaign. Explorations of the nature of dowry itself would give insights into the role of women and marriage within the wider political economy. Such a study might provide a very detailed and nuanced view of many aspects of movement history.

Further research into feminist thought too might revolve around one aspect or subject. One interesting subject to consider could be different feminist engagements with the family as an institution. As we have seen, the family has had a central place in feminists' theorisation of women's role in society and the nature of their oppression. However, today, I often hear the family described in differently: as a source of love, shelter and support for its members. This second conceptualisation is seen as in some way undermining those analyses of the family that have seen it as the source of women's oppression. Studying these approaches might lead us to interesting discoveries of the nature of feminist thought in the present, in particular the emphasis placed on individual subjectivity in determining the nature of society.

These projects would be interesting and productive extensions of the research I have conducted till date. I hope that the research I have undertaken for the purpose of this thesis would serve as a strong foundation on which to base these future projects.

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Appendix

The Institutionalisation of Feminism

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that NGOisation is only a subset of the forms of institutionalisation that feminist activism might take and indeed has taken. Srila Roy writes that NGOisation is used as an "umbrella term" to describe the changes in the "form, functioning and the wider political context" of the Indian women's movement (Roy, 2015, p. 97). The use of the term NGOisation, while pointing to valid critiques of the impact of NGOs on collective feminist politics, obscures two important points: institutionalisation of feminist politics in general (and not only through NGOs), and the shortcomings of collectives themselves. In this chapter five, we explored the latter to some degree, pointing to the closed nature of collectives.

With regard to the former, we must note that the institutionalisation of the women's movement has taken place not just through NGOs but also, significantly, through women's and gender studies in higher education. Though referred to as the academic arm of the women's movement, women's studies is institutionalised in that it is tied to institutions of higher learning, with their own bureaucracies, barriers to entry, institutionalised ways of working, forms of hierarchy and pressures of funding. Women's studies practitioners do describe the challenges of institutionalisation, stemming from the patriarchal institutions in which they find themselves. For example, women's studies centres are temporary, financed for a period of five years at a stretch, and therefore constantly threatened by the withdrawal of funding (Sreerekha, 2016, p. 66). Indeed, as I write this, the University Grants Commission's notice of reviewing all schemes to determine their continuation after September 2017 (University Grants Commission, 2017) is being seen as throwing the future of women's studies into jeopardy. Women's studies centres are marginalised within the institutions in which they are housed, as reflected in their share of resources.

The institutionalisation of women's studies brings with itself a distance from movements. MS Sreerakha refers to many shifts in women's activism: challenges

raised by Dalit women's movements, Muslim, Adivasi, transgender women et cetera. She notes a change in terminology away from 'women's movement' and towards 'women's movements'. Yet she argues that debates in movement spaces have not adequately informed the discipline of women's studies (Sreerekha, 2016, pp. 64-65).

Bhumika Chauhan, in her examination of the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre in the University of Pune, discusses the ways in which the Centre tries to form links between academics and movements (Chauhan, 2015). For example, the Centre acknowledges that knowledge production takes place in movements, and accords to movement artefacts like plays, pamphlets, songs et cetera the same status as conventional academic sources. Additionally, she says that "the practices of feminist pedagogy and research at the KSPWSC indicate the penetration of knowledge-producing practices of the movement into the Centre (Chauhan, 2015, p. 193)."

Chauhan refers to the emergence of an "action group from the classroom of the WSC in the 1990s that intervened both inside and outside the university (Chauhan, 2015, p. 198)." This group became a vehicle for political action, working with groups outside the university also. However she says that

> Currently…there are no similar activities where the Centre participates in the campaign of an organisation. These activities have been substituted by modular workshops, internships and block placements. It is through these avenues that students interact with activists and participate in movement organisations (Chauhan, 2015, p. 198).

Chauhan points to the twin needs of the Centre to attain academic respectability and ensure that students are employable. The distance between the movement and the Centre have widened, she says, in the face of the Centre's attempts to meet these challenges.

> Student activists noted that increasing attention to institutional expansion was beginning to limit the Centre's engagement with movements. It was reported that the compulsions of funding or the possible criticisms of corporate funding were never discussed in the classroom. … While it is true that the Centre has to ensure that students are employable, teachers were reported to have admitted that they have to take into consideration the

aspirations of all students, and that not all students are interested in the movement… (Chauhan, 2015, p. 200).

Just as NGOs might attract women who are not interested in feminism but in careers in NGOs, so too might women's studies attract students who are not interested in the women's movement (either academically or as activists). And, while employees in women's NGOs might become single-issue specialists, it is not necessary that women's studies students will have a greater breadth and depth of understanding. For example, Nirupama notes students' difficulties in connecting with the broader issues of power in society:

> Nirupama: [What] defines itself as feminist politics is a lot to do with issues of identity, of sexuality, which are also issues of power, but they are not able to connect that with the larger issues of power in society, that a missed opportunity… Personally as a teacher and scholar of women's studies I find that I'm a little sad because I think we're living at a time when there are major changes in the political economy, rural distress, these so-called female-headed households, enormous migration from rural to urban areas, what is happening to women in that process, I think our students are unable to engage with that. To the extent that they should be. They're much happier to exist in a certain comfort zone of literature, cultural issues, cultural studies, queer feminism, sexuality, trans, some of those issues are far easier and you wonder whether you know the institutionalisation of women's studies has somehow pushed all of us into those spaces and are not able to get out of them.

> Vasudha: Why do you call it a comfort zone?

> Nirupama: It's a comfort zone because you're dealing with yourself much more than the outer world. It's always easier to do that. … The personal is political, okay that has been one of our slogans, I would say today that the personal is political but the political is not personal. Always. The political is much more. So we have made the personal political and we haven't really got around to examining politics and taking it beyond this.[1]

These facts suggest that the institutionalisation of women's studies has had ambivalent consequences for feminist movements. There are questions that may be raised of the institutionalisation of feminism and feminist politics which cannot be captured in the term 'NGOisation'. Yet no term comparable to NGOisation has been

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[1] Nirupama, personal interview, 2016, Mumbai

coined that might capture the changes accruing to the feminist movement through the institutionalisation of women's studies. Why this is so is an open question, one which is beyond the scope of the present study. Yet we must ask, what could we learn about feminism by focusing also on other ways in which it has been institutionalised? What could we learn about the situation of autonomous feminist politics by looking at women's studies alongside NGOs?