

**Reconstructing Feminist Herstories Through Politics of
Friendship: A Study of Select Autonomous Women's Movement
and Collectives in India
(1980 - Contemporary Times)**

Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Arts)

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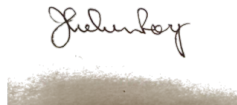
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Seven years feels like a long time to write a thesis. Yet, at the close of it also feels not enough. When I had begun thinking on the politics of friendship it seemed a very abstract idea, just some jumbled thoughts and connections that I was making in my head gathered from my experiences on the streets and a bit of research. Today, as I submit a thesis building concrete arguments from those scattered thoughts and experiences, I thank my supervisor, Dr. Paromita Chakravarti for helping me organise those thoughts, dig deeper and present them in coherent arguments. In these seven years Paromita di has not only been a supervisor but also a close friend pushing me when needed, also being patient when required, helping me make sense of my disparate thoughts, arguing vehemently when I seemed to lose the objectivity required for writing a thesis on a subject that is too close to home. Revisiting the history of a movement that I, myself bear allegiance to is a difficult task. Revisiting it through politics of friendship would have been even more difficult if not for the help I kept getting from my friends. Researching a history that has mostly remained in the margins would have been impossible if I had not had friends and comrades opening up their personal archives for me, looking through dusty cupboards and digging through old letters and emails to bring up that one document that they felt would help my work, sharing their experiences, thoughts, memories (despite some being painful). This work therefore has also in a way been a collective revisiting. I would like to thank Ranjana for taking that extra pain in pointing me towards sources, resources, for hearing my thoughts and sharing hers, for reading through some of my rough drafts and proving comments that helped me understand the whys of the movement in a way no literature review could. I would also like to thank friends and comrades in Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) and Saheli for giving me their time, sharing their insights, experiences and providing me with materials that enormously helped my work. I also thank all my respondents for giving me their time, their memories and for introducing me to others who they felt could help, all the time encouraging me, validating

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*For all those friends and comrades, past and present, who have been there and are still there
in the battlefield fighting to keep our collective belief that another world is possible...*

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Introduction

The 1980s had ushered in a new moment in the political landscape of India. With the Naxalite decade leaving its indelible mark in the polity, a new form of ‘doing’ politics emerged. This politics while questioning the premises of the Nehruvian idea of India, of the idea of ‘democracy’ brought to the fore new stakeholders of the polity, building a new rubric of movements that had the working masses at its centre (Samaddar, 2019). This fight for a new idea of democracy also articulated a new autonomous political voice through a series of civil rights movements, new social movements and progressive democratic movements. The autonomous women's movement was a product of these lineages and trends. It later came to be known as ‘the women's movement’ in India as the movement, as for the first time, this movement consciously articulated a feminist politics through its understanding of gender violence, its analysis of marriage and family, and theorising of patriarchy. This assertion was born out of women's experiences of being overlooked in the movements that preceded it as those movements were still not prepared to acknowledge women as equal stakeholders.

In a paper written by Stree Shakti Sanghatana¹ in a socialist feminist conference organised by Forum Against Rape (that later became Forum Against Oppression of Women or FAOW)² in

¹ Stree Shakti Sanghatana was an autonomous women's group based in Hyderabad. It was founded in 1978.

² Forum Against Rape was formed in 1980 when around 40 women organised a meeting to protest the Mathura rape judgment where tribal girl was raped in police custody but the judgment stated it could not be rape since the girl was not a virgin and seemed accustomed to sexual intercourse. The Forum Against Rape later named itself Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) as it took up gender issues other than rape as well. We will discuss FAOW in depth in later chapters.

1980 stated, “We have seen how women's organizations affiliated to political parties (even in socialist countries) have become mere appendages of those parties. In post-revolutionary periods, women's movements have been relegated to the background. It is important that women's organizations guard against such a danger, but without isolating themselves from the masses, and from other revolutionary movements” (Kumar, 1993, p. 112). This assertion of feminist politics was also born out of new learnings from the radical feminist movement in the West that placing gender as a central analytical category drew a different idea of social transformation. It was born out of the feminist articulations found in the new social movements in India wherein, even in peasant movements in Sahada (Datar, 1987), or worker's movements in Chhattisgarh (Sen, 1990), issues like domestic violence, dowry were becoming central agendas around which women rallied. These ideas and articulations initiated a search for new communities, and relationalities. The autonomous women's movement demanding autonomy from state diktats, foreign funding and Party control represented that newness. Yet this articulation was also drawn heavily from a socialist feminist rhetoric (Kumar, 1993). The very first campaign against dowry initiated by Stree Sangharsh that later became Saheli³ in 1979 articulated in its leaflet:

As Engels pointed out in his classic work, property relations within the family were mediated through the development of private property, and questions of inheritance became paramount... While the question of inheritance remains an insight into women's oppression, it is not the sole relationship of private property to this oppression. The example of dowry in India is a clear one of relationship with private

³ Stree Sangharsh was formed in Delhi in 1979 to protest the death of Tarvinder Kaur who was killed by her in-laws over dowry. The group named itself Saheli as 16 women came together with a register, two jharus and a duster to form a collective in 1980. Saheli in Hindi meant a friend, and the name was chosen deliberately to build a space for women to relate politically with other women. The idea of saheli as a political relationship ran across the autonomous women's movement as many other autonomous collectives formed named themselves similarly. We will discuss Saheli in detail in the coming chapters.

property in which this becomes a bridegroom price and is added to the immediate, consumable family capital, used either to further business ventures, to educate younger sons, to buy a promotion, or to furnish a daughter's dowry. In many cases it does not remain within the immediate family, but becomes someone else's private property. (Kumar, 1993, pp.117-118)

This fresh autonomous articulation of feminist politics was marked by an open, strong critique of marriage and family that had so far been missing from left politics, yet carried within it the assertion of left politics as also a yearning for finding new communities, new political relationalities, new homes.

Brief Historical Background of Autonomous Women's Movement

The history of the autonomous women's movement can be traced back to the founding of Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) in 1974. It was founded by a few middle-class women students from Osmania University, Hyderabad who were beginning to find a disjunct between the liberal ideas they were being exposed to through their university education and the life of family and marriage that was proscribed for them (Lalita, 1988). While the restraints and curfews at home informed their struggle, their discussions with other progressive student and left organisations who advised them a separate women's organisation would be divisive to Marxist politics, made them keenly feel the need to organise women in an autonomous platform. Thus, although most of its members were leaning towards Marxist Leninist and Maoist political beliefs, it chose to keep the forum autonomous. Despite being autonomous, POW did not disavow structures as it worked out a formal structure to ease representation of both college, university students and working women forming editorial

committees, library committees, *basti* (slum) committees. It is through this united struggle of radical students and working women that the first anti-dowry campaign was lodged (Kumar, 1993; Lalitha, 1988). It seemed to signal a new experiment in women's organising, a coming of age of the feminist interventions/ moments of the communist movement, carrying within it both the legacy and the ruptures of the left traditions. In a similar way, around the same time, Gail Omvedt (1980) writes of a group of college students from Aurangabad, Maharashtra coming together to form the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD), their manifesto drawing inspiration from Babasaheb Ambedkar and Angela Davis and locating themselves in the lineage of the history of militant struggles forged by anti-caste movements in India, and black women in America. It was the time of democracy and bureaucracy within party structures being questioned, the ideals of revolution being revisited as discussed above. The policy of planned economy while focusing on heavy industrialization and agricultural commercialisation also gave birth to a new set of contradictions. Iliana Sen (1990) documents how women remained at the forefront of most of these struggles thereby these bringing in questions on domestic violence, unequal distribution of work and resources, rape, sexual violence into the political arena. With more and more women pouring on to the streets, laying claim to the polity through their gendered subjectivities, the site of production and reproduction too begin to get blurred. Nandita Gandhi (1990) writes about the Nav Nirman movement in Gujarat in 1973 that brought together workers, peasants, students across party lines to struggle against unemployment and price rise and paved the way for the Anti-Price Rise Movement in Bombay. The movement saw a huge number of working class and middle-class women occupying the streets with rolling pins, plates and spoons in what was described as the *latni morcha* (rolling pin procession) where spaces of production and reproduction too begin to get blurred. Nirmala Sathe (1990) writes about the Shramik Sanghathana in Maharashtra's Dhulia in district that mobilized adivasi peasant women of Shahada

demanding restoration of social and economic dignity in 1978. While it began as a land struggle, the organization while mobilizing landless peasants paid special attention to bringing women to the struggle, thereby nurturing a feminist leadership that could then bring to the fore issues of sexual violence and rape, domestic violence, gendered division of roles and the oppression of women through customary tribal laws (Sathe, 1990). Similarly, in the Shetkari Andolan in Maharashtra in 1981 under the leadership of Sharad Joshi saw the participation of women in what was described to be ‘the new peasant movement’ (Omvedt, 1990). The movement led to the formation of Samagra Mahila Aghadi (All Women’s Front) that began a new struggle for women’s political power in the panchayat system. Chhaya Dattar (1990) points out how the bidi worker’s struggle in Nipani facilitated the formation of ‘Women’s Multipurpose Co-operative Society’ in 1983. These struggles on the ground were slowly giving shape to a grassroots’ women’s movement that shared a close comradeship with the autonomous women’s movement in metropolitan spaces, each hand holding the other, shaping each other, framing the contours of autonomous feminist politics. In 1975 thus while the UN declared the International Decade for Women, middle class women from Bombay belonging to a group called ‘Magowa’, tribal women from Dhulia district, women from Lal Nishan Party (LNP), and women from Pune Progressive Women’s Group came together to discuss perspectives on women’s oppression (Omvedt,1980).

It is in this environment that in 1972, Mathura, a young tribal woman from Maharashtra reports being raped in custody. The case dragged on from session court to Supreme Court over the course of seven years and on 1979 the Supreme Court found the accused not guilty stating that there were no bruises in her body and since the two-finger test revealed that she was habituated to sexual intercourse, it could not be ascertained that the encounter was non-consensual. This judgment had the entire country seething sparking debates on power, consent and patriarchal imposition of sexual moral codes on women, raising questions on the

complicity of the state and its organs – police, judiciary in perpetuating gender violence (Dattar, 1988). It is in this context that Forum Against Rape is formed, which later becomes Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW). We will discuss FAOW in detail in the coming chapters. Similarly, in Delhi, the case of a dowry death led to the formation of a campaign group called Stree Sangharsh, that later in 1980 formalised itself and named themselves Saheli (meaning friend). The movement spread across the country and more autonomous women's collectives sprang up all across the country. The issue of rape soon opened up ways of talking about other kinds of violence - and the lens moved inwards to one's homes as stories of domestic violence, dowry deaths tumbled out, the Roop Kanwar case⁴ made way for women's agitation against Sati, Shahnaz Sheikh's⁵ story sparked debates on maintenance and private laws as the movement locked horns with religious patriarchy, the Delhi pogrom of 1984 brought to the fore issues of state repression as the battle intensified against state patriarchy. The politicisation of gendered violence offered a new critique of patriarchy that was being forged on the ground bringing the institution of family and marriage into careful scrutiny. As the movement gathered momentum it began to engage with law, and the state. New contradictions arose. We will discuss them at greater length in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The opening up of the market to global drug companies in 1989 made way for drugs and contraceptives that were poorly tested, under-trial or even that had been proved hazardous in the West were being rerouted to the third world and the reproductive health of Indian women became one of the major casualties. Saheli spearheaded a campaign against such hazardous

⁴ Roop Kanwar was a Rajput woman who was forced to self-immolate over her husband's pyre to become sati in Deorala, Rajasthan

⁵ Shehnaz Sheikh was the first Indian woman to challenge Muslim personal laws. She was thrown out of her marriage by her husband who proclaimed talaq. However, later her husband asked her to come back but Shehnaz refused and challenged the law as she believed it violated her fundamental right to equality. FAOW took up the case and launched a campaign in support of her.

contraceptives and declared an ideological war against big pharmaceutical companies questioning the economic restructuring under the diktats of the World Bank that tilted funds towards family planning than social development at the cost of women's health (Saheli, 2006). This is also the time when the 'autonomy' of the women's movement faces a new challenge with the proliferation of NGOs and renewed debates on funding. A glance through the changing themes of the autonomous women's movement conferences mark this shift. The third national conference of autonomous women's movement held in Patna in 1988 named Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan (Women's Liberation Struggle Conference) (Omvedt, Gala and Kelkar, 1988) had women from autonomous groups, socialist and Marxist Leninist groups leading the discussions with the themes being related to women's work, land rights, ecology, communalism and religious fundamentalism and struggles and challenges of organising – most of the discussions geared towards culling out a vision for women's liberation, initiating a process of worldbuilding through these struggles, through friendships, comradeships (Omvedt, Gala and Kelkar, 1988). By the time the fourth women's movement conference was being held in Tirupati in 1994 (The Fifth National Conference of the Women's Movements in India: A Report, 1994), the title 'nari mukti sangharsh' had been dropped as was the attempt to chart out a vision for women's liberation. We will discuss this journey in greater detail in the coming chapters so as to cull out the history of affect and friendships that played a defining role in building and fuelling the movement. This history, however, will not be a history of events, about what the movement did, but rather how the movement did what it did.

The chief objective of this thesis is to construct a history of the autonomous women's movement through histories of friendship. However, the "paucity of literature available as a source and the unevenness of sources that are traceable" as Kumar (1993, p. 1) makes the movement difficult to document it. Attempts have been made to chronologically trace its

journey through the trajectory of ideological debates within the movement, or through events histories. The movement has also been archived through memoirs, leaflets, posters, photographs, memories and oral narratives (Omvedt, 1985; Velayudhan, 1985; Patel, 1986; Gandhi and Shah, 1992; Kumar, 1993; Roy, 1999; Khullar, 2005; Menon, 2011; Zubaan, 2012; Murthy and Dasgupta, 2014; Arya, 2020; Arya and Singh, 2024). However, these histories fail to capture the affective core of the movement which was driven by the intensely interpersonal relationships forged between the women whose lives were transformed by it and who gave so much of their lives to transform the existences of other women. This emotional history, too powerful or painful to be mentioned remains hidden away in private correspondence-- in long intense handwritten letters, in informal gossip, in obituaries and resignation letters but also in coded ways in meeting minutes and conference proceedings recording splits and dissent in the movement. These sources and forms of reading the alternative history of the movement have historically been overlooked as being 'non-political' and are only recently being examined.

Literature Review

Historicising the Movement

What is considered to be worth historicising also then becomes a political question. In the early 1990s, two of the foundational texts documenting the history of the movement were Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah's *Issues at Stake* (1992) and Radha Kumar's *The History of Doing* (1993). Both written by 'insiders' and published by the independent feminist publishing house, Kali for women, they also framed the movement with regard to its questions, its flow, debates, and contexts in a way that set the dominant narrative of the movement. Radha Kumar's (1993) book traces the 19th century context of social reform and

the nationalist struggle, and situates the autonomous women's movement in this political milieu outlining the trajectory of the movement through questions of autonomy, as discussed above, and campaigns against dowry, rape, personal laws, sati. Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi (1992) too frame the movement through issues of autonomy, women's experiences of violence, and campaigns on women's health, work and law. For a long time, campaigns became the only registers through which the autonomous women's movement came to be discussed, historicised and remembered. The United Nations led work on violence against women initiated through the declaration of the International Decade of Women in 1975 became the defining frame in academic histories which remained disconnected from the actual debates on the ground. This became the dominant story of the women's movement thereby obfuscating the critiques of family, marriage, stories of friendship and political intimacies that were emerging from struggles on the ground. However, despite these frameworks, there were also challenges to these histories. Iliana Sen's *A Space Within Struggle* (1990) at a similar time interrupted this discourse of what we understand by women's movement, who are the 'women' in this women's movement by bringing in narratives of women from various social struggles. Gail Omvedt's *We Will Smash This Prison!* (1980) too remained an outlier in this dominant discourse interrupting this history through the testimonies and experiences of rural Adivasi and Dalit women who have been in the forefront of peasant and trade union struggles and played a defining role in shaping the feminist politics of the autonomous women's movement in the 1980s. Omvedt's book while not actually being a 'history' but rather a first person account of the struggles in rural India pre-dating the autonomous women's movement ends up serving as a historical archive that provides a glimpse of the friendships that would become a defining character in the autonomous women's movement later. Yet, these herstories mostly remained bracketed within the register of 'women in movements', questioning, the dominant narrative of Indian

women's movement that was framed through the 'Mathura to Manorama'⁶ trope (Kannabiran and Menon, 2007), where the story of the movement could only be told through the violence against women campaigns. Towards the end of the 1990s, one of the groundbreaking works of gendered 'history' of movements came through *We Were Making History* (1989). A women's organisation, Stri Shakti Sanghatana writes an alternative history of the Telengana struggle through the oral testimonies of women who had played an integral role in the struggle. While this book is not perceived to be a record of the women's movement, neither does it pledge to be a task of historicising, yet this curation of oral testimonies of women who had been part of the Telengana struggle by a women's collective seeking to trace their lineage in the struggles for their predecessors set forth a new way of history writing. The book played a key role in feminising the Telengana struggle and placed itself as an alternate template for writing women's histories. Raka Ray's book *Fields of Protest* (1999) attempted to write a history of the movement through the organizational trajectory of two autonomous collectives, Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), Bombay and Sachetana, Kolkata. Similarly, Mala Khullar's edited volume *Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader* (2005) had feminists analyse some of the key aspects of the movement, capturing its journey through legal history, ideological mapping, conceptual analyses. However, like its predecessors, this book too focuses on question of what the women's movement did, rather than how it did what it did, thereby keeping the emotional at bay. It is important to park here that these books that for a long period became the go to references for understanding the movement also followed the formats of writing public histories that drew from Habermas' definition of public and the

⁶ Thangjam Manorama was brutally raped and killed by the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary unit in 2004. Her mutilated body was found abandoned 3 kms away from her home where she was arrested on suspicion of belonging to an insurgent group. The case caused huge furore as despite no incriminating evidence was found on her, the court ruled that since the Assam Rifles was deployed under Armed Forces Special Powers Act no action would be taken against them. The Mainpuri mothers staged a huge protest in front of Kangla Fort where they stripped down and stood with a banner saying 'Indian Army Rape Us'. It also sparked a debate within the movement around the impunity of the army and the silence of mainlanders on atrocities in the North East.

private where the public constituted of free male citizens while the private was where women reproduced life and slaves laboured (Liddington, 2002). Integrating women's history into this format without disrupting the framework meant these histories had to acquire the rational, public voice that keeps the emotions out. Both Omvedt (1980) and Stree Shakti Sanghatana's work (1989), in this context, though strictly falling out of this tonal framework, also strangely aligns itself with the very spirit of public history writing that is hinged on a “democratic declaration of faith in members of the public at large to become their own historians” (Grele, 1981, p. 48). It is only in recent times, in the last decade that we see an attempt to historicise the movement through different registers - through memoirs (Menon, 2011), posters (Dasgupta and Murthi, 2014), curation of memories (Zubaan, 2011), conference documents (Bhattacharya, 2021) narrativising the movement not just through events and campaigns, but also capturing the texture, the interior world of the movement thereby breaking out of the public tonality of writing to bring to light the different moments of organising, intimacy, heartbreaks, joy that characterised the movement. This thesis bears the legacy of this trajectory and also contributes to this history through its attempt to tell the story of the autonomous women's movement using friendship as a political archive, and thereby ask how does this history when revisited through friendships change our understanding of the political.

Writing an Alternate History

But how does one tell the story of a movement that has been so varied in its objectives, journey, politics and regional locations? How does one historicise a movement that has been unstructured and fluid - where every collective has had its own journey and political character, where every city has had its own articulations and registers of protest and prioritising of issues. For instance, the Roop Kanwar case played a fundamental role in

shaping the politics of North India (Kumar, 1993), while Bombay riots in 1992⁷ and Gujarat pogrom in 2002⁸ played a key role in shaping feminist politics in Western India (Shah and Gandhi, 1992; Agnes, 1994). Caste played a defining role in determining feminist politics in the South (Vellayudhan, 1991; Geetha and Jayanthi, 1995), while the contradiction between the parliamentary left and non-parliamentary radical left played a significant role in the protest registers in Bengal and the East. The demographic character of the collectives too determined the campaigns undertaken, and the issues that took centre stage. For example, the dominance of migrant women in the women's movement in Bombay made local trains a critical arena of protest. In Uttarakhand and Chattisgarh the aspirations of statehood played a central role in directing the autonomous feminist politics there. Any attempt at historicising the movement then is only able to capture a slice of it. This thesis too in that respect makes no claim to be THE history of the movement, but rather attempts to revisit the history through the lens of friendship, comradeship, affective relationalities by studying the journey of two autonomous feminist collectives from 1980 to contemporary times in Delhi and Bombay.

Reconstructing feminist herstories through the politics of friendship requires several enquiry points. It therefore becomes important to situate this work in overlapping frameworks of friendship studies, theories of affect and social reproduction and feminist historiography.

However, unlike the campaign led mode of history writing, this thesis will not follow chronology of events, but rather focus on affective historiography. Instead, it will follow non-

⁷ Soon after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, there were communal tensions all over the country fanned by the Hindutva groups. A series of riots broke out as a result in Maharashtra and Gujarat that permanently altered the secular fabric of the country.

⁸ In February 2002, a train returning from Ayodhya with karsevaks reached Godhra station all burnt as it was alleged that someone had set fire to the train. Following this, Hindutva outfits began spreading rumours and communal propaganda across the state and initiating a genocide in several parts of Ahmedabad, in Best Bakery, Naroda Patiya and Gulberg Society murdering thousands of Muslim men and women.

linear temporalities to trace affective continuities to seek what remains at the unchanging affective core of the movement.

Why Feminist Friendships?

“In these 40 years I have seen more heartbreaks because of friendships than because of relationships... some people have walked out of your friendship and there is no clue... and because there is no recognition of what it means to walk out...if it had been in a romantic relationship I could have more claims to ask for an explanation why this friendship went away...” (Personal Interview 2019)

One of the central problematics of talking about friendship, or more specifically women's friendship, has been the lack of vocabulary to talk about it. Friendship is supposed to be private. In today's neoliberal dispensation, where organising of sociality is hinged on principles of market exchange, the idea of friendship is relegated to the background.

However, recent growing interest in Friendship Studies (Devere, 1979; Shilpa Phadke and Nithila Kanagasabai a, 2023; Niharika Banerjea, Debanuj Dasgupta, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Jaime M. Grant, 2022) reflect how in these very times, people turn to the idea of friendship to fight back. However, the crises of care that this system creates through the withdrawing of state support from public welfare shift of burden of care completely on the family, on private households, and more importantly on women. When the nuclear family fails, reliance on friendships grows. This has sparked a renewed search for intimate relationalities outside the kinship system, outside the world of market exchange. Friendship, being outside property relations opens up possibilities of imagining care. In recent years, thus, we find new articulations of feminist politics through the mode of female friendships. This articulation, however, despite opening up new possibilities, when presented through the indices of market feminism, primarily shores up a framework of neoliberal ideology that looks at friendship as

a personal relationship, wherein its task is to respond and manage the ‘crises of care’ without causing any dent to the current organisation of sociality. Marxist feminists, however, while imagining alternate forms of organising reproductive labour has politicised friendship finding in it revolutionary possibilities of challenging the very organising of sociality and gendered division of labour (Kollontai, 1920; Federici, 2012). Talking about women's friendships has therefore has been as much a fight against censorship, as it has been a contestation between these two ideas of friendship.

Horst Hutter in his book, *Politics as Friendship: The origins of classical notions of politics in the theory and practice of friendship* (1978), traces how friendship, has historically been an entry point in western philosophy in envisioning democracy and thinking about social justice, and the ethics of civic relationships in an egalitarian world. In classical Greek philosophy the idea of friendship was the major principle through which the ‘polis’ and consequently the idea of the political was formulated. Hutter (1978) describes how the institution of *hetaery* or the ‘union of friends’ formed on the basis of social institutions that enabled the emergence of the category of the political or the polity and hence the sphere of politics. *Hetaery* as Hutter (1978) describes was a friendship grouping of men of similar class and age. Homeric epics mention *hetaery* as an institution that Greek aristocrats entered into in their youth and continued in till old age. It was also what “played a decisive role in the military, political, and legal affairs of the polis. It was an indispensable means for the attainment and retention of political power. It provided protection to the individual member in times of civil strife and aided him in electoral campaigns, law suits, and love quarrels.” (Hutter, 1978, p. 27).

Friendship is thus conceptualised as being a foundational idea of state and of philosophy in the western world. *Hetaeries*, were also institutions around which the Greek philosophical schools were organised. The need for this kind of organising lay in the gendered division of labour determined by the exigencies of war. Men fought wars and guarded the polis, while

women managed the household. Friendship or such fraternity groups allowed men from different groups to associate and form alliances for purposes of warfare and peacekeeping. Friendship was in such context also a bond infused with affect, with emotional expressions that are otherwise frowned upon in kinship networks (Hutter, 1978). *Hetaery* promising a bond that was more intimate than the family formed the social basis of Greek moral code (Hutter, 1978). With the establishment of democracy, though the aristocratic privilege that was characteristic of hetaeric organising came into conflict with the interests of the *demos* (common populace), ideas of friendship and justice were redefined. The polis required an association of people not biologically or ‘naturally’ related, friendship became that link. It was through friendship that the polis got constructed and sustained. Friendship thus became linked to the idea of citizenship. It also came to inform the visions of worldbuilding⁹.

Interestingly though, Women and slaves being outliers to this idea of democracy, also remained outliers to this notion of citizenship and the idea of worldbuilding as articulated in Western political theory. Primarily tied to the household, women were seen as threats to this system of what could be seen as homosociality. Ideations of friendship by Plato in *Symposium* (2008) or Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004) were founded on this ideation of the polis and therefore remained androcentric constructing their ideas of the ‘*polis*’ as the

⁹ It is important to note that the idea of worldbuilding is used in the thesis to refer to the politics of social transformation, the dream of building a different world that has been at the heart of all philosophical thoughts. In ‘Ways of Worldmaking’ Nelson Goodman (1984) posits worldmaking as a construction of world through creation of many versions of it through words, pictures, sounds, numerals. Built from his idea of radical pluralism Goodman (1984) deliberates on the way we create our own versions of the world from the version of the world we live in. Arthur Eddington in his book, *Space Time and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory* (1920) uses the term ‘worldbuilding’ to denote the construction of an imaginary world with different physical laws. The word has since been used in science fiction and video game designing to describe the process of building imaginary world by creating alternate histories, language, culture. Hannah Arendt too uses the idea of ‘worldbuilding’ in *The Human Condition* (1998) as she talks of the human life is involved with the task of worldbuilding only in so far it is “engaged in the process of reification” (Arendt, 1998, p. 96). She lists labour, work, and action as the three fundamental human activities that constitute the human conditions of life, plurality and worldliness. Politics of friendship for Arendt (1998) can transfigure these human activities to build a ‘common world’. The idea of worldbuilding referred to in this thesis while borrowing from Arendt actually connotes ideations of social transformation, of transfiguration of people and social relationships that lie at the heart of political theory that intends to not just interpret the world but also change it.

work of male friendships. It is why any theorisation of friendship in political philosophy has based its basic premises on Aristotlean understanding of friendship. The change in organising of capital accumulation and the gendered division of labour in consequent Western societies have changed notions of public/ private, sociality and consequently, redefined ideas of democracy, state and friendship (Hutter, 1978; Konstan, 1997; Derrida, 1997; Arendt, 1998). We will explore this history in more detail in the next chapter. Heather Devere, in her paper ‘The Academic Debate on Friendship and Politics’ (2013) marks the revival of academic debates on friendship and politics in the West since the 1980s with the establishment of neoliberalism, each attempting to deliberate on “model for civic relationships that is based on the concept of friendship, where this is regarded as a relationship of equals, who take the interests of others into account in decision-making, who consider it fair for exchanges to be of reciprocal benefit, and who care for those who are in need”(Devere 2013, p. 5). While the political approaches differed, the common refrain in 1980s been as Devere identified, “lament about the lost place of friendship in civil society” (Devere 2013, p.5). The other commonality that is characteristic of these theorisations is its androcentrism. Thus, the view of citizenship, justice, and polity that are foundationally associated with the understanding of friendship in political philosophy is marked by a systemic exclusion of women's lived experiences (Moitra, 2002). Since the ‘polity’ conceived through the work of civic friendship is understood to be historically dependent on those who are deemed to be citizens, who can claim space in the ‘public’, women, being outliers to the polis, were either seen to be non-human or the problem, and thereby excluded from the conceptualisation of the human condition (Moitra, 2002).

Female friendships, in this context, mostly overlooked and unseen, have remained outliers to these political theorisations. Women's exclusion from the idea of the political that is constructed solely through men's friendships, and their relegation to the private domestic

space ensured that non familial relationships of women were trivialised and depoliticised. Being marginal, though, has positioned female friendships to question the very abstract epistememes of philosophy that refuses “to recognise the legitimacy of women's experiences during theory construction”, thereby producing instead a “homogenised model of humanness” (Moitra, 2002, p. 32). One of the central political tasks of the feminist movement therefore has been to question this omission. Questioning this omission makes clear the rubric of heteropatriarchy that is at work in invisibilising and depoliticising women's friendship, in relegating it to the private, in controlling women's labour, sexuality, and affect through the nexus of family, marriage and state. This in turn has played a role in defining women's citizenship.

Recent works of Shilpa Phadke and Nithila Kanagasabai (2023 a) and Niharika Banerjea, Debanuj Dasgupta, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Jaime M. Grant (2022) attempt to locate politics of friendship in feminist and queer practices in the context of the global south and reflect on its implications in social justice activism and social movements. These works need to be read as response to the demands of the present times where intense individualism has undermined friendship, while the crisis of care as discussed above has necessitated a reliance of friendship. Simultaneously, these works also need to be placed within these larger historical contexts, and seen as both responses and continuations of these conversations. It is also significant to note that these works provide a curation of individualised, personal histories of activists, rather than any collective history of the movement. Janice Raymond's book *Passion for Friends* (2001) painstakingly weaves address the depoliticisation of women's friendship, analysing it from a radical feminist standpoint. Jodi Dean's book *Comrade: An Essay in Political Belonging* (2019), responds to the crisis of neoliberalism by positing comradeship, from a Marxist feminist perspective, as a mode of political belonging cemented through a shared political vision that can resist the neoliberal onslaught and remap relationships in a

brave new world. These recent revisiting of friendship, comradeship point out how the politicisation of women's friendship is intricately linked with the question of social reproduction, and how a politics of feminist friendships organically politicises care. In doing this Dean posits a revolutionary idea of women's friendship that challenges the very organisation of sociality in the current system. This thesis draws upon these connections for its theoretical framework while also situating the politics of women's friendship in India within the larger historical context that Phadke and Kangasabai (2023) and gr, Dasgupta and Grant (2022) fail to do. As discussed above, the autonomous women's movement in India, during its own fight against patriarchy at home and at work, in public and in private has had its own fights and negotiations with the institutions of family, marriage, and state. It is this position that has also made friendships, comradeships, solidarities valuable. With the movement's complicated relationship with structure, friendships with all its potentials and limitations also emerge as an instrument of political organising. Thus, revisiting the history of the movement through histories of friendships offers insights that otherwise go unnoticed and undocumented. It also questions the framework of violence through which the movement has mostly been analysed, positing alternative frameworks of women's political relationalities as a mode of analysing the movement.

Yet, as the respondent quoted at the beginning of this section asserts, the trivialisation, depoliticisation and invisibilisation of female friendships also means any project of historicisation becomes difficult. Reading the autonomous women's movement through women's friendships would then not only require an engagement with various 'texts' of the movement, but also with discourses on politics of affect, theories of social reproduction and care, and ideations of civic friendship in political philosophy. Furthermore, as Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt (2017) posit, any exploration of South Asian history requires an alertness to how caste has considerable bearing on how friendship is viewed, read, understood. Any

reconstruction of feminist herstory needs to interrogate how caste occupies a central position in kinship structures which determine who can be friends, how, and how much (Geetha, 2007). It is only through intertextual readings, and conversations across these diverse discourses that we will be able to challenge the androcentrism of politics and political worldbuilding. It also allows us to ask what feminist friendships are? What makes a friendship feminist? Is there a feminist vision of worldbuilding which is based on women's primary non familial bonds with each other in politics and political movements? What ethics can feminist friendships bring to the politics of worldbuilding? Through its reflections on some trends and trajectories of the autonomous women's movement this thesis will deliberate on these questions and tease out possibilities of an ethics of feminist friendships, and understand what it may offer in sketching a feminist political vision.

Politics of Emotional Reproduction

One of the key contributions of the feminist movement and feminist scholarship, as we will now discuss, has been in placing emotions at the heart of any deliberations on civic friendships. Feminist lens makes visible the affective tenets that lies at the heart of civic friendships that androcentrism overlooks. It becomes visible when we read Sappho's poetry about her circle of friends (Greene, 2023), through Alan Bray (2003) and Valerie Traub's (2002) queer readings of ritual friendships, courtly friendships during the Renaissance in alignment with the discourse of homosociality and sodomy and the way it was constructed in Renaissance society. It is articulated through Lorna Hutson's (2007) reading of the omission of Katherine Philips and her society of friends from the discourse of civic friendship as traced by Bray. Emotions have always played a critical role in envisaging civic friendship, it is only feminist readings that, accentuates and bring it to the forefront.

The women's movement has had its own journey into thinking politically about affect because of the history of negative association of women with emotionalism, passions,

irrationality and sentimentalism. . From Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of The Rights of Woman* (1792) disavowal of emotions in order to be taken seriously as a 'rational' voice to feminist scholarship on what emotions 'do' politically (Ahmed, 2017), the feminist engagement has been long, arduous, and varied. The feminist engagement with emotions emanates from their struggles against the gendered division of labour, social reproduction, women's disproportionate burden of emotional labour and care work. It is in this context, that feminist understanding of emotions has both pre-dated and been critical of the 'affective turn' and its prioritizing of affect over emotions, and overlooking of the 'social' conditions that produces and contains affect (Ahall, 2018).

Feminist engagement with the 'emotional' has also been a battle against censorship. women's emotions have been seen as excess and have been subjected to patriarchal controls. Women have always been told how to express or n how not to, what emotions to express and what to repress--thus an aspect of feminist politics has also been to identify these checkpoints and rally against them. It is also concerned with politicising rage (Lorde, 1981), passion (Raymond, 2001), and other 'dangerous feelings' that is thought to make women defiant, unruly, disobedient. Talking about emotions thus entails talking about its relationship with power, as also its relationship with the body. Emotions get framed and inscribed through the cultural, socio-political vectors that both produce and regulate them. Sara Ahmed (2014) alerts us to the cultural politics of emotions pointing out to the role of emotions in politicisation of subjects:

It is not that anger at women's oppression 'makes us feminists' such an anger already involves a reading of the world in a particular way, and also involves a reading of the reading, so identifying as a feminist is dependent upon taking that anger as the grounds for a critique of the world, as such. For, as I have already argued, emotions are what move us, and how we are moved involves interpretations of sensations and

feelings not only in the sense that we interpret what we feel, but also in that what we feel might be dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by US, but that come before us. Focusing on emotions as mediated rather than immediate reminds us that knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation; knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble, all those feelings that are crucially felt on the bodily surface, the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world. (Ahmed, 2004, p.171)

Women's friendships then need not be politicised as the primary identification of woman with woman is always already a feminist politics against heteropatriarchy. In talking about the politics of emotional reproduction, Alva Gotby (2023) unpacks how emotions participate in our 'continual remaking of the world' exposing the links of this remaking with an understanding of emotion as reproductive labour (Gotby, 2023). Drawing from the theorisation of Alexandra Kollontai (1920; 1923), Gotby (2023) identifies family as the primary site of heterosexual reproduction and posits that we can only explore new ways of being and new ways of reproducing emotions when we move beyond the family and marriage as a dominant form of sociability. Placing the question of labour at the heart of the discourse on emotional reproduction, Gotby (2023) stresses how the creation of a labouring subject in a capitalist society that has little concern in replenishing what it takes, reduces our ability to feel and act in ways that are not in conjunction with the dominant cultural norms. Any feeling that resists the idea of 'good life' that capitalism needs us to aspire, any rage that one feels at the exploitation emerging from the current organising of society is seen as a threat.

Resistance, in such cases, can only arise from other forms of needs and pleasures that are dissatisfied with the current organisation of the world, as she states, "Labour creates the immanent possibilities of its own refusal. From these possibilities, a queer reproduction can emerge based on the practices, needs, and pleasures of those currently most marginalised by

hegemonic notions of the good life” (Gotby, 2023, p. 23). It is in this quest for radical possibilities of a feminist politics that intends to remodel sociality beyond the boundaries of public and private, waged work and reproductive labour in family, that the queer potential of friendship emerges.

We find Gotby's hope of a radical politics of friendship anticipated in Adrienne Rich's reading of female friendships in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and The Lesbian Existence* (1980), where she links the trivialisation of women's friendships with the organisation of labour through family, marriage and capital that necessitates women to disavow their relationships with women to keep the heteropatriarchal capitalist system at work.

Gotby's conceptualisation of politics of emotional reproduction also equips us to understand of female friendships in the global south where women's emotional agency is regulated and labour organised through kinship structures. In exploring the emotional history through literature in 19th century India, or what he deems to be the era of ‘Indian awakening’, Rajat Ray (2003) marks how the changing terms of sociality brought about through India's tryst with ‘modernity’ ushers in newer registers of portraying man-woman relationship, and male friendships. What remains unsaid in this theorisation is how the overwhelming centrality of love in these heteropatriarchal understanding participates in unseeing women's friendship, in even recognizing the invisibilisation of affective female relationalities from this landscape of sociality.

The task of feminist scholarship then is to re-examine sociality in the context of organisation of labour, to unpack the political economy of love, and dislodge family from the centrality it occupies in reproducing heteropatriarchal norms. Any deliberation on feminist friendship not only begins with a critique of family and marriage, but also questions the current organisation of labour, sexual, and cultural norms that dictate how sociality is to be performed. Through

this questioning feminist friendships get constructed as a vehicle of all that is considered to be unruly, dangerous emotions that can be mobilised to resist and rebuild the world as it exists (Gotby, 2023). This politicisation of feminist friendships by deploying it for alternate worldbuilding in the face of patriarchal attempts to personalise, privatise individualise and thus also marginalise and trivialise these affective relationships of women s also moves friendship from the personal to the political, from the home to the realm of the civic (Gotby, 2023).

It is imperative to note that politicisation of emotions has at the heart of struggles for social justice. In examining the place of emotions in public culture, Martha Nussbaum (2013) comments how every ideology bank on public cultivation of emotions for its sustenance and legitimation. She demonstrates how institutions generate public emotions through the apparatuses of public artworks, monuments, memorials, songs, symbols, public festivals, images, rituals and ideals propagated through public education. Culling out the underlying moral subtext that all political principles propagate, she posits a moral rubric for cultivating public emotions in liberal democracy. In envisaging liberal democracy thus, she looks towards ways to transcend fear, shame and disgust '*to make the human loveable*' (Nussbaum 2013, p.16).

In this context, it becomes interesting to read Alexandra Kollontai's (1918) assertion of the need for constructing a new morality in the process of the building of the new society post revolution. While Nussbaum (2013) touches upon the need to redefine the idea of the political, she fails to push beyond the abstract basis of building a notion of social justice on the principles of love that would conquer social, racial stigma, without changing the material conditions of inequality that makes some humans not as 'loveable' as others. Where Nussbaum's liberalism stops short, Kollontai (1911) posits her notion of love comradeship on a politics of social transformation.

Feminist conceptualisation of women's civic friendships being the basis of revolutionary notion of social justice also compels one to look at care as an organizing principle. The feminist movement has demanded the onus of care usually thrust on women, be shifted from the individual to the collective, to organise care politically rather than personally. While the women's movement has had its own negotiations with organising care, queer politics being outliers to institutions of family and marriage have not only challenged the gendered nature of this labour, but also expanded political imaginings of care (The Care Collective, 2020).

In India too, while the women's movement, despite having a fraught relationship with family, has mostly negotiated with the institution, queer politics has placed the claims of friendship more centrally in the politics of care (Biswas, 2024; Shah, 2024). Although it is imperative to note that this politicisation of care in the queer movement has been different from above mentioned socialist queer critique of the West as this politicisation has been bereft of any critique of private property. The queer politicisation of care in India is more in alignment Richa Nagar's (2016) conceptualisation of 'radical vulnerability' being an intrinsic character of feminist friendships. Feminist friendships she believes are about imagined and lived processes through which one comes to love and trust despite the other's weaknesses and mistakes. Radical vulnerability, Nagar explains, "demands that alliances across starkly unequal locations open themselves to critique, suspicion, and possible injury embrace what I call a "politics without guarantees." (Nagar, 2016, p. 513). While the radical vulnerability allows the space to make mistakes, to allow weaknesses, to accept that each one of us are capable of "inflicting or supporting the violence that we stand critical of" (Nagar, 2016, p.510), feminist friendships, I argue, also pushes for an ethics that holds each other accountable while being radically vulnerable.

Interrogating the history of the autonomous women's movement through herstories of feminist friendships then also allows us to dig into the feminist struggle with the personal and

the political, the struggle to politicise the personal while consciously trying to avoid personalising the political. It also opens up feminist herstories of care that not only offers us the lens to question the current organising of labour, but also allows us to peep into the ideological fault lines and ruptures in friendships that played a critical role in shaping the movement. It brings to focus little moments that otherwise go unnoticed in the grand timeline of events, but nevertheless played an important role moulding the movement.

Feminist Historiography

... a feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations... (Sangari and Vaid, 1989, p. 2-3)

In 1977, Joan Kelly Gadol questioned the very premise of history writing in Europe through her essay 'Did women have a renaissance?'. Questioning the politics of periodisation, she brought to light how the conceptualisation of the European renaissance ignored the lived experiences of women. Tracing women's lived experiences Gadol points out that women in Middle Ages were better off than those in Renaissance as the period that is hailed as the 'Renaissance' while opening up possibilities for a particular class, actually reduced options for women (Gadol, 1977). She, therefore asks, if there was no renaissance for women, should renaissance completely overlook the woman question? Taking cue from Gadol's question, Uma Chakravarti posits that one of the tasks of feminist historiography, is to not just 'add and stir women' into the larger historical narrative, but to also gender the process of periodisation thereby questioning the the acceptable schemes of periodisation itself. Uma Chakravarti, in an essay titled, 'Of meta-narratives and 'master' paradigms: Sexuality and the reification of women in early India', also questions the very framework of determining 'transitional moments' in history. Challenging the politics of writing of history solely through 'events', the

rise and fall of empires and battles lost and won and the narratives and aspirations of Kings, she questions who the 'subjects' of history were? Tracing the framework of periodisation from the nineteenth century to twentieth century, she notes how the 'rise and fall thesis' came to be replaced by the mode of production thesis; none could challenge the very historical imagination that premised these frameworks from a gendered perspective. Thus, while history came to be written through the history of social formations, social formations came to be read solely through the mode of production, thereby completely overlooking the sphere of reproduction and remaining oblivious to gender. Feminist historiography, as Chakravarti understood, meant seeking to also ask:

If historical transitions were to be inclusive of the history of social reproduction what would social institutions and social dominance look like? How might periodisation change if we were to introduce gender as a marker of periodisation; further, if transitions are not merely about state power and who controls that, or the histories of production and resource mobilisation and governance, but about how people, especially women, experience—or do not experience—transitions in their own lives, how might the notion of transition be defined?' (Chakravarti, 2009, p. 2).

Gendering history then means to also factor in relations of reproduction. Feminist historians like Kumkum Roy (1994) and Jyoti Tyagi (2008) began bringing the sphere of reproduction into the process of determining social formations in history, bringing to focus study of the household, kinship structures, and thereby culling out a critique of Brahmanical patriarchy through its linkage of relationships between production, reproduction, labour and caste hierarchies. Writing an affective history of the movement through friendships then uses the social reproductive criteria to shed light on aspects of the movement that had hitherto been overshadowed by the grand narrative of events.

This 'retelling' of history that feminist historiography initiates also involve dealing with the messiness of history, interrupting the master narrative by asking the unasked questions. This retelling also means relooking at sources, finding new sources in both the personal and the political. Chakravarti (2009) notes one of the significant shifts in history writing in India comes in the mid-seventies as cultural patterns became an important vector in understanding social formations, in writing history. It is important to note that the 'affective turn' in history writing comes around the same time, and begins a similar relooking as historians of affect try to examine how emotions 'make' history (Boddice, 2014). Another significant challenge to the teleological narrativising of history came around the same time from the Annales school. Wanting to write 'total histories' a branch of the Annales school deployed the framework of 'mentalites' to tell the story of everyday life, to dig into the 'deep structures'¹⁰ that they believed played a critical role in moving history (Hutton, 1981). Drawing from the feminist understanding of the sex gender system, and patriarchy, as well as the tradition of history of *mentalites*, Rajat Ray (2003), as discussed in the above section, posits a history of emotion through a reading of gender and masculinity in literature during what was construed to be the Indian Awakening. Diverting from the history of mentalites tradition though, Roy examines how caste, class and gender play a critical role in shaping cultural norms of love, friendship. In attempting to tell a different history of the autonomous women's movement in India thus this thesis both situates itself and builds on these traditions of feminist historiography. It also moves away from the diachronic mode of writing history through events that have a lineal temporality, opting instead for a synchronic history of the autonomous women's movement through a history of friendship that eludes any form of temporal linearity existing rather in an affective continuum. In a context where women's friendships in South Asia is largely

¹⁰ By 'deep structures' the annales school referred to analysing all aspects that enable a 'total' understanding of history. They therefore categorised time as political time, social time and geographical time. However, to write a history of mind one needed to analyse all three categories and the role they placed in shaping history.

invisibilised, telling a story of a movement through that history also means redefining the political. It also means questioning the public/ private divide and establishing the politics of these herstories. It means relooking at history for stories that have been hitherto overlooked.

As an activist from Delhi confided during her interview:

It is very important to claim that history... but that history is not very easily accessible to us... and you will not get this in the traditional history... if you read bits and pieces. if you look at the friendship of Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh.... if you see Savitribai opening up her school for Tarabai Shinde, what is it if not friendship? It is an act of solidarity for somebody who was strong about voicing their views and who got shunned for voicing their view... I was reading the book, *Lady Doctor*, which is about the history of women entering the profession and it is a book of female friendships... Anandibai was able to study because she developed a friendship with a British woman and they wrote letters to each other, and she invited her to study in England and she travelled and stayed with her and became a doctor... I think Ramabai extended much friendship to people... we don't know much about this but there are these stories... but we need to value them... but when you read Therigatha poetry these things emerge...
(Personal Interview, 2022)

Feminist historiography thus refuses to shy away from the messiness of history. Works like, *We Were Making History* (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989) rewrites the history of the Telengana struggle through the personal narratives of women who had been a part of the struggle. Not only does this work place women as crucial 'agents of history' as discussed in earlier section, through their often incoherent, emotional, messy narratives, by bringing in relations of social reproduction, it also brings to surface an affective history of the movement. Similarly, Minakshi Menon and Urmila Pawar's book *We Also Made History* (2004), by recuperating narratives of Dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement attempts a similar

retelling that refutes the teleological framework with a 'history from below' (Guha, 2009).

Both these historical projects born out of "speaking and listening between generations of women" in creating conditions of solidarity that in turn serves as ground for a critique of the "privative modes of not listening, turning a deaf ear to, turning away from" (Guha, 2009, p.313) Recent works of feminist historiography of Indian communist movement (Punjabi, 2016; Loomba, 2019) attempt a similar retelling of communist history of India by bringing forth gendered histories of friendships, comradeships that had were hitherto been not listened to. This work follows that trajectory in its attempt to move away from the periodisation or campaign-based framework narrativising of the autonomous women's movement and historicising it instead through feminist herstories of the politics of friendship.

So how would a feminist historiography of the autonomous women's movement written through herstories of friendship look like? An activist from Bombay lays out the terrain:

In recorded history, you have to draw a timeline through events. Remembering political history through friendships, affects, if one tries it, a completely different history would be written. It always counts as personal history. For instance, this was the day these two women brought to the collective the recognition that two women could force a nationalised bank to open a joint account and the history was changed forever. It is a local history, but it is also a history of the collective, a history of the movement because it brought to the recognition that there is an alternative. (Personal Interview, 2018)

The task of feminist historiography then lies in not just focussing on women's voices, but also in redefining the political through deploying new methodologies, and alternative sources that can gender history with all its messiness.

Methodology

Feminist histories have mostly been built from marginal sources – scraps, scribbled notes, footnotes, struck out or officially censored words, discarded rough sheets. Piecing together feminist herstories means looking over the blueprints of homes which never got built or were torn down. It also means to look beyond the ‘public’ as the only repository of history, and delve into the private, the mundane, the discarded. This thesis therefore begins its primary enquiry by looking at friendship itself as a political archive constructed through personal interviews, letters, emails.

Friendship as a Political Archive

In ethnographic studies and studies about women’s lives under occupation, friendship offers a tool that helps to understand women’s resistance in ways that is perhaps otherwise difficult to trace. Marina de Regt talks about the role of friendship as an ethnographic research method that offers a more nuanced understanding of women’s lives in “severe political crises when conventional methods are not applicable” (Regt, 2015). Uzma Falak too writes about women’s friendships, intimacies and its insight on women’s resistance against Indian occupation in Kashmir, what she terms as ‘*vyostoan*’ – “a critical and affective female alliance and friendship, a companionship of resistance. Significantly, this alliance is hinged upon, I propose, a notion of witnessing... *Vyestoan* is an alliance of witnesses, in life, death, and beyond... This critical female alliance, I argue, is an alliance against several interlocked forms of domination... not hinged merely on a common pain or a common victimhood, but plural shared-ness of strengths, struggles, and resistance against oppression and its myriad structures and manifestations.” (Falak, 2018). This notion of feminist friendship as a way of bearing witness is further explored through Uma Chakravarti’s films *Yeh Lo Humaare*

Bayaan (And We Were There) (2021), *Durbar-e-Watan* (In The Court Of The People) (2020) and *Zameer* (The Voice Of Conscience) (2023) as she reconstructs political lives of women through friendships forged in prisons, through comradeships surviving prisons.

Friendship, despite being under theorised, has been one of the critical tools of recovering women's histories, in building the fragile feminist archive. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, in their introduction to the seminal volumes, *Women Writing in India* (1991), shared how in the absence of written literary archives friendship acted as an anchor in recovering women's writings. Where there were no manuscripts, friends and comrades recollected poems transmitted orally, friends pieced together scribblings from diaries, or cookbooks. This is explored further in Chapter 1. Where women have almost always been written out of history, memories have emerged to be alternate archives. Remembering friends and comrades therefore have also played a critical role in building feminist archives. This thesis too uses feminist friendships within the autonomous women's movement recovered through personal interviews, letters, emails to tell an alternate story of the movement.

Writing Friendship

Writing friendships becomes an important political act as it not only posits a whole new historical archive but also carves out a collective 'we' through intersubjective practices. Ritu Menon's edited volume *Making a Difference* (2011) brings this to the fore as each feminist memoir is as much a bearing witness to the movement as it is a recounting of stories of friendships, comradeships. Writing friendships thus becomes a political project in both what is written and how it is written. While we have explored the 'what' in the discussions before, unpacking the 'how' calls attention to the politics and ethics of feminist knowledge production. As an activist who has been involved with feminist publishing reflected, "so your role as feminist publisher comes out in approaching them from a position of solidarity and

not profit... you have to provide that nurturing and caring to give the confidence that you have things to say... you have to go that extra mile as feminist publisher... and that is also where friendship comes in a very interesting way..." (Personal Interview, 2020). Reflecting on the role of friendships in feminist publishing, she looks back at her experience of publishing books of feminist history also establishes a new example of feminist collaboration, of feminist ethics of authorship:

I think by taking that step it made us do similar books... the autobiography of Koteswaramma and the book *Sharir Ki Jankaari* made by rural women in Rajasthan it was brought to us as a collective book written by 75 people and the condition that was imposed on us was that you will never make a profit from it and you will carry all 75 names on the cover... and to this day we have kept that condition, we have never put in the bookshop as we saw it as a movement book... The other is Urmila Pawar's *We Also Made History*... here also solidarities are amazing... they wrote it, Alochona, a Pune based group translated it and gave it to us to publish... it just continues because women in the movement in different regions are asking to translate it to disseminate it there... so friendships are not only about telling your personal stories, but also these kind of stories...' (Personal Interview, 2022).

Feminist friendships have been an integral part of facilitating feminist knowledge productions. It is therefore no wonder that one of the foregrounding texts of gendered history in India, *Recasting Women* (1989) by Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari was born out of feminist friendships. Collaborative authorship and feminist knowledge production, also help to destabilize power equations through friendships and anti-capitalist practices, as an activist from Bombay shared:

There have been efforts in our spaces, apart from co-authoring... in any way if you occupy spaces in the real world where you have to match up... when we started ‘¹¹Margins’ we called ourselves an editorial collective and we published our names in small letters, in alphabetical order... these small things may be very naive but the thinking was there. We heard of Gibson-Gran who were feminist geographers who published as that with a hyphen to counter the first author, second author thing. We learnt from there. The whole little magazine culture of Calcutta people would refuse to reference. These things were in the air as an anti-capitalist, anti-intellectual form of writing production. In the subaltern marxist places and little magazine spaces these things were there but they were also male centered. But feminist work has raised these questions and are aware of it. In the process of becoming mentors to people we struggle as there are no roadmaps in formal academic spaces... to communicate to people who might become mentors to that acknowledgement is a non-negotiable.

(Personal Interview, 2019)

Exploring friendships as a political archive in revisiting histories thus pushes one to also unearth tensions and anxieties lurking beneath the very act of feminist writing and the politics of feminist knowledge production.

Yet, despite the rich repository that friendship holds as an archive, it has been mostly ignored as a methodological tool in Indian history writing. Pointing out this lacuna, Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt (2017) writes, how despite the overlooking of friendship as a key to opening up new histories, there exists a rich vocabulary for articulating friendship in the many Indian languages:

¹¹ A magazine focused on rethinking Marxism,

The variety of words in modern Hindi alone, which can be translated as ‘friend’ (*yaar, dost, seheli, saathi, sahayak, jaani, sanghrakshak, mitr, hamdard, bandhu, hamdam, habib, sayogi, ukht, akka, wali, bhai, jigari, rafiq, sajjan, sakhi, ‘aziz, nadim, hamsafar*, to name only the most common) is vast. These words, which derive from both Sanskritic and Persianate roots, suggest that conceptions of friendship were diverse and far-ranging in ‘traditional’ Indian society. They conjure a tantalizing history of complex intersections between the realm of friendship and other social institutions and practices including ideas of kinship, romantic and erotic love, theology, warrior ethics, gender relations and political alliances. These words intimate diverse bodily locations for the emotions aroused by friendship: the liver, the breath and the soul, and they underline specific moments when a friend is thought to be particularly useful: on a journey, among the family, during martial exploits and so on. (Ali and Flatt, 2017)

Historicizing a movement through feminist friendships therefore requires an enquiry into the politics of language, into vocabularies of friendship.

Politics of Language

The politics of language therefore becomes an important starting point in any historical investigation of friendship. Janice Raymond (2001) too, while talking about the genealogy of women's friendships through what she terms ‘gyn/ affection’ delves into the changing vocabulary of female friendships. This history of gyn/ affection she believes also points to a history of rebellious ‘loose women’ as the very act of looking at female friendships as primary, in putting each other first - in order of importance, in claims of affection, attention and activity - becomes registered as an act of resistance against hetero-reality. She observes, “One starting point is the etymology of the word hetair (or hetaera), which originally meant

companion, most often companion to other women and only later sexual companion to men. The history of loose women is also related to the history of prostitution. And, finally, it can be found in the woman-identified culture produced by Sappho and her companions on Lesbos.” (Raymond, 2001, p. 82). We find resonances of this history of women’s intimacies being read as defiance in the eighteenth-century coinage of ‘romantic friendships’, in the nineteenth century ‘Boston marriages’, in the coming out of the term ‘lesbianism’ in the twentieth century (Faderman, 1981). Raymond (2001) also notes a resonance of the same notion being felt through the nineteenth century Chinese marriage resisters. The word ‘comrade’ on the other hand, predates use by socialists and communists. In sixteenth century, the word seems to first appear in romance languages denoting one who shares room with another (Dean 2019). Jodi Dean traces the journey of the word from its Spanish ‘*camarada*’ meaning someone close enough to eat and share house with another man to its French connotation where the term was originally feminine and referred to barracks or room shared by soldiers. Dean opines:

Sharing a room, sharing a space, generates a closeness, an intensity of feeling and expectation of solidarity that differentiates those on one side from those on the other. Comradeship is a political relation of supported cover. Interested in comrade as a mode of address, carrier of expectations, and figure of belonging in the communist and socialist traditions, I emphasize the comrade as a generic figure for the political relation between those on the same side of a political struggle. Comrades are those who tie themselves together instrumentally, for a common purpose: If we want to win—and we have to win—we must act together. (Dean, 2019, pp. 10-11)

Tracing the history of the word ‘friend’ again Nick Montgomery and Carl Bergman (2017) stumbles on the deep-rooted connection between friendship and a collective notion of freedom. They state:

“Freedom” and “friend” share the same early Indo-European root: *fri-, or *pri-, meaning “love”. This root made its way into Gothic, Norse, Celtic, Hindi, Russian, and German. A thousand years ago, the Germanic word for “friend” was the present participle of the verb freon, “to love.” This language also had an adjective, *frija-. It meant “free” as in “not in slavery,” where the reason to avoid slavery was to be among loved ones. Frija meant “beloved, belonging to the circle of one’s beloved friends and family.” ... A few centuries later, freedom became untied from connectedness. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes imagined freedom as nothing more than an “absence of opposition” possessed by isolated, selfish individuals. (Montgomery and Bergman, 2019, pp. 59-60)

The women's liberation movement in the 1970s premised its foundation through the idea of sisterhood. The etymology of the word, though, predates the women's movement. The Online Etymological Dictionary traces the idea of sisterhood back to the 14th century when the word deriving from ‘susterhede’ conveyed the meaning of a state of being or having a sister, sisterly relationship. By the 15th century, however, ‘society of sisters’ was common parlance usually referring to religious order. It was the women's liberation movement in the 1960-70s that politicised sisterhood to preach collective action of women on the basis of a notion of common oppression. The notion of ‘sisterhood’ by propagated bourgeoisie white feminists have been vehemently criticised from Black feminists (Lorde 1984) for glossing over the specificities of oppression that race, class, sexuality brought upon the category of women. While the notion of universal sisterhood has been sufficiently challenged, ‘sister’ still remains a political term in the women's liberation movement. In India too, ‘sister’ travelled into the women's movement. ‘Behen’ or ‘bhagini’ became a common way of addressing women connoting both a political as well as a familial relationship, thereby declaring an affective bond, a relationship based on a commonality of oppression. Tracing the vocabulary

of 'sakhbhava' or woman to woman bonding, Giti Thadani writes how the nominations of the word 'sakhi' (female friend) historically included an erotic dimension that today's secular writing of history refuses to take note of, "Words such as bhagini, sakhi, jami have lost their former sexual, cosmosocial meanings and are simply translated as 'sister' and 'woman friend'. Most Hindi-to-Hindi dictionaries do not have any explicit word to connote lesbian sexuality." (Thadani, 2016, p. 77). She locates the word 'jami' to bear the connotation of 'kindred spirit' or the concept of dual sisters, thereby representing a social/ kinship formation based on what she terms to be 'gynefocal arrangement'. Similarly, Rigveda mentions dual feminine deities, 'dyava' - dual mothers who are assumed to be the driving principle of generic feminine kinship system - a kinship structure, she argues, not based on the concept of children or woman as property but one based on the nurturing aspect of collective motherhood. 'Sakhiyani' again, she felt denoted two women living together in friendship (Thadani, 2016)¹². While the delinking of the erotic from the idea of female bonding in the later period formed the dominant discourse in secular history writing, cultures of friendship remained despite being pushed to the margins. She points out:

Two women school teachers in Gujarat entered into a friendship pact called maitri karar, an older Gujrati tradition. Another traditional marriage that I was witness to in 1991 comes also from a tradition of 'women's friendship'. This is part of an old tribal culture. The two tribal women celebrated their friendship by a ritual where rice wine is drunk from each other's glass, a mango is shared and feet are mutually washed by each other. The tribal deity is asked to bless the friendship and not to cause strife in their relationship. Consequently, they become sahiyas - lifelong companions. There are no gender masks requiring that one must play the male role and one the feminine.

¹² This thesis has used sahelī, friendship and comradeship sometimes interchangeably. However, the idea of sahelī has been referred to as the critical relationality of women's friendship.

The emphasis is on mutuality, reciprocity and companionship. The erotic element, too, is embedded in a symbolism of mutuality, indicated through the sharing of the mango, drinking of wine from the other's glass and reciprocally washing each other's feet. However, I was informed that this tradition is no longer positively regarded in their villages, and that they preferred to live in the city which provided an anonymous setting. (Thadani, 2016, p. 108)

These explorations of the politics of language indicate political cues through which female friendship has been read, perceived, understood and politicised in culture. One of the starting points of enquiry into the history of the autonomous women's movement too begins by re-examining the journey from Sakhi Samiti to Saheli¹³. This is explored in detail in Chapter 3. The journey of the autonomous women's movement is therefore also marked through a changing feminist vocabulary. Mary John traces this journey of feminist vocabulary in India and indicates three important moments that shaped the feminist episteme: the colonial period where the 'woman' was marked through the framework of lack, backwardness, oppression - conditions that could change because they were rendered legible as social beings; the nationalist period that put posited a cultural discourse where the 'woman' became the epicenter of all debates and the ground on which the idea of India was being carved; and finally, the 'post-colonial' in the 1980s where the category comes to be framed through contestations of identity, and the neoliberal onslaught (John 2014). Reconstructing the history of the autonomous women's movement then also provokes an investigation of how these epistemes directed feminist understanding of friendship, comradeship, solidarity. It is in this journey from 'saheli', 'saathin', 'behen', 'comrade', 'maitri' to 'allies', 'collaborators',

¹³ Saheli in English means 'Friend'. It should be noted that the word 'saheli' has been used in this paper as a political relation denoting feminist friendships. When used with a capital 'S', Saheli refers to the Delhi based autonomous feminist collective.

‘cases’, ‘queer kinships’, ‘feminist friendships’ that a different history of the movement can be etched. Friendship as a political archive opens up these journeys, stories, t anecdotes and informal histories that have hardly ever made their way to the grand narrative of the feminist movement in India, yet hold the door to a new understanding of the texture of the movement.

Methodological Concerns

So how does one tell the story of a movement through a vector that is so slippery, so malleable, so fragile an archive? It is important here to reiterate that this thesis makes no claim to tell THE history of the autonomous women's movement in India. As discussed before, the history of the autonomous women's movement has been documented thus far through various means. Yet, documenting every aspect of a movement that has been so varied in terms of its location, practice, and political grounding, is still an impossible task. What this thesis attempts to do then is to alter some of the frameworks through which the movement has so far been documented, understood and discussed. While the existing histories of the movement has focused more on the question of autonomy, on the campaigns, on the movement's relationship with the state, and the question of NGOisation, the lens of friendship opens up newer questions of organizational structure, mechanisms, questions of care, and solidarity that brings to surface aspects of the movement that had hitherto remained relatively unseen. It is further important to mention that it has not been possible to bring the whole purview of the movement under study in this thesis. Instead, it offers a slice of history of the movement through a study of select autonomous collectives and their functioning from 1980s to contemporary times.

The autonomous women's movement has had its own unique journeys in different cities as per its local political landscape. Every city, every town has had its own flavour, own texture

of organising, its own way of doing politics. Keeping this vastness in mind, this thesis focuses primarily on two autonomous collectives, Saheli and Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), in Delhi and Bombay to seek answers to the primary research questions this thesis poses. Both Saheli and FAOW have carried with them a history of more than 44 years and are among the handful of collectives that are still active in the movement even today. Both came into being post the Mathura protests and are still standing strong, resisting NGOisation and other forms of institutionalisation. It therefore becomes critical to locate this study around these two collectives that have been witness to the ups and downs and swerves of the movement, and still remain critical actors bearing within them the memories and legacies of the movement.

The task of reconstructing feminist herstories of the autonomous women's movement through the politics of friendship primarily demands the building of that archive as discussed earlier. Since much of this history remains undocumented, lurking as anecdotes, stories, revisiting this history involves recovering oral testimonies from the very people who have lived this history. Personal interviews of 20 activists from Bombay and Delhi associated with FAOW and Saheli, 2 group interviews of 4 FAOW members from Bombay and a focus group discussion with Saheli members form the primary texts for this thesis. Apart from members of Saheli and FAOW, I have also interviewed activists who have been part of anti-caste struggles, Muslim women's movement, queer movement, so as to better understand the interactions between them. These interviews have been mostly unstructured, freewheeling with conversations ranging from personal political journeys in the movement and the role friendship played in it, friendship dynamics with collectives, organising structure of collectives, questions of leadership, decision making to more personal stories of friendships, comradeships, dissonances, ruptures, care networks, imaginings of collective living. While seeking out these personal histories have been a political task of this thesis, it becomes

imperative to also lay bare the socio-political location of the researcher so as to contextualise both the seeing, hearing and the findings.

As a student of Women's Studies, my first encounter with the women's movement in India has been through academia. I had not been unexposed to the political field owing to my belonging to campuses that have been the hub of student politics and my own familial history, but the exposure had been largely around left politics where feminism remained more of a personal articulation born out of personal experiences. It had therefore been the classrooms and hallways of Women's Studies that brought the personal and the political together. Yet, even that academic encounter with the women's movement had largely been through the campaigns, and official and published history taught in class. Although 'seeing' the movement through the lectures in classrooms offered a partial view of the movement, it sparked enough curiosity to draw one fully towards it.. The discussions, debates, 'side talks', chats in the women's studies conferences offered a different 'way of seeing' that I found lacking in the pages of the documented history taught. My own increasing involvement with the women's movement and the interactions with feminist friends, comrades found along the way offered a deeper understanding of not only the picture of the movement, but also its texture, flavour and colour. My involvement with the trans, queer movement further sparked questions on marriage, family, care that I had not found answered in the available histories of the movement. My dual position as a student trained in women's studies, and a worker in the struggle on the streets pushed me to ask questions about the movement that existing histories of the movement failed to answer. My belonging to an autonomous feminist collective in Kolkata also made me an 'insider' who despite not being an actor in the 80s and 90s considered to be they could be seen as someone who was an inheritor of the legacies, a feminist friend, a comrade of the women in the movement now—but also perhaps of those no longer around—or those who have left the movement or those who continue in it. This is the

synchronicity of affective history—the present bears and shores up the past—bound together affectively through friendships. This unique positionality as both friend and interviewer of some of the respondents often broke the formality of the interviews as conversations flowed with ease and an unspoken understanding of trust. Since most of the interviews were of a very personal nature, the familiarity and friendships allowed respondents to open up about dissonances, heartbreaks, vulnerabilities more easily. Interviews also often broke the formal ‘researcher’/ ‘researched’ hierarchy as many of the sessions became more of a sharing between friends, an exchange of experiences than one sided knowledge ‘extraction’, transforming the conversation into a collaborative quest for answers by fellow travellers that individually neither person had. While not being known to some respondents meant some of the interviews were more guarded, my positionality as a fellow activist often broke the barriers of unfamiliarity. Despite being strangers some of the respondents would open up about their critiques of the movement through the trust bestowed on a comrade, on someone they felt had the same stakes in the movement as them. This trust also bestowed a responsibility on me to read the dissonances politically and represent the movement responsibly. Furthermore, being an ‘insider’ also meant being in the know about some of the inter-personal dynamics within the movement. It meant knowing how to traverse the political field. More importantly, it meant knowing where to ‘look’, what to ‘look’ at, and what to look out for. This knowledge offered me immense insights that guided not only the framing of my questions, but also trained my eyes to find needles in the haystack.

While these oral narratives formed one of the primary texts for this thesis, the history is also constructed through posters, conference proceedings, meeting minutes, letters, leaflets, pamphlets, reports, perspective documents found in personal archives of friends and comrades. A large part of the archival documents has been collected from the Centre for Education and Documentation archive in Bangalore that housed a rich collection of

documents from the women's movement right from the 1970-2000s. The Saheli archive tucked carefully in the cupboards in the collective's office above a flyover in Delhi is another rich source of historical documents that has survived fire, and several comings and goings.

The history of FAOW on the other hand has been more undocumented with most documents remaining haphazardly spread amongst many of their members. Yet, where official archives failed, personal friendships, comradeships came in to bridge gaps as friends opened up their personal collections, allowing me to look with them into the dusty cardboard boxes that housed a large part of their political lives. These collective sifting through archive moments too sparked more conversations as the collective looking triggered recollections of histories that perhaps the formal interviews were unable to address.

As discussed before, written memoirs formed another important entry point to this history. Interestingly here too the 'looking' needed to go beyond traditional written memoirs, essays. Obituaries, written by friends about friends in the movement remembering their contributions offered a new insight into understanding the movement through friendships. While the official written histories consciously kept the personal, the emotional at bay, the space of obituaries helped accommodate the emotional into the history writing. Similarly, while posters, leaflets, pamphlets, conference reports kept the emotional away, songs and photographs brought in the passion thereby offering cues on how to read those histories. The daily diaries of Saheli, personal emails, and letters shared by friends and comrades filled the lacuna and provided a more unguarded 'feel' and a more vibrant 'pulse' of the movement. It is these informal stories and conversations that also make palpable cultures of care that otherwise eludes the grasp of official histories. It makes visible how intricately conversations on feminist friendship are linked with conversations on social reproduction.

Since a large part of this thesis is built from oral histories, anecdotes, informal stories, it is important to also bear in mind the treachery of memory. The Politics of remembering also lies in who remembers what, in what detail and how much, and it is also in this remembering and forgetting that one can gauge what these friendships meant to people. It is imperative to state though that this thesis will draw from the history of the existing histories of the movement, but will focus primarily on events that though temporally separated bear affective resonance and thereby build a continuum. It is also with this intention of not distracting attention from the affective historiography of the movement, the diachronic event history of the movement has been added in the appendix of the thesis and has not been kept in the main text. It is these experimentations and explorations of different methods that then help build the ‘fragile archive’ of feminist herstories and enable us to piece together a different history of the movement - a history that not only helps us understand our past legacies but also offers new insights into building solidarities in the present moment.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1: Friendship in Political Philosophy

This chapter situates friendship studies in the history of political philosophy. It examines how friendship has been theorised in Western political praxis and philosophy. It reflects on why the post-world war era initiated a new search for human sociality. It also ponders on why the Aristotlean idea of friendship and its connection to social justice and democracy has been so defining in terms of western theorisations of friendship. This chapter will unpack how the idea of political friendship has been explored by Hannah Arendt (1998), Jacques Derrida (1997) and Foucault (1984). It will explore the androcentric historiography of friendship and reflect on the exclusion of women and their friendships from histories of friendship. Accounts

of women's friendships has largely been privatised and individualised, removed from the realm of the political, found most often in literary descriptions rather than in political philosophy. This chapter demonstrates how questioning this omission of women has been a critical task of feminist politics and also the objective of the thesis. This chapter also looks at the contradictions between the liberal ideas of friendship and the radical possibilities of these affective relationships between women entails. Critiquing the universalist way friendship has been theorised primarily through the idea of male friendships in the west, this chapter explores what a decolonial politics of friendship would do to the idea of the political. Finally, it explores into the revolutionary idea of friendship that not only politicises friendship but also uses it as a tool to challenge the existing social and political dispensations.

Chapter 2: Another World is Possible: Party, Communes, and The Comrade Woman

This chapter unpacks the histories of the emergence of the comrade woman in the political landscape of India through a series of the Communist Party led mass movements that had women at the forefront. The history noted here will be synchronic than diachronic as it will not concentrate as much on the temporal landscape as it will on the echoes of affect/friendship felt across these movements. Tracing the history of women's political participation in India from the nationalist struggle, through the rebellions of Tebhaga, Telangana, the militant worker's strikes in Bombay to the Naxalite insurgency in the 1970s, this chapter will read this history through the exploration of women workers' subjectivities, their struggles of social reproduction in communes, underground shelters and sites of resistance, the promises and disillusionment of these experiments and attempt to cull out a politics of women's comradeships. However, it is imperative to note that while the large participation of women in these struggles made it possible for women to enter the political arena. It is only recent scholarship (Custers, 1987; Panjabi, 2016; Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989; Loomba, 2019; Roy, 2012; Roy, 2011; Roy, 2019) that has enabled a feminist reading the politics of care,

friendship, comradeship that had nurtured these movements. This chapter reads the history of these years through the ‘eye’ of the recent feminist scholarship. The objective of this chapter, though, is not to retell these histories, but rather to revisit them with a focus on feminist comradeships and the legacies they left for the the autonomous women’s movement in the years to come. This chapter is more of a pre-history to help contextualise the autonomous women's movement.

The chapter uses testimonies, stories, anecdotes, women's lived to interrogate the emergence of the new woman through communist struggles which provided a site for moulding women's political belonging, comrade relations and their political subjectivities. The chapter explores the new family constructed through Communist ideology and praxis-- through experiences of reading Engels and Kollontai as well as those of living collective lives in communes, and underground shelters. The chapter examines the imagination of care that is fostered through comradeship, shared living arrangements and collectivisation of reproductive work. It also problematises how the new family so forged tended to replicate the template of the patriarchal family. Finally, it demonstrates how feminist comradeships offered women a leverage to raise issues that might otherwise be subsumed under the grand narrative of class struggle offering a vision of comradeship as an ethical relation to hold each other accountable to certain principles. Women’s critique of inadequate comradeships generates a critique and articulates a need for a different kind of movement—giving birth to the autonomous women’s movement with gender equality as not a post-revolutionary deferred goal —but as a priority. This created its own idea and ideal of women’s primary relationship with each other in movement—as sahelis rather than comrades.

Chapter 3: Sahelis in Resistance and Ruptures: The Making of Feminist Friendships in The Autonomous Women's Movement

This chapter explores how the betrayal of the idea of comradeship pushed women in the communist movements to seek a different form of relationality, leading them to the idea of *saheli*. The chapter thus probes into the ethics and politics of being a *saheli*--what it meant to be a 'saheli', who was the 'saheli' and who could and could not be the 'saheli. It shows how being a *saheli* becomes a political relation, an expression of political belonging, which in the absence of formal organisational structures in the collectives through which the movement functioned, becomes the mobilising factor that holds the Indian autonomous women's movement together. The chapter examines the problematic of structure and structurelessness in the movement collectives and the anxieties it generates regarding friendship cliques and lobbies which then becoming vectors of power laying down an invisible structure. While these invisible structures constructed informally through friendships are limiting for some women, it also makes for porosity and flexibility and the dismantling of hierarchies. It is this ad hoc nature of the movement that allows space for friendships, in both its liberal and revolutionary manifestations, to become a central organising force in the movement. The chapter finally looks at the ruptures, dissonances, heartbreaks caused by breakdown of friendships within the movement caused by external factors such as emerging identity movements as well as internal relationship dynamics. It will look into the ways the personalised political and the fragile 'we' forged through friendships becomes the reason for the movement to stand up to neoliberal forces and identitarianism as well as for its partial surrender to these forces. Lastly, this chapter explores and the project of feminist worldbuilding.

Chapter 4: Revisiting Care Through Politics of Friendship

This chapter dwells on feminist exploration of social reproduction, and revisits the Marxist feminist discourse on care. This chapter interrogates the sphere of care, and argue the possibilities that a radical politics of friendship holds in building resistance to neoliberal defining and organizing of labour. The first section looks at the public/ private divide and its historical implication in organizing of care. The second section engages with Marxist feminist interventions in this discourse. The third section examines the experiments, exploration, discussions, reimaginings of care that the autonomous women's movement threw open in India. It engages with the ways friendship networks emerged through the became informal support systems for those living outside familial and marital structures. It also probed into the ways these support systems when formalised reinforced barriers of caste, class that had previously been consciously broken by the movement. This chapter traces the journey of politicisation of care in the autonomous women's movement through building adhoc shelters and open homes to the service providing model of NGOs in the 1990s. It also engaged with questions of claims of care, and deliberated on how a radical politics of care put forth by a revolutionary idea of friendship meant asserting claims and opening up of possibilities of challenging the very organisation of sociality. Finally, it is through this opening up of possibilities through a radical politics of care that an ethics of friendship could be built.

Conclusion: Towards an Ethics of Friendship

This chapter looks into the collective 'we' that the autonomous women movement creates through private and public manifestations of friendship and politics of care. Delving into the making, unmaking and remaking of the fragile 'we' so forged through care, this chapter explores the ethics of '*dosti nibhaana*' (performing/ living friendship). It unpacks conceptualisation of ideas of friendship, comradeship, sisterhood, and solidarity as performed

and lived through the journey of the autonomous women's movement and its interactions with the neoliberalism and growing identitarianism within the movement. The next section looks into the impact of institutionalization of the movement and the debates on intersectionality to engage with feminist investments in different conceptual frameworks as it tries to offer an easy fix to remake the collective 'we'. It will also attempt to understand how these debates and insights can help understand the current crisis of the movement. The final section engages with scholarship on solidarity, allyship and friendship to thereby build towards feminist reimaginings of a communicative 'we'. It will also try to see how the Ambedkarite idea of maitri can help us understand feminist friendship as an ethical relationship that can open up possibilities for building a new morality based on a revolutionary vision of feminist worldbuilding.

Chapter 1

Friendship in Political Philosophy

The neoliberal onslaught in our home and hearth, work and thoughts, lives and loves has piqued a new interest in a search for an alternate political order, for a different world. This quest for a new political vision has also propelled a search for new prototypes of political relationships. Friendship, being an outlier to these social relationships of market exchange, being outside property relations, has become a new point of interest in envisioning social justice and rethinking democracy. This interest, however, is not new. As an elective affinity, that carries within it the values of reciprocity, as also something beyond that, it distinguishes itself from other relationships of exchange. The reciprocity is not obligatory as it is in kinship. Unlike erotic love which insulates individuals from social involvement by locking them in a private coupling, friendship opens up possibilities of cementing and sustaining the existing social fabric. However, it also carries the potential of disrupting the existing order to create new worlds with a shared vision with friends. Friendship is thus both valued as an anchor and restricted and surveilled as a threat to the social order. As an extra-institutional bond, friendship at its core demands a recognition of the 'other' as an equal in all respects. Friendship between unequals thus becomes impossible unless the self transcends its social role. In a class-structured society, personal friendship is often used to obfuscate the structural inequality and thereby manage the emotions of the oppressed. Yet, the strife for democracy, for equality, that lies at the heart of the values of friendship implies that a society founded on real friendships would mean abolition of private property. It is these possibilities of a politics of friendship that has helped it to capture the imagination of both liberal and revolutionary ideations of worldbuilding.

This chapter will primarily unpack these ideations by historicising and politicising friendship within the rubric of political philosophy. Instead of looking at friendship as a self-evident concept, this chapter will look into the ways theorisation of friendship has evolved in particular ways in different geographical and historical contexts, acquiring an important role in defining political and social systems of the West. This theorisation, however, following the norms of all ‘good philosophy,’ has been blind to concrete experiences and the abstract conceptual scheme through which friendship has been theorised has remained ‘gender neutral’ and universalist. Shefali Moitra in her book *Feminist Thought* (2002) speaks of this bias identifying philosophy's ‘omission’ or systematic exclusion of women's lived experiences as being rooted in its disinterest in concrete instances. Feminist philosophy, Moitra (2002) notes, being in the margins of the discipline, has insistently questioned this androcentrism, this bias. Drawing from this tradition of questioning the androcentrism lying in the very episteme of conceptualising and theorising friendships, this thesis posits the need to gender the theorisation of friendship in political philosophy and locate it in specific regional contexts in order to see how it would then affect our reading of history and the evolving political structures, our ideas of democracy and civil society in ways distinct from the way male friendships have been understood to shape politics in the West and in India. It is in this context that this thesis puts forth how a study of women's friendship also brings to light an alternate historiography and a different politics. Understanding the politics of feminist friendships would involve an engagement with this interaction between the self and the other that friendship initiates and an ability to situate it within the dialectic of relations of production and social reproduction, of the public and the private, the political and the personal. Writing an alternate history of the autonomous women's movement through politics of friendship requires a tracing of the historiography of friendship in political theory, and the way women's lived experiences have altered it. One of the central tasks of this thesis is to

situate friendship studies within historical contexts. This involves critically examining the positionality of women in this landscape. By posing this question, the thesis highlights the possibilities that a Marxist feminist analysis of the politics of friendship can offer and open up new avenues for revolutionary worldbuilding.

Theorising Friendship: Friendship as Politics, Citizenship and Democracy

As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of friendship being an organising force in constructing the polity and defining notions of justice and democracy dates back to the classical Greek and Roman world. Yet, serious academic engagement on the politics of friendship and what it means to understand social and political institutions through friendship began gaining ground only post Second World War. The knowledge of Auschwitz and its implications, the loss of a dream through the fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union chipped away at the idealism required to ideate new futures and worlds. A need was felt to revisit the ethics of human relationships and the ideals of social justice. It is in this context that friendship emerges as an anchoring point, as Western theorists like Hannah Arendt (1958), Jacques Derrida (1997) and Michel Foucault deliberate on the politics of friendship. While both Arendt in *The Human Conditions* (1998) and her essay 'On Humanity in Dark Times' (1970), and Derrida in *Politics of Friendship* (1997) theorise friendship from different social locations, both revisit and build on the Aristotelian conception of friendship, delving into the interactive space friendship holds for the self and the 'other', the role it plays in binding society together with a common sense of justice, and the possibilities it holds in building democracy. Foucault, however, writing as a queer person during the AIDS crisis in a state that refused to acknowledge the humanity of queer lives, and thereby having to fend for alternate support networks, stumbled on the politics of friendship through the lens of queer

lives. For decades to come, these theorisations have played a critical role in framing the politics of friendship in political philosophy, as well as in laying out the parameters of a historiography of friendship.

Writing as a Jew in a post-holocaust world, Hannah Arendt's search for a new guarantee for the safeguarding of human dignity pushes her towards the political theory of '*amor mundi*¹⁴' or 'love for the world' (Arendt, 1998). Derrida (1997) finds in friendship the potential to shake up traditional forms of historicity and envision a democracy that is 'to come'. Both quests, however, lead Arendt (1998; 1970) and Derrida (1997) to Greek social institutions and practices that initiated a thinking of politics through the lens of friendship. Revisiting Aristotle's conceptualisation of *philia*¹⁵ and friendship for the 'good'¹⁶ in *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004), they politicise friendship by probing why equality and justice is co-constitutive of friendship. Arendt's theory of '*amor mundi*' is based on the political capacity of friendship (Arendt, 1998; Arendt, 1970). Friendship, for her, becomes a space of in betweenness, what lies between the private and the public, the familial and the political, the religious and the civic. Nixon notes, friendship in her thought emerges not just as a way of doing politics, but as a "condition necessary for the survival of politics as she understood it" (Nixon, 2015, p. 7). Being witness to a time when both dissent and difference was criminalised, Arendt while pondering about the possibility of friendship between a German and a Jew under the Third Reich, in her essay 'Men in Dark Times' (1970) looked back to the ancient Greeks who

¹⁴ It is interesting to flag here that classical antiquity and Christian theology propagated the idea of *contemptuous mundi* or contempt for the world and worldliness in the context of stoic philosophy as well as a turn to love for God. Arendt turns this trope on its head as a way of calling attention to the material and looking at love for the world as a primary step towards envisioning social justice.

¹⁵ *Philia*, commonly translated as friendship, forms one of the central concepts of Aristotle's political thought connecting his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004) with *Politics* (1905). Horst Hutter (1978) reads the Aristotelian idea of *philia* as '*affect tempered by the rational faculty of man*'.

¹⁶ Aristotle articulated the good as the purpose or end of all beings.

firmly believed that “only the constant interchange of talk united citizens in a polis” (Arendt, 1970, p. 24). She was drawn to the importance Greek philosophy gave to the idea of friendship among citizens being essential to the wellbeing of the city, and the essence of this friendship, for her lay in discourse. Arendt writes, “However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows” (Arendt, 1970, pp. 24-25). The act of being friends thus becomes the training ground for political interaction as it is what makes us humanise the world. In her reading of Arendt, Shin Chiba (1995) locates Arendt's quest for human guarantee in what she notes to be a search for a *new vinculum* or a new public bond that would “bring people into a common mode of living without any recourse to more-or-less naturalistic bonds such as family, ethnicity, race, nation, the Volk, religion, or a shared origin of humanity” (Chiba, 1995, p. 508). This search for a new public bond makes Arendt (1998) reject love for its tendency to form inner circles of lovers which were inherently private, closely knit, and homogenous, excluding the outside world, the public, the political. Friendship, instead, becomes the bond that bears the possibility to bring people into a common mode of living without any recourse to more or less naturalistic bonds of family, ethnicity, race, nation, religion or a shared origin of humanity. As she searches for an authentic bond through which groups with different specific interests can come together to form a political identity out of diverse loyalties and interests, she finds in friendship that unique discursive sphere that can mediate between the private and public and thereby constitute political activity as well as humanness. Although Arendt's political thought has been both in argument and in conjunction with European liberal humanism, her experiences of being persecuted by an ideal that had no space for difference made her depart from Aristotle's notion of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004) based on sameness and homogeneity, demanding due recognition and respect for differences and heterogeneity, citing

pluralism to be the foundational basis for all friendships (Nixon, 2015). Based on a hatred of a world where people are treated inhumanely, her notion of friendship therefore embodies a politics of world building – establishing a common vision world built on an understanding of friendship as a political identity. Friendship therefore, in her political thought was the resistance to what she termed as ‘totalitarianism’ as all things that Arendt believed were fundamental to friendship - “the continuity of relationship, mutuality of commitment and recognition of plurality” were negated by totalitarianism (Nixon, 2015, p. 28). She called for a championing of ‘public happiness’ and ‘political freedom’ in the coming together of free, equal citizens in collective action. She believed ‘public happiness’ to be the bedrock of friendship, but the attainment of this happiness or the forging of friendships while premised on equality, did not acknowledge the material conditions that would be necessary to motivate free and equal citizens to participate in democracy. ‘Public happiness’ in Arendt’s liberal utopia then merely becomes an aspiration predicated on individualism, consumerism and privatization, as we see now packaged in neoliberal times. What Arendt posits then by looking at collective activity oriented towards the production of radically new beings is an ethics of friendship that is founded on a liberal idea of friendship that merely calls for a kinder world without causing much of a dent in the class structured society.

Arendt's concept of friendship as a cornerstone of worldmaking, spoke of the ‘friend’ as an unmarked, ungendered category, in the tradition of civic humanism, overlooking the histories and politics of female friendships. However, her own personal friendships speak of what Arendt’s political treatise shies away from, bringing to light the dialectic of the personal and the political that seep into writing/theorising of friendship. Letters, postcards, telegrams document her passionate friendships with women, of which perhaps the one with Mary McCarthy is the best known. Brutally uprooted from her home in 1933, having to leave without papers, stateless, friendships became Arendt’s home, and refuge. Yet, friendships also

tested her politics, tore her apart, sometimes put her back together. Her report on the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 1963) had lost her many friends, some of whom rejected their relationships with Arendt publicly. Amidst the uncertainty and precarity of exiled existence, Arendt longed for the promise of enduring friendships wherein friends understood each other “not only as friends, but also as persons with complex histories that include all the multi-layered unpredictability and discontinuity of the human condition” (Nixon, 2015, p. 50). Arendt's long-lasting friendship with Mary McCarthy, was one of her anchors that not only shaped and sustained her, but also opened up the possibilities of subversion that female friendships held in a patriarchal world. Nixon (2015) describes their friendship as ‘workmanly’ between two women trying to navigate otherwise male-dominated professional fields, and make sense of their identities as women, and a Jew in the case of Arendt, and Catholic for Mary. Their correspondence with each other not only reveal the development of their philosophical, political ideations in all its rawness, but also bring to light their vulnerabilities, fears and a tenderness that articulates a politics of care that feminists in later days would seek to explore as a condition of female friendship (Byom, 2009). It is therefore no surprise that upon Arendt's death, Mary took on the daunting task of editing and completing her final work, *The Life of the Mind* (1981) as a ‘duty of friendship’ (Nixon, 2015). It was their life experiences that had made them lose faith in kinship, family or marriage, but rather invest in friendships, in building communities and republics of friendships, and in doing so Arendt creates a praxis of friendship whose politics is considerably at odds with her theory of friendship.,

Writing in the later part of the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida lectures on the *Politics of Friendship* (2006) at a time when the world is yet again grappling with ideas of citizenship,

and ideals of democracy. Mulling over the lines ‘o my friend, there is no friend’¹⁷, Derrida cracks open Aristotle's text to bring to the fore the selectivity, the counting, the choosing that formed the very essence of friendship. He ponders over the contradiction that Aristotle (2004) presents in this sentence where he worries about the fact that friendship between two may threaten the fabric of society, but at the same time too many friends may take away the intimacy that friendship demands. Derrida posits that it is through this ‘counting’, this ‘naming’ of this experience of belonging through friendship that the idea of the political gets constructed (Derrida, 2006). Tracing the place of the political in the *telos* of friendship, Derrida (2006) pondered on the act of deliberation, on the ‘choice’ that lies in naming someone a friend, in loving, in *lovence* (activity of love), for it is in naming that reciprocity is supposed. In the act of naming the friend, Derrida (2006) also dwells on the politics of naming the enemy. For the defining of the enemy also defines who or what the friend is. This naming of who is the friend, and who is the enemy is also entrenched within the idea of the state. Thus, whenever any threat is posed to the state, Derrida notes, the idea of the enemy is resurrected as an idea that would bind all citizens and pledge their loyalty to defend the state. He presents how the concept of ‘domestic or internal enemy’ or ‘public enemy’ is brought upon by the state, thereby pondering how the state uses the idea of friendship to isolate the ‘other’ and makes any friendship with the ‘other’ an impossibility (Derrida, 2006). This natural fraternity that forms the basis of community building, however, Derrida (2006) reminds us, is also one that is masculine. Woman being framed as the outlaw of humanity, is seen to be incapable of becoming a friend. Yet, he himself overlooks the history of female

¹⁷ This line, though traditionally attributed to Aristotle, is actually by Diogenes Laertius. However, in a modern edition of Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (2018) a similar line can be found stating, ““He who has (many) friends, does not have a single friend” (Theophanidis, 2014).

friendships, and merely acknowledges the absence of the figure of the woman from what he deems to be the telos of friendship. Democracy, for Derrida is 'to come', as he asks:

Is it possible to open up to the 'come' of a certain democracy which is no longer an insult to the friendship we have striven to think beyond the homofraternal and phallogocentric schema?... When will we be ready for an experience of friendship and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship which would at least be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness.

(Derrida, 2006, p. 306)

As the democracy gets built through active participation, of people cohabiting, participating in life together, through the exercising of reflective choice, the figure of the woman, excluded from the determining center of familial friendships, can only linger in the margins, as an outlier, as a shadow. Politics of friendship, therefore, lies in the contradiction of the irreconcilability of singularity and equality, in individual aspirations for privacy, for intimacy, and the larger interests of the community, of the state; for there can be no democracy without community. It is in dealing with this irreconcilability that Derrida (2006) rests his hope on the aporia of the 'perhaps' wherein the open-endedness of the idea of democracy may leave room for the impossible possibility. Although where the woman would stand in this impossible possibility, in this new organization of the polity is a question he does not deliberate on.

While Arendt and Derrida look back to the ancient Greek philosophy to seek what binds friendship to the polity, to tease out a politics of civic humanism, writing in a similar time as the queer 'other', Foucault's (1981) personal political journey directed him to carve out a different kind of politics in friendship. As a homosexual person in the midst of the AIDS crisis, Foucault's deliberation on friendship was rooted in a queer worldbuilding.

Interrogating the normative image of homosocial fraternity, Foucault notes how a concession

is made in case of sexual codes, gestures, as it does not disrupt the social moral fabric, however, the moment relationships between men begin to rewrite the norms of public affect, anxieties surface as male friendships, intimacies then become disruptors:

How is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge. their confidences? What is it to be “naked” among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie? It’s a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people... (Foucault, 1981, p. 136)

Fighting for a rich relational world entail learning new languages and new forms of communicating, reinventing a relationship that is still formless. At a time when the AIDS crisis left the gay community fending for themselves, friendship was also a fight against death, it was also about mapping a new politics of care. Thinking in this backdrop of finitude marked a rupture of thought from the idea of friend as understood by the Western literary canon. For Foucault, for friendship to be viable, it had to reinvent a way of life, find a new way of doing politics. Probing into Foucault's politicisation of friendship in the background of the AIDS crisis, Tom Roach describes, “the politicization of friendship as shared estrangement in AIDS caregiving and activism offers a powerful model for biopolitical formations unwedded to the dialectic of identity and difference—precisely the model needed to combat the social management of life in the age of Empire” (Roach, 2012, p. 12).

Friendship in this context, also demands a rupture from the framing of male intimacy.

Foucault (1981) talks about the way the sexological theorisation of homosexuality, not only impoverished the relational world, but also helped maintain the heteropatriarchal power structures. Implementing friendship as a tool for struggle, as envisioning a new politics of living, Foucault (1981) opens up new possibilities in queer politics that takes the struggle far

beyond the recognition of identity, or the assertion of identity. For Foucault (1981) being homosexual also entailed creating a new ethics of homosexual relationality. The AIDS crisis then for the gay community also ushered in the engendering of new subjectivities, new forms of friendship, new politics (Roach, 2012). Taking a leaf from Foucaultian idea of friendship, Roach looked at the politics of friendship that lay at the heart of organisations like AIDS Buddy System, ACT UP, arguing, “such groups transform friendships of shared estrangement into a mode of biopolitical resistance that breaches boundaries of gender, race, class, and generation and that encourages radically democratic forms of citizenship and civic participation” (Roach, 2012, p. 12). Worldbuilding in neoliberal times meant queering of the vision. In the post-Fordist era, when all our affects, emotions, language were being subsumed under productive processes of capital, when all our gestures, words, expressions were becoming capital's principal commodity, Foucault (1981) envisioned a radical queer politics that would fight against impoverishment of the social fabric. Friendship, with all its formlessness, with all its fluidity and malleability offered that locus of anti-establishment, of eluding structures and social forms, and thereby opening up radical possibilities of being, becoming. Thus, for Foucault (1981) friendship as a way of life offered the queer community a way through the quagmire of identity and community founded solely on commonalities, to go beyond strategic essentialism, and build new conceptions of community. It also pushed the discourse on singularity that had so far formed a defining marker in theorising friendship in political theory, towards imagination of multiplicity of belonging, multiplicity of relationalities, thereby laying down the foundations for the building of a queer polity through radical care and revolutionary friendships. Thus, while Arendt (1998; 1970) and Derrida (1997) politicised friendship and its impact on the conceptualisation of citizenship, their primary reference point had been the field of discourse. It is in this context that Foucault

moves away from the abstraction of philosophy and theorises friendship through lived experiences of homosexual men to see what it then does to the idea of the polity.

The three theoretical propositions laid by Arendt, Derrida and Foucault while politicising friendship also set forth a need to historicise friendship in an otherwise apocalyptic world where friendship had been depoliticised and relegated to the private, to the personal. These theorisations not only heavily influenced the framework of historicisation of friendship in Western political philosophy, the androcentrism that founded their discourse also seeped into the historiography of friendship that remained ungendered.

Historicising Friendship in Western Political Philosophy

The theorisation of friendship as a way of life, as a vehicle of social transformation as discussed above initiated a process of historicisation of friendship in the Western world to understand social institutions, and systems of state, citizenship, democracy. This revisiting not only meant a relooking of sources or methodology, but also an engagement with historical materialism, investigating not just through relations of production, but also through relations of reproduction. The problematics of the personal and the political, the public and the private, the liberal and the revolutionary that lies at the heart of the theorisation of friendship, also makes the history of friendship in political philosophy a history of worldbuilding.

David Konstan in his book *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997) traces the history of friendship in the ancient classical world, alerts us to the social and political struggles that have fought to expand or establish democracy and talks about ways they may have conditioned the value attached to friendship. He locates one of the first articulations of friendship in Homer's epics. As the Greeks under Pericles, in the latter half of the 5th century

BC, stipulated a number of inalienable rights of the individual as indispensable to human dignity (Trang and Quynh, 2021), it opened up possibilities to imagine a different organising of human life. However, while the idea of a democratic state fuelled different imaginations of freedom, and political life, it is imperative to remember that this intellectual life stimulated thus was due to the class of ‘free citizens’ (albeit male, Athenian) created on the backs of the labour of slaves and expatriates (Trang and Quynh, 2021). As Engels wrote, “without slavery there would be no Greek state, no Greek art, and science” (Marx and Engels, 2002).

Democracy in Athens, therefore, only accorded freedom to those who conformed. Yet, it was also a time of resistance, of the values of justice, equality, liberty so planted by the notion of democracy, enabled the slaves to initiate struggle against brutal oppression, against the inhuman blow to human dignity. The 6th century is therefore also marked by class conflict, of class solidarities being built through friendships in times of civil war and power struggles as expressed through *skolia* or drinking songs sung at Athenian symposia, Theognis’ poetry, poems of Solon. Friendship here gets memorialised, as Walter Donlan (1985) remarks, as class solidarity. It also becomes an anchor in state building as class solidarity not only helped in retaining power amongst the aristocrats, cross class friendships ensured that the class solidarity of the oppressed did not become a problem for the existing state structure, rather it carried within it a promise of expanding democracy. David Konstan’s (1997) project of writing the history of the classical world through the history of friendship contextualises Aristotle within this time of political upheaval, thereby explaining his need to ideate the ‘man of good character’ as a measure of excellence, and the *polis* (city state) as the work of friendship with the common vision of striving for the ‘good’. Similarly, Horst Hutter (1978) situates Aristotle in the larger social and political contexts of Greek theorisation of friendship, thereby locating how it had been one of the chief relationships in the public life of a police. He differentiates Aristotelian thoughts on friendship from the Platonic conceptualisation of

friendship stating while for Plato friendship was the “crowning result of sublimated love”, for Aristotle friendship was a “masterpiece of reason” (Hutter, 1978, p. 92). Deliberating on the Greek tradition of understanding friendship as a bond that is both value-creating and value-sustaining. As an acquired relationship, friendship offers the scope for deliberation, for decision making, for reflective choice, and that choice can only come from a ‘moral state’ (Aristotle, 2004). Friendship and justice, in this context becomes mutually dependent, intrinsically linked ideas, as “just acts take place between persons who have a share of things generally good” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 139), and for the political to exist, friendship needs to be defined. The perfect friendship as Aristotle defines then is the friendship of those who desire the good of their friends for the friends’ sake, each loving each other for what it is and not any incidental quality. Equality too becomes bedrock for the foundation of friendship. Furthermore, it is the commonality of life that makes friends. Thus, “where there is nothing in common between ruler and ruled there is no friendship either, just as there is no justice” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 220). Similarly, women and slaves, being written out of the ‘polity’, have neither claim on justice or citizenship, and so friendship as a slave or a woman is impossible. Delving further into the Greek politicisation of friendship, Hutter (1978) dwells on the idea of *hetaery* or ‘union of friends’, more specifically implying men of similar age and class. He notes how *hetaery* played a decisive role in the political, jurisdictional and military affairs of the polis. Greek philosophic schools too emulated this concept. It was also a queer institution wherein *hetairoi* or lovers were expected to inspire each other to great deeds of valour. As the roots of this social organisation lay in the sexual division of labour, *hetaira* or women were meant to simply be sexual companions to men. The de-emphasis of family as an institution of social organisation and economic accumulation also made friendship the anchor point in the political order. Yet, this political order built through *hetaery* could only be an oligarchy as it ensured that power remained only in the hands of the few (Hutter, 1978). The rise of

democracy thus also demanded rethinking of ideals of justice and thereby redefining friendships. As Hutter opines:

Democracy always implies equality and, as such, must abolish superior-inferior relationships and place governance on a new principle. The inspiration for this transition was provided by the institution of friendship. Equality and community for the demos, however, could be reconciled with friendship only if friendship were redefined and removed from its atmosphere of aristocratic privilege. (Hutter, 1978, p. 46)

Yet, the equality Aristotle stressed on was more directed inwards, than towards outward possessions. Friendship no longer demanded equality of possessions as long as equality of virtue could be attained. Hutter points out:

friendship is theoretically possible between a master and a slave insofar as both are equals in virtue in their function as men, which transcends their social roles. Friendship, despite the fact that it implies a demand for equality, would then not necessarily threaten the existence of the social structures surrounding it. Because of this redefinition of the concept of equality, the theory of friendship loses its revolutionary implications. (Hutter, 1978, p. 112)

If the crisis of slave democracy and political instability of the times shaped Aristotle's notion of 'good virtuous friendship', Neal Wood (1991) while placing Cicero's social and political thought in history notes how the struggle between the landlords, *assidui* (property owning class) and the *proletari* (the propertyless poor), landless peasants, *urban plebeians* (free labourers, craftsmen, etc) and the Roman slave society in the late republic, and the later political turmoil culminating in the dictatorship of Caesar played a defining role in Cicero's

political thought. This was also the time of the crisis of aristocracy owing to its changing relationship to the peasantry. Influenced by Aristotle's idea of the state, Cicero (1990) conceives of the state as the property of people joined together by justice or right and common interest. However, women, slaves and outsiders remained outcasts of this *populus*. Thus, what Aristotle and Plato implies but falls short of, but Cicero articulates, is the notion of state being a protector of private property. *Persona civitas* or citizens, in this state come together on the basis of *fide* or trust, and thereby forge *amicitia*, or friendship. A friend, to Cicero (1990), is then a 'second self', wherein subjects both human and divine are joined with mutual goodwill and affection, wherein virtue both creates and preserves friendship. As a lawyer and magistrate who rose to the oligarchic senatorial order, Cicero is well aware of the informal networks of friendship that played an influential role in court politics, thus his treatise of *amicitia* is also laced with a warning about friendship where virtue is abandoned, of retaining relationship with friends who are disloyal to the republic (Cicero, 1990). Since women's citizenship was mediated by guardians, family, kinship, their role as friends too eluded Cicero.

Tracing the journey from Aristotle to Cicero to Montaigne, Eric Macphail (2016) notes how writing in the time of 16th century civic humanism, for Montaigne friendship became 'a model for humanism and a shared fund of cultural references and memories. Borrowing from Cicero's dialogue, Montaigne (2005) too recognizes the conflict between friendship and citizenship vis a vis loyalty to state. The word he uses to describe friendship is 'souveraineté'. The tyrant, to him, therefore has no friend, as equality is the basis of friendship. The history of friendship from classical republicanism to the modern state is also about the changing relationship to political power, be it antagonistic, accommodating or independent. The political role of friendship, he prescribes, is to befriend the king, and through self-study does one develop the faculty of judgment needed to perform the duties of friendship. One of the

critical duties of the friend is to counsel, even admonish if required for the greater good of the politic. Free speech therefore remains at the heart of friendship, as he posits candour to be a sacred duty of the friend.

Annalisa Ceron (2016) marks how, writing a century later, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, Bacon (2001) combines the values of civic humanism with Machiavellian politics, identifying friendship as a distinctive sign of human sociability, as imperative to an active political participation, situating it in the complexities of court politics. Taking forward Montaigne's ideas and the traditions of sixteenth century humanism, he carries on the prescriptive literature of how kings must choose their friends, while also going beyond the idea of *parrhesiastes* (counselors in court), reflecting on the political meaning of friendship in the context of the system of royal patronage (Ceron, 2016). He translated the Ciceronian language of *vera amicitia*, locating it in the Renaissance court, “in an attempt to indicate the moral and intellectual aristocracy over which the prince should aim to exert and administer his power” (Ceron, 2016, p. 213). In the political economy of Elizabethan renaissance and the fifteenth century patronage tradition, friendship becomes posited in the material reality of finding favour in court, as a mode of solidifying class solidarity yet at the same time a vehicle for class mobility, without so much disturbing the status quo. For Bacon thus, equality is the consequence of friendship, not the basis of it, as he reflects, “there is little friendship in the world, and least of all between equals” (Bacon, 2001, p. 172). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Bacon's idea of friendship is that he goes beyond the Aristotelian and Ciceronian definition of the friend as ‘*another self*’, or Montaigne's emphasis on the extraordinariness of sharing soul in two bodies, and sheds light on the role friendship played in the management of power, the importance of friendship in everyday ordinary life. Friendship, thereby becomes a ‘civic confession’, that brings together “government of the self and the government of the other” (Ceron, 2016, p. 217). What gets developed through the course of this history is a

liberal idea of friendship whose radical possibilities of becoming a vehicle of social transformation get contained within the individualised aspirations of power, of making place within the system.

In his book, *The Friend*, Alan Bray (2003) interrupts the historiography of family, through his exploration of the significance of friendships in the public sphere in what he defines as ‘traditional society’¹⁸ as study of ethics. Examining male friendships in early modern Europe, Bray (2003) effectively traces the currency these intimacies had in the political economy of the time, and how friendship, being seen to be less susceptible to religious and political change, came to form the bedrock of social relations. Reading into the stock parables of sworn brotherhood, Bray explored how friendship was fostered by both religion and the court as it did not create potential impediment to marriage, yet sometimes the oaths of male friendships also surpassed the bonds of marriage. Tracing the history of friendship as ‘voluntary kinship, Bray further notes how the discourse of sodomy ushered in a rupture in this way of perceiving friendship, thereby framing male intimacy, male homosociality as a dangerous relationship. Thus, what Bray’s history of friendship uncovers is an overlooked history where, in lieu of Foucault's theorisation, friendship was indeed a way of life, and in that overlooking also lay the subversive possibilities that friendship carried in worldbuilding, in revolutionary thought.

What gets obfuscated in this history though is the anxiety about the figure of the ‘sodomite’ that shadows any theorisation of friendship in these times. The dialectic between the public and the private, the personal and the political, that Foucault's theorisation touched upon, gets

¹⁸ Alan Bray in his work *The Friend* (2003) marks a periodisation of history through the conceptual evolution of friendship and the idea of public/private. He defines the pre-modern society, that the period before the seventeenth century when a social contract of citizenship came into being as traditional and the period after that as modern.

explored in Alan Bray's (2003) historicisation of the time that explores the affect that remains hidden in the subtext of Bacon's letters, in the pastoral poems of Sir Philip Sidney or the sonnets of Shakespeare. Revisiting the 'dangerous friendship' of the influential secretary in an Elizabethan noble household, Bray locates the secretary as the 'go-between', the bridge between the home and the world, the private and the public, the personal and the political:

The humanist scholars created a new embellishment of that rhetoric, but one that was to persist far beyond its time and place: a manipulation of the sense of history itself. The appearance that friendship between men was shaped afresh in sixteenth-century England by the ideals of a newly rediscovered classical world is a tactful illusion, not a sudden break with the past: a new response to the long-familiar uncertainties of friendships between men that carried obligations that were frequently irksome and always dangerous. For a man's honor could be at stake in the manner in which the obligations of friendship were made and called upon. The stance of a generous altruism, of an inward affectionate friend, was a tactful rhetoric that helped to negotiate those dangers, a language in which the hard facts of friendship could be spoken. (Bray, 2003, p. 76)

The seventeenth century upheaval through the Civil war in England ushered in a different vision of worldbuilding. The changing property relations in England resulted in a new scramble for power. The fading power of the landed gentry and the rise of a new bourgeoisie that was beginning to see Catholicism as becoming more and more unsuitable for commerce, brought in violent struggles, making way for constitutional monarchy (Marx, 1850). The English civil war also meant consolidation of class solidarity and friendship. The seventeenth and eighteenth century climate of debate and dissent, paves the way for two models of political bonds - natural sociality and contract theory. While natural sociality builds on innate

kindness as a form of glue binding man to man, that is vehemently challenged by the atmosphere of betrayal and suspicion in the interregnum years, the dissolution of the traditional form of monarchy called for a different mode of political organising based on people's contractual agreement to be bound to each other, to commit to each other to assure stability. Locke's social contract theory thus also called for a revisiting of the discourse of friendship, as discursive communities formed the locus of Locke's conception of friendship (Smith, 2017). It allows friendship to incorporate political dissent within its very structure. The idea of the 'civil society' that emerged from a 'rational' ethics as conceived by the Kantian discourse of eighteenth-century enlightenment required a change in the way friendship was performed and perceived (Bray, 2003). In the civil society so formed, friendship was a suspect, it was thought to be a harbinger of anarchy. Instead, Bray notes, it was "diverse forms of kinship that held the capacity of friendship" (Bray, 2003, p, 214). It was also what then made way for the idea of companionate marriage where marriages became sites of friendship while friendships outside marriage and kinship receded to the background.

Alan Bray (2003) throughout his book identified modes of intimacies brought about by eating together, by exchanging literary gifts, by sharing laughter, sharing secrets, and thereby opined:

the wider ethics of friendship turned on the perceived ability of friendship to secure the boundaries of family and kin: that it created links of kinship across social barriers otherwise unbridgeable; that it evaded the quarrels over inheritance that could divide families; and crucially that it could stand in the place of a friend left empty by death, in the care of his children and family. (Bray, 2003, p. 168)

The anxiety of the queer shadowed codifications of friendships since the Elizabethan period and the Puritan redefining of the public/private, of companionate marriage where the spouse is supposed to become a friend, further intensified the contradiction between the personal and the political, between the liberal and the revolutionary notion of friendship. The historiography of friendship thus carried the androcentrism embedded in the theorisation of friendship. The neoclassical revival of Aristotelian ideas and the revisiting of cultures of friendship solely through male experiences to understand the role friendship played in state building and in defining democracy then reinforces the phallogentric idea of the 'polity'. The exclusion of women from this historiography while depoliticising women's friendship, also consciously keeps women outside the 'polity' thereby understanding their citizenship solely through the mediation of family and marriage.

The Omission of Women and Feminist Historiography of Women's Friendships

'Chloe liked Olivia, 'I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature...' (Woolf, 2008, p. 108)

While the history of friendship in political friendship as discussed in the previous section, played a significant role in exposing the dialectic between the public and the private, right from the construction of the *oikos*¹⁹ (household) and the *polis* (city) to the modern codification of the home and the world, the universalist idea of the polity so imagined systematically overlooked women and invisibilised women's friendships. So when in 1929, while browsing books in a dusty library, Virginia Woolf imagines stumbling on the words in

¹⁹ It is imperative to note that in classical Greek philosophy, the *oikos* and the *polis* were not conceived to be exclusive spheres. It was only with the collapse of the city-state that a more privatised notion of the household came into being. Even then, it was only in the later periods that the private sphere became more defined.

Mary Carmichael's imaginary novel 'Chloe liked Olivia' etched by a woman writer - these three words marked a significant turning point for feminist history. While it is definitely not the first record of women's relationship with women, of women writing of friendships with women, or even of women liking women, it is perhaps the first time that history is opening up its eye to it, of seeing female friendships, recording women's intimate world, intimate desires, understanding the significance of it, and questioning the politics of this omission. What Woolf articulates in *A Room of One's Own* (2008) is a history of absence, a history of anonymity that any feminist historiography has to fight against. This history of absence is what Arendt, Derrida, Foucault's omission creates through their androcentric theorisation of political friendships. This overlooking of Olivias and Chloes is what characterises the entire historiography of friendship that simply forgets to engage with Sappho, with Katherine Philips.

This moment of recognition of Olivia and Chloe's relationship contains within it a whole Western history of women's friendships. These relationships, named Sapphic, have throughout history only been seen as private, as erotic. While Alan Bray (2003) politicises male homosocial relationships, while Foucault theorises queers the politics of friendship, Chloes and Olivias remained in the margins, outside the polity. It is this exclusion that propelled Woolf to imagine this relationship and raise questions on the very politics of historiography. Writing about the problems of omitting women from history in her book *Hidden From History*, Sheila Rowbotham (1976) makes the connection between the emergence of women's movement, of women claiming space in the polity with the need for constructing a feminist historiography. She writes, "Interest in women's position in the past has grown as women's liberation has grown, partly because women within the movement have started to study women in the past and partly because the existence of a new feminist movement has

stimulated enquiry among other historians” (Rowbotham, 1976, p. xvi). Study of women's friendship exposes the bias of aforementioned political theory.

The moment of recognition of women’s relationships in history also, was not one that arrived out of the blue. The eye to really look at women's friendships, to trace and probe women's intimate worlds, to speak of such desires came riding on the back of the women's movement in the West. So when Woolf dwelled on this moment when perhaps for the first time in literature women could write about liking women, about being passionate about women, about befriending women, it was born out of this urge to rewrite history through a different lens, the urge to rehabilitate women in history, and to see what this history does to the political. It ushered in new readings of women's subjectivities, of women's engagement with the polity, and thereby new readings of women's friendships. Feminist historiography is born out of the women's movement's investment in recovering women's voices, re-reading women's assertions, and thereby boldly proclaim, ‘We were here, we are here, we will be here’. This investment aims to understand women's relational world in a new light, to tease out cultures of women leaning on each other, of women holding each other and thinking, acting, working together to build another world.

The politicised reading of women's relational histories enabled a revisiting of Sappho as the first woman poet in Western literary canon. Ellen Greene (2023) while studying the scholarship on Sappho historically marks how every generation seemed to have created their own Sappho on the basis of their own interests and needs. Interrogating the many readings and re-readings of Sappho over the years, Greene notes the rediscovery of Sappho as a figure of potential in the 60s and 70s, “increasing empowerment of women, with the resultant interest in women's history, women's writing, and women's "ways of knowing," has accounted for the focus on Sappho as the first female writer in the Western tradition whose

works have survived in any quantity” (Greene, 2023, p.xii). She points out how this moment marked a departure from previous readings of Sappho that was mostly overdetermined either by an obsessive interest in Sappho's scandalous biography or in wishing away the erotic aspects and queer implications of her writing. Each generation created their own versions of Sappho on the basis of their own needs and interests, Greene (2023) notes. The censorship and presentation of Sappho over the years also exposes a history of anxieties of women's desires, women's friendships. Janyce Raymond (2001) highlights how the Greek word, *hetaira* used to denote ‘female friend’, a word that Sappho used abundantly in her poems to speak of her female students, came to be translated later to mean ‘courtesan’, ‘prostitute’ to put to work a historical demeaning of Sappho. In fact, *hetaira* also came to mean lesbians in conjunction with ‘loose women’. As Raymond argues how in 4th century Athens, the Greek Demosthenes divided women into three categories *hetaerae* (courtesans) to women ‘kept’ for pleasure, concubines (female slaves) for women who would be the daily caregivers, and wives who would be the trusted guardians of children and bearer of children. Sappho in this context, completely befuddled everyone. She was neither a concubine nor a wife, and her open affect for women, her new worldbuilding in lesbos, her spilling of the private emotions into the public, her complete rejection of heteropatriarchal conventions and norms meant that she eluded all categories, her poetry and her world remaining misunderstood, overlooked, deliberately censored, altered, sanitised. It was also perhaps the fact that, as Rowbotham (1976) points out, the women's movement began to question the tendency in society to divorce sexual emotion from culture, and see sexuality as something outside history, that this very questioning opened up newer ways of understanding Sappho and her world.

Similarly, Lorna Hutson (2007) questions the history Alan Bray sought to tell questioning his omission of Katherine Phillips, interrogating his usage of the body as a signifier of friendship as an adequate category to read female intimacies, thereby pushing towards a rethinking of

the cultural capital of women's friendship in the 17th century. She notes how it was feminist criticism that pointed out how the accessibility of humanist education and the ideological constraints of ideals of chastity and obedience imposed through domesticity played a defining role in invisibilising women (Hutson, 2007). Echoing Valerie Traub (2002), Hutson (2007) too reflects how the lack of public discourse on the possibilities of women's friendship as compared to the overwhelming social standing accorded to Montaigne or Bacon's essays, might have blinded one to the friendships residing in the shadows. Reading Philip's poetry, who was royalist and wrote prolifically on female friendship in seventeenth century, in in this context, what Hutson arrives at is rather the highlighting of a symptom that refuses to see women's poetry as ethical or political (Hutson, 2007). What Katherine Philip's glaring omission from Bray's history of friendship foregrounds is a lack of vocabulary, or framework to politically read women's friendships, women's intimacies, a training that only comes with the women's movement, with women's claiming of the public, with women's claiming of friendship as a critical anchor in their lives.

Recovering histories of Chloes liking Olivias therefore, as Rowbotham (1976) points out, became a critical point of the women's movement. It also became a cornerstone for feminist worldbuilding.

Tracing the history of women's friendships from Renaissance to the Victorian period, Lillian Faderman (1981) notes the changing perceptions towards registering women's relational world. Exploring correspondence and memoirs of women of that period, Faderman also stumbled on records of such romantic friends aspiring to set up households together. She writes of Mary Wollstonecraft's friendship with Fanny Blood, wherein Wollstonecraft describing friendship as the “most solemn, sacred union, displaying itself in all offices of true affection and esteem” (Wollstonecraft, 1979, p. 62), expresses her desire to reject marriage

and stay with Fanny forever. The devastating effect Fanny's death had on Wollstonecraft is recorded in Godwin's writings, yet somehow, Faderman points out it gets overlooked, missed in Mary's biographies (Faderman, 1981). It also points out the dialectic of personal and the political, liberal and radical that loomed over writing about friendship, where in the pressure to keep the personal, the emotional at bay we see Wollstonecraft adopting a public voice while articulating her 'political' propositions, while the emotional, the personal, her politics of friendship only finds political expressions in her fiction, in her personal letters, in her way of life (Woolf, 1935; Faderman, 1981). Following traces left by women of their relational world, Faderman sheds light on 'kindred spirits' in 19th century America driven by the New England Reform Movement wherein women formed sisterhoods of kindred spirits to right a world that men had so wronged. She further marks the post 1868 American Civil War era when there was a recorded surplus of women remaining unmarried, and it was these passionate friendships that was seen to compensate for their lack of family, a phenomenon that Longfellow had described as "rehearsal in girlhood of the great drama of woman's life" (Faderman, 1981). The politicisation of women's friendships according to Faderman began with the 19th century emergence of the new woman, more the professional writer, when friendship became a ground of strength for the collective struggle to transcend the role so far allotted to women. However, it is only with the whirlwind of the women's movement in the late 19th century that revolutionary potential of female friendships unfurled. With the rise of the middle class in the mid-19th century, at least a certain class of women could afford to be less affected by tradition or threat of starvation and could thereby carve their own ideals. Living together with one's friends no longer remained a wishful thinking. In 1912, Edward Carpenter postulated that women's growing consciousness of their oppression strained their relationship with men, opening up possibilities of forging comrade-alliances with women. Faderman (1981) turns our attention to the tradition of Boston marriages, to the sisterhood of

sculptors, to intellectual friendship between academic women, to friendship circles cropping up in cities that framed a new discourse on women's friendship built on ideals of feminist solidarity. There was backlash too, as armed with medical terms and sexology jargons, these friendships began to be labelled in society as 'dangerous', 'outlawed'. Faderman (1981) marks how popular anti-feminist tracts began to appear in 1830s England and post 1848 America with their palpable anxiety that this love between women would replace and weaken the ties of marital love. The sexual liberation movement in 1920s America was stated to be a violent reaction to Victorian purity, and all intimacies between women came to be suspect. Faderman (1981) writes of the time before the first World War, when women could openly express love for one another and forged romantic friendships that were condoned than seen as disruptive. That women's friendships were trivialised and de-politicised, also gave women the opportunity to explore passion, and express affect through letters, through writing. Denied any stake in the polity, mostly stuck in loveless, dispassionate marriages, these friendships that offered them an outlet to explore rich intimacies with each other, and through it find their own selves, their subjectivities. Thus, at a time when divorce was impossible, women could find comfort in friends without altering the social fabric. Romantic friendships till the second half of the 18th century became that space where young women could practice sensibility, faithfulness and devotion to each other. It was like a rite of passage, and the transitoriness also meant it was non-threatening. Yet, the new women had already learnt to think of themselves as outlaws, and riding the waves of the Civil Rights Movement that boldly asserted that minorities have inalienable rights, a new form of feminist worldbuilding came into being that consciously politicised queer friendships. The formation of Daughters of Bilitis²⁰ in 1955 at the peak of a state witch hunt and police harassment, and Mattachine

²⁰ Daughters of Bilitis was the first lesbian political organisation to be formed in the United States of America. The organisation took its name from Pierre Louys' collection of poems titled *Songs of Bilitis* (1894) wherein Bilitis was a female character who was romantically associated with Sappho. It was founded by Rosaline 'Rose' Bamberger, a Philipina woman working in a brush manufacturing factory and her partner Rosemary Sliepen

society²¹ in 1950 further ushered in a new politics of friendship as defiance, as resistance that sought to build a different world on the ideals of solidarity of the marginalised, paving the way for political lesbianism.

Writing in the backdrop of second wave feminism, and the new left movement in the 60-70s, Adrienne Rich in her seminal work, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence* (1980) takes upon the task of bringing to the table the much-needed focus on female friendships and intimacies. Drawing from Nancy Chodorow's (1978) critique of motherhood, Rich deliberates on the economics of prescriptive heterosexuality, to write how it actually impoverishes women's relational world by fragmenting the erotic from the emotional. Critiquing heterosexuality as a political institution, she put forth how in a heteropatriarchal society that constantly undermines women's ability to forge relationships, intimacies with other women has itself been resistance. Rehabilitating female friendships in history, she traces what she terms as the 'lesbian continuum' – the world of women's relationships, friendships, intimacies, solidarities with other women. Radically questioning assumptions about 'innate' sexual orientations, pointing out how the burdens of social reproduction - of mothering and housework, and the economics of heteropatriarchy compels women to give primacy to heterosexual relationships, rendering women's relationships with women secondary, and eventually rendering invisible lesbian possibilities. Lesbian existence is thus written out of history, and women's friendships trivialised, overlooked, so as to invisibilise

primarily as a space for lesbian women to gather, talk and dance together, as a space for friendship. The group that came together however, intended to also become a political activist group. Rosaline and the working-class women wished for it to remain secret and therefore distanced themselves after the first meeting. The group carried on founding chapters in different states and participating in picketing.

²¹ The Mattachine Society was a gay rights group formed by Harry Hay. It was inspired by a French medieval and renaissance masque group named after Mattachino, a character in Italian theatre who was court jester who would speak truth to the king when no one else would. Most of the organisers of the group were Communists and the group was organised in the structure of the Communist Party. They also provided critical support to the Daughters of Bilitis to launch their magazine 'The Ladder'.

the institutions that are put in place to manage, organise, propagandise ‘innate heterosexual’ way of life. She uses the term ‘lesbian existence’ or ‘lesbian continuum’ to speak to a vast expanse of women-identified experiences so as “to embrace many forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Rich, 2007, p. 27). In thereby teasing out histories of women's marriage resistance, of wanton, unchaste women, Rich posits a radical politics of feminist friendships that seeks comradeship across generations, across class, race, community:

It allows us to connect these women with the more celebrated “Lesbians” of the women’s school around Sappho of the seventh century B.C., with the secret sororities and economic networks reported among African women, and with the Chinese marriage-resistance sisterhoods—communities of women who refused marriage or who, if married, often refused to consummate their marriages and soon left their husbands, the only women in China who were not footbound and who, Agnes Smedley tells us, welcomed the births of daughters and organized successful women’s strikes in the silk mills. (Rich, 2007, p. 29)

What Rich arrives at is an expansion the radical possibilities of lesbian politics that not only challenges heteropatriarchy but can also bring down industrial capitalism, and takes the conversation forward to visibilising care networks, support structures, queer kinships that forms the backdrop of women’s survival in heteropatriarchal society. As Rich states,

The denial of reality and invisibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an

incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other. (Rich, 2007, p. 34)

Female friendships in this context, become sites for revolutionary politics, a way of claiming back that power. It offers an entry point to envision what women would choose in a world where the compulsions of heterosexuality and capitalism did not exist. The politics of female friendships that Rich posits in this context, also becomes an exercise in feminist worldbuilding, in envisioning a world where social gender relations are reorganised.

The political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s also provoked new forms, formats and vocabularies that enabled politicisation of women's friendships not just by creating a thematic of friendship, but also using it to reconfigure the political. The audacity of breaking down structures and building a new ushered in by the May 68 movement rippled into the French feminist movement as a new group of women began to tear down language, to look for new ways of writing women's experiences, writing women's lives, desires and intimacies. This new search for form and language to map the new vision can be reflected in Helene` Cixous and Catherine Clément's experimental thesis *The Newly Born Woman* (1986). A labour of friendship, the structure of the book itself cracks open structures to open up possibilities of new kinds of conversations between women, new ways of articulating feminine affect. The book comes out to be an exploration of what Cixous theorised to be *écriture féminine* - writing with the body. In the space of the text, Clément and Cixous engage in a dialogue with themselves, with women of past and present, with the hysteric, with the sorceress, with all those disruptors of patriarchal structures, with those outlawed by the family, with those splitting open the structures of the family, and kinship. Part dialogue, part poetry, the book experiments with form, with genre, flowing in and out of structures like outlawed emotions, uncontrolled desires to map a new feminist utopia, to give birth to the new woman, to write a

new history. The textual disruption in the book reflects the possibilities of social disruption that lurks in women's affect, in the disruptive, volcanic, eruptive nature of women's libidinal organisation. In attempting to write the new world for women, to write a new feminist utopia, the new woman has to be borne through friendship, through conversations, arguments, explorations between friends. It is in this experiment that Clément and Cixous also find a new language for writing female friendships, to make writing new history an act of friendship.

Taking forward the argument of the potential of female friendships to become sites of resistance against heteropatriarchal institutions, bell hooks (2002) builds on her idea of communion. Looking into black histories, into its tradition of closeness, mutual care and support among women to facilitate each other's survival, bell hooks talks about loving friendships being a step towards ending patriarchy. In a society where a woman who talks of love is suspect, where women are conditioned to self-loathe, friendships become the first place where most women have their first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community. bell hook's postulation of friendships, women's intimacies being the first space of fostering self-love, of nurturing self-love as a weapon of political warfare further offers a more complicated feminist critique of the discursive hesitation/rumination/debate over the idea of homophilia, of loving and lovence, of finding likeness in friendship that formed one of the central tropes in political philosophy. It is therefore friendship that enables women to forge bonds of love, intimacy, to come in communion with oneself. It is where one learns to process, cope with differences and conflict, and thereby build communities – communities of love, solidarity, of resisting, surviving together.

The radical feminist movement brings with it a new understanding of hetero-reality, a new exploration of women's subjectivity. Writing in the radical feminist legacy, Janice Raymond brings forth how the dismembering of women's friendship is also an act of dismembering of

the woman-identified self. Taking a leaf from Simone de Beauvoir's oft quoted line, “if [woman] did not exist, men would have invented her. They did invent her. But she exists also apart from their inventiveness” (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 201), Raymond (2001) theorises female friendships to be an exploration of women's own inventiveness, a birthing of women's original self. It is in this context that she posits her theory of ‘gyn/ affection’ being a synonym for female friendships. She defines:

Gyn/affection connotes the passion that women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other vital women. There is another meaning to affection, however, which conveys more than the personal movement of one woman toward another. Affection in this sense means the state of influencing, acting upon, moving, and impressing, and of being influenced, acted upon, moved, and impressed by other women. (Raymond, 2001, p.22)

Gyn/ affection, therefore, for her means women's personal and political movement towards each other. Female friendships, in this context, get ‘seen’ as both the foundation and consequence of the feminist movement, opening up possibilities to go beyond personal intimacies to a politically affective state of being. Philosophy of female friendships, Raymond writes, is also a philosophy of feminist discernment. It is the cultural commitment women made to their selves and to each other even in the face of repeated assaults of heteroreality. Tracing the genealogy of female friendships is therefore also a politics of building counter memory. Differentiating it from the concept of comradeship and sisterhood, Raymond (2001) invests friendship as a certain ‘moreness’. Origins of this genealogy can thus only be found in spheres where women are free to be for each other, where women provide women with a sense of difference, importance, autonomy and affection. The genealogy of female friendship then also becomes the genealogy of ‘loose women’ - of the courtesans, the hysterics, the outliers. Mapping this genealogy therefore leads Raymond

(2001) to the Chinese marriage resisters, to the nuns, to the comrades - to all those cultures that created social, economic, cultural locus for institutionalisation of female friendships. These friendships, she believes, provide women with a common world that becomes a reference point for location in the larger world. Furthermore, female friendships equip us with the understanding that mere survival is insufficient for the spirit. Possibilities of female friendships are therefore founded on a vision, on the radical hope that “women have always been for women in all times and places, and in the continuity and consistency of women’s friendships that cross all lines” (Raymond, 2001, p. 241). Gyn/ affection provides a context of rootedness from which women can reorient herself to the world by gendering women's political relationality with other women. Politics of feminist friendship then also lies in the task of building a world where a truly feminist life can be lived, in women choosing to ‘see’ each other. As Raymond (2001) posits:

Female friendship alone cannot vanquish the oppression of women, nor can it guarantee that friendship lasts forever. It can create and sustain hope in the midst of a world that suppresses Gyn/affection. (p.242)

It is hereby through this radical hope that the politics of female friendship also initiates a homecoming for women, of enabling women to be at home with themselves, and with each other, so as to build a new home. It also occupies a unique positionality to question the premise of the historiography of friendship in political philosophy, foregrounding a new politics of feminist worldbuilding.

Towards a Decolonial Politics of Friendship

The seeds of radical hope that the politics of female friendships planted found different articulations/manifestations in the global south as women searched for a new vocabulary to

give voice to their experiences, their material realities. The Civil Rights Movement in America in the 50s and 60s, the anti-imperialist struggles all over the world, new social movements, identity movements exposed deep fractures within civil society fracturing the social contract. These fractures tore apart the liberal idea of friendship making obvious the limitations of the idea of universal sisterhood. Yet, this was also the time that new solidarities were emerging across intersectional identities demanding a renewed evaluation of friendship across divides. Within the enclaves created by radical feminist fracture, a new search for region based, politics based third world, south Asian, postcolonial women's relationality, along with ideas of third world feminist solidarity began to emerge (Mohanty, 2003). Similarly, in 1981, fierce women of colour in the United States who had historically been denied a shared political voice came together to 'build bridges of consciousness' in a hope for revolutionary solidarity to view the world through the prism of third world feminist consciousness, collectively penning *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (2022). The book that almost read like a manifesto was written in the tide of the political optimism of the 70s ushered by anti-imperial struggles that had erupted all over the world cracking open the facade of Western Civilization, of Western democracy, destabilising, decentring, shifting the conversation to ideals of humanity, equality, liberty shimmering in the people's struggles in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Cuba, China, Algeria. Written by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipina American, Chicana/Latina, Native and African American women, this new collective political voice, with all their chequered histories and battle scars, boldly stated:

those of us who see ourselves as active (dis)inheritors of colonization are still trying to recover within ourselves a different history of world relation. We imagine free-traveling African and original Américan philosophers; voyagers from near and far,

proffering distinct modes of equitable governance, sustainable living, and healing practices. (Moraga, 2022, p.19)

These are women who have seen their countries ravaged, looted by Western imperialism, their people killed, raped, their personhood destroyed, dismissed by white supremacists. The holocaust though devastating, had not been their first encounter with ‘rupture with civilization’. This refreshing voice thus while calling for a politics of friendship of third world women, unequivocally asserted that the exercise of worldbuilding could not be founded on the corpse of the marginalised, that anti-colonialism needed to be a precondition for dreaming of another world:

Our strategy is how we cope—how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person’s skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other. This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality. It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision. (Moraga, 2022, p. 54)

Taking a cue from this vision, and theoretical impulse to revisit gendered sociality, we then look towards India. With the British transferring powers in 1947, India’s tryst with democracy is marked by colonial legacy, feudal culture and neoliberal promises. Any formulation of politics of friendship in India is therefore shaped by contradictions and contestations between aspirations of different constituencies, and different claims of

citizenship. Historians Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt speak of these anxieties in their study of emotional affect and structures of sociability in South Asia as it deliberates on why Indian historians have been reticent to engage with the theme of friendship, opting instead what was deemed to be more ‘verifiable’, ‘serious’ (Ali and Flatt, 2017). They further point out the bias that lay in affective historiography:

Many nineteenth-century intellectuals held that different types of human affiliations were appropriate to different forms of society and state. True friendship, understood as a relation of trust and disinterested affection between equals, was thought to be linked to the principles of free and equal association that would define modern societies and states (governed by contractual relations). This notion of friendship was contrasted to the types of affiliation current in feudal societies, underpinned by relations of hierarchy based on blood and birth and ultimately rooted in kinship. India, along with the vast majority of non-Western societies, was considered to be one of the latter types of society (Ali and Flatt, 2017, p. 2)

The interlinking of friendship with concepts of social equality and the birth of privacy and intimacy, meant friendship was theorised to be a key element of modernity - a formulation which South Asia's unique institutions both aspired to embrace as well as vehemently denied. In trying historicise friendship in Indian political philosophy, Ali and Flatt (2017), Urmila Patil (2017) go back to the royal court of medieval India to unpack how the interpersonal affective relationships made the court ethos vibrant. Revisiting *nitishastra*²² and the genre of *hitopadesa*, Patil (2017) explores how these stories became tools to guide people on the ethics of friendship, alerting them to the ways in which friendship operated inside and outside

²² *Niti* in common parlance, means guidance, ethical conduct, moral philosophy. So *Nitishastra* is a branch of knowledge/ treatise that offers ethical prudence and political wisdom essential to statecraft and becoming a good citizen.

the royal court. Drawing parallel to the Greek notion of the polis where friendship was a significant part of public life, Patil notes how the *niti* treatises blurred the distinction between official and personal relationships and projected the role of the friend as counsellor and guide who would keep the king from going astray (Patil, 2017). The parables generated through the genre of *Hitopodesa*²³ and *Panchatantra*²⁴ therefore not only stressed on the ethical propensity needed in a friend, but also prescribed who one could be friends with (Patil, 2017). It is in this context that in South Asia, caste had considerable bearing on any perception or definition of friendship. With kinship ties overlapping and taking precedence over almost all individuated and communitarian social relations, caste was seen to work against any development of friendship. Ali and Flatt (2017) point out how colonial tropes of court patronage and friendship did not sit comfortably with the spectres of feudal traditions that haunted and framed most relations in South Asia. However, recent scholarship in European historiography too have demonstrated how friendship and voluntary kinship played out in public, eluding such clear binaries of public/private. Recent interventions by Kathyryne Babayan in her lecture ‘The Body of the Friend in Early Modern Isfahan’ (2014) has further shed light on friendship as a ‘civilization process’ through her reading of *adab* (etiquette) and cultures of sociality in early modern Isfahan. These ‘affective turns’ in history writing and the opening up of South Asian scholarship to literary and cultural history has initiated newer enquiries and urged new investment in studying friendship as bonds through which institutions and power are formed and maintained. In their ‘Introduction to Friendship in Indian History’, Ali and Flatt point out to the rich vocabulary India has in articulating

²³ A Sanskrit text that provided wisdom and advice on political affairs through fables involving animal and human characters. These texts were recommended to train young aristocrats in ethical sensibility and conduct.

²⁴ Sanskrit text meant to offer political advice through animal fables. Dated back to 200 BC, the first two of the five principles of *niti* that the texts explored were ‘*Mitra-bheda*’ (loss of friends), ‘*mitra-labha*’ (winning of friends).

friendship that itself contains a complex historiography of friendship that has not been adequately explored:

friendship has a rich vocabulary in Indian languages. The variety of words in modern Hindi alone, which can be translated as ‘friend’ (*yaar, dost, seheli, saathi, sahayak, jaani, sanghrakshak, mitr, hamdard, bandhu, hamdam, habib, sayogi, ukht, akka, wali, bhai, jigari, rafiq, sajjan, sakhi, ‘aziz, nadim, hamsafar*, to name only the most common) is vast. These words, which derive from both Sanskritic and Persianate roots, suggest that conceptions of friendship were diverse and far-ranging in ‘traditional’ Indian society. They conjure a tantalizing history of complex intersections between the realm of friendship and other social institutions and practices including ideas of kinship, romantic and erotic love, theology, warrior ethics, gender relations and political alliances. (Ali and Flatt, 2017, p. 5).

Any historical investigation into friendship in South Asia therefore demands examination of a variety of sources - chronicles, memoirs, letters, literature, culture, informal anecdotes, stories. It demands a more attentive reading of archives against the grain, more attentive listening for whispers, gestures, signs, tells, and once one really opens up, a rich tapestry reveals itself directing one towards overlooked categories of affective communities. Tapping this rich tapestry, Leela Gandhi (2005) formulates her reading of politics of friendship in conjunction with anti-colonial thought as she digs into stories of resistance in India's anticolonial struggle. Taking a leaf from Derrida's redesignation of the ‘political’ as a place of an always deferred, open hospitable community, she interrogates the history of India's anticolonial resistance to examine how “friendship categorically defines community as countermand against social exclusion” (Gandhi, 2005). Reading Western political theory's positing of friendship as a rehearsal for citizenship, as a founding metaphor for the configuration of the political, she echoes Agamben's postulation that “the polis ratifies

‘exclusion’ as the principle that ‘founds the city of men’, locating at the core of politics a principle of *exceptio* [italicised in the original text] according to which the promise of the good life for some requires consigning others to the concentration camp, the detention centre, the various inhospitable borders of modern civility” (Agamben, 1998, p.7). Similarly, she notes, the modern nation too has no tolerance for humans co-belonging without any responsible condition for belonging, for singularities forming a community without affirming any identity. Friendship, in this context, posits to be “one name for the co-belonging of non-identical singularities” (Gandhi, 2005, p. 17). Looking at the aspirations of India's national liberation struggle and the friendships that formed a critical juncture of garnering solidarity from anti-imperialist struggles all over the world, Gandhi argues for the centrality of these affective ties in the formation and sustenance of anticolonial resistance. In doing so, she rejects the Greek philosophical idea of *homophilia*, that is, the tendency of people to bond with people who are similar to them, seeking inspiration instead in the Epicurean ideal of *philoxenia* or love for strangers, friendship of strangers, foreigners, or if I may stretch to the seditious friendships of anti-nationals fighting to build a new world, for an impossible community. Leela Gandhi's postulation of *philoxenia* finds deep resonance with Rabindranath Tagore's politics of friendship carved out of his critique of nationalism. Resisting the barbed wires of nationalism, Tagore posited instead a cosmopolitanism built out of sharing ideas and building friendships across the East and West so as to effect political change and progress. Reminiscing about the ethics of friendship that had once tied the whole of East, “the only natural tie which can exist between nations”, Tagore writes:

There was a living communication of hearts, a nervous system evolved through which messages ran between us about the deepest needs of humanity. We did not stand in fear of each other; we had not to arm ourselves to keep each other in check; our relation was not that of self-interest, of exploration and spoliation of each other's

pocket; ideas and ideals were exchanged, gifts of the highest love were offered and taken; no difference of languages and customs hindered us in approaching each other heart to heart; no pride of race or insolent consciousness of superiority, physical or mental, marred our relation; our arts and literatures put forth new leaves and flowers under the influence of this sunlight of united hearts, and races belonging to different lands and languages and histories acknowledged the highest unity of man and the deepest bond of love. (Tagore, 2010, p. 14)

Male friendships, thus, form a central theme of many of his fictions (Tagore, 1916; Tagore, 1910) written in the backdrop of the nationalist struggle, however, this friendship is also carved as a threat to the heterosexual marriage, as a disruptor of the family, as much as of the polity. The construction of the polity in India also meant an organising of the Brahmanical Hindu male elite, an organisation that Jyotirao Phule described to be public in form, but solely an expression of private interest. The polity therefore, as Phule imagined can only be constructed through the true representation and membership of all sections of society. In his *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee (1993) showed how in the modern nation state, community got reconstructed at the level of state when love and innate belongingness of community/ family were ‘read into’ or ‘imagined’ in the nation. However, in the colonised state where there is no scope for social equality, not even bourgeois equality, the colonised refusing membership of the civil society of subjects, constructed their national identity within a different narrative:

They create, consequently, a very different domain - a cultural domain marked by the distinctions of the material and the spiritual, the outer and the inner. This inner cultural domain is declared the sovereign territory of the nation, where the colonial state is not allowed entry, even as the outer domain surrendered to the colonial power.

The rhetoric here (Gandhi is a particularly good example) is of love, kinship, austerity, sacrifice. (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 237)

As this affective community so constructed becomes the monopoly of the Brahmanical Hindu elite men, those written out are left to fight a double battle for space in both the home and the world, and it is in this fight that ideals of social justice gets expanded. It is therefore no surprise that Ambedkar chose to launch his battle on the contestation over this public, his Mahad satyagraha in 1927 from his first major weekly, *Bahiskrut Bharat* (Outcast India) (Omvedt, 2003). Anti-caste struggle built itself through contestations over water, roads, education, employment, all inch by inch working towards laying claim to all aspects of public life. As Gail Omvedt notes:

Here the ‘public’ required to be created in terms of building up new human groupings, through redefined and widened bonds of social intercourse, which involve sharing of water and food. These aspects of human interaction were precisely what was regulated, hierarchized, and made exclusive within the traditional caste society. In taking up these issues, in struggling for access to such things as water and food, the anti-caste movement was declaring that the new India would be something very different from the feudal caste society. (Omvedt, 2003, p. 141).

It is as outliers to this ‘polity’ that Ambedkar constructs his vision of *maithri* as both an ethical and philosophical response to the alienated selves constituted by the Hindu social order. V Geetha (2018) defines the Ambedkarite notion of *maithri* as “an instance of active fellowship with the world, a fellowship that does not elaborate, codify and render every difference an aspect of hierarchy and inequality. *Maithri* expresses an annulment of differences between oneself and the larger world in a particular sense: one is to be mindful of differences; yet the point is to go forth from one’s situation and enter another context and

world in a spirit of righteousness”. Noting how it differs from Gandhian idea of love that formed a crucial role in nation-building, one that demanded absolution, and stemmed from penitence, maithri she believed sought friendship, wherein justice was not just about recognition but also about a common notion of humanity as the recognition also meant an acknowledgement of violation of ethics of friendship (Geetha, 2018).

Contestations between the home and the world, over the gendered idea of the inner and the outer space, too began to play out in these times through women's claim to the public.

Women who had so far been relegated to the household, the *oikos*, with the role of emotional and physical labour of caregiving thrust on them, begin to make a claim to the polity by laying claim to the public. In 1905, as debates on women's rights - abolition of sati, widow remarriage, women's education, age of consent, religious rituals raged, grappling for a new discourse of women's rights, Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, penned her feminist utopia, *Sultana's Dream* (1905), constructing a feminist *polis*, the idyllic Ladyland of two hour workdays, solar technologies, community kitchens, lush gardens, and collective care, nurturance, friendship - a country where women were in charge, and where friendship not family or blood kinship bound people to each other in an imagined homeland. Rokeya's worldbuilding project opens up possibilities of imagining a new politics of feminist friendship in India (Hussain, 1905).

Despite Rokeya's articulation of a politics of female friendship through a new imagination of care, female friendships remained undertheorised, relegated to the private, the *andarmahal/zenana* (the private sphere inhabited by women/ the interior world of women). Yet, where political philosophy fell short, fiction, memoirs, lived experiences chronicled a different history. Perhaps one of the most significant representations of 19th century anxieties over women's laying stakes in the 'polity' and the challenge it posed in altering power relations in both home and the world can be read through Tagore's writings. While his songs came to be

the effective vehicle for expressing passion, affect that reigned women's relational world, that powerfully performed the emotional spectrum of female friendships, his short stories, novels reflected the dangers of 'excesses' of such affect. Written in 1914, Tagore's short story '*Streer Patra*' ('Letter from the Wife') explored this radical possibility of female friendships in disrupting heteropatriarchal social fabric in both the home and the world. The short story is basically a poignant letter that the protagonist Mrinal writes to her husband. She writes the letter not as a wife, but as Mrinal. She writes about secretly writing poetry, amidst housework. She writes about finding space within the home where she could be herself. She writes how the space outside the house had gardens, was beautifully kept, while the interior space that was the workspace of women was dark, suffocating. However, it was in this interior world of women that she found friendship. She speaks of her friendship with her sister-in-law's sister, Bindu. Homeless and poor, after her mother's death Bindu was given refuge in their home. Mrinal took her under her wing, and an intimate relationship grew amongst them that was soon perceived to be a threat to the family. So, she was soon forcibly married off to a mentally ill man. It was in that marital home that Bindu finally killed herself to escape from the marriage. Bindu's death not only liberated her, but also Mrinal as it gave her the final push to leave her marriage. In Mrinal's assertion of herself as Bindu's friend, we see a radical change in her perception of her new self, her perception of her relational world. Choosing to end her marriage, lay claim to the 'public', Mrinal also lays claims to a new relational world, a world where she is Bindu's friend, a world where she imagines herself to be Meerabai's friend, a world where she chooses to be her own friend (Tagore, 1914).

Tagore's parable of dangerous friendship posits before us a politicisation of female friendship, traces of which could be found in his sister, Swarnakumari Devi's establishment of the Sakhi Samiti (Society of Girl/women Friends). Founded in 1886, Sakhi Samiti is perhaps the first recorded women's organisation in Indian history. Envisioned as an organisation working

towards the upliftment of widows and destitute women, Sakhi Samiti soon became a mobilising ground for women for anticolonial struggle (Sengupta, 2024). While little written history can be found on the organisation and why it was named so, one could speculate that the trivialisation of women's friendship in mainstream discourse helped the organisation to avoid surveillance of the colonial state, and become a recruiting ground for the Indian National Congress. Furthermore, one could speculate that widows, destitute women who were already deemed by the polity to be fallen, could only be redeemed through the friendship of upper caste and elite Hindu women. Born out of Swarnakumari's belief in education being the gateway for liberation, Sakhi Samiti envisioned the liberation of widows through education, through political participation, rather than through remarriage. Female friendship, in this context, also opened up possibilities for exploration of feminist subjectivities that laid the initial bricks for the Indian women's movement.

The early rumblings of the women's movement could therefore be felt through the politicisation of female friendships, through claiming an equal space even though it was within the rubric of a reformist movement. It can be traced in the revolutionary friendship of Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh as they looked the Brahmanical society in the eye and opened schools for Mahar women (Chikermane, 2024). Tremors of it can be felt in the revolutionary friendship of Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta as they transgressed the proscribed roles for women to open up new worlds, new modes of belonging for women (Gupta, 2014). It can be mapped through the histories of marriage resistance and sworn sisterhood (Raymond, 2001). Excavation of this history, of this genealogy of female affect also becomes a labour of friendship - a task that the Indian women's movement gracefully undertook.

In 1991, when Susie Tharu and K. Lalita took on the burden of compiling women's writing in India, the exercise itself became an act of friendship as several women came together to

find manuscripts lurking in cobwebbed shelves, in letters in old trunks and memories of friends. It is through this excavation that we come to know of women attempting to occupy the 'public' through writing, of women carving their relational world through writing. The curation process itself exemplifies a history of literary friendships. We are acquainted with Hannah Catherine Mullen's *Phulmoni O Korunar Biboron* (1852), a handbook written for converted Christian women where friendships among women structure the plot as women are advised on how to lead good Christian lives. We get to know of Swarnakumari Devi's *Chinna Mukul* (1879) that tells the story of friendship of sisters. We come across literary friendships of women writers trying to lean on each other in a male dominated profession. In 1915, Nirupama Devi wrote *Didi*, a fiction set in the 20th century backdrop of debates around widowhood and polygamy, where she tenderly highlights the power of female friendship through the complex friendship between the characters Surama and Charu. A widow herself, Nirupama Devi's literary aspirations are said to have been nurtured by her deep friendship with another writer, Anurupa Devi, a bond that was founded on mutual encouragement and inspiration and lasted till their death (Bandopadhyay, 2016-17). Similarly, Mahadevi Verma's poetic journey is said to have begun through her roommate Subhadra Kumari, as Verma writes, "While others used to play outside, me and Subhadra used to sit on a tree and let our creative thoughts flow together...She used to write in Khariboli, and soon I also started to write in Khariboli...this way, we used to write one or two poems a day..." (Verma, 1973). Rejecting marriage, Mahadevi Verma found her own chosen family of friends and animals, her fellow wayfarers of whom she writes in her book *Mera Parivar*, positing her ideation of chosen family. Mahadevi Verma's organising of the first women's poet conference further highlights the collaborative activity of friendship that played an important role in helping women find their footing in an otherwise male world. We hear of women running publishing houses to support women writers. We hear how Tarigonda Venkamamba's poems were found

in her aunt's prayer room, how though Venkamamba's work had found no place in public systems of distribution, it had been kept alive in an alternative mode, as it was handed across from woman to woman (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991).

Aparna Bandopadhyay in her paper 'Attempting the Pen: Women's Foray into Fiction in Colonial Bengal' alerts us to the deep anxiety of authorship that marked women's foray into literature in colonial Bengal wherein these literary friendships and professional camaraderie helped women hand hold each other to navigate these hitherto uncharted territories (Bandopadhyay, 2016-17). She further spoke of collective reading sessions organized in the *andarmahals* that not only helped women gain confidence to share their work, to engage with their readership, but also perhaps became grounds for nurturing friendships, comradeships. It is through these scraps of information, these clues left by women that we can put together a history of women's friendship in India, a history that is built through the construction of an imagined community and the sculpting of the new woman citizen.

Another such excavation of women's friendships can be found in Geeta Thadani's in her book *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (1981) search for a queer genealogy through cultures of sakhiani (two women living together in friendship). Tracing tradition of *sakhivallabhis*, Thadani (1981) writes how in today's secular writing of history words like 'bhagini', 'sakhi', 'jami' have lost their sexual connotations and are simply translated as 'sister' or the 'woman friend'. In her quest for our own indigenous cultures of woman-to-woman bonding, she stumbles upon the Gujarati tradition of *maitri karar*²⁵ or the friendship pact. She uncovers the tribal culture of women's friendship wherein two tribal women celebrated their friendship by a ritual where they drank rice wine from each other's glass,

²⁵ While Thadani describes it as a ritual of friendship invoking women's relationship with women, the ritual has been heterosexualised and is often used as a form of Civil union among heterosexual partners.

shared a mango, washed each other's feet, and sought blessings from a tribal deity so that there may be no strife in the relationship (Thadani 1981). She further talks of the *sahiyas* who were deemed to be lifelong companions, a tradition built on ideals of reciprocity, mutuality, companionship. Through the lores of *jami*, the kindred spirits, through the stories of dual feminine deities in Rigveda, Thadani (1981) traces gyne focal arrangements that open up possibilities of alternate kinship structures that are based not on the concept of seeing children and women as property, but rather on nurturing aspects of collective motherhood, collective care. In seeking a genealogy of lesbian desire, Thadani (1981) also taps into the way friendship historically served as a mask for queer relationalities and the uneasy relationship that lay between the two, marking how the moment women's friendships attempt to leave the tutelage of heterosexuality, they become dangerous, seditious, unruly. It is through the assertion of such dangerous, seditious, unruly that the revolutionary potential of politics of friendship can be teased out. However, while resonating Rich's idea of political lesbian continuum, this dangerousness sometimes led to privatisation and eventual depoliticisation of friendships, to a liberal notion of friendship, yet if politicised could lead towards revolutionary friendships.

Theorising Revolutionary Friendship

One of the crucial trajectories of the revolutionary tradition of friendship comes with the emergence of the idea of the comrade. Breaking from the liberal idea of friendship merely being a personal bond that can become a vehicle for acquiring individual power, or a mode of accommodating the 'other', the idea of the comrade promises a form of political belonging that is directed towards disrupting the status quo and working towards material equality not just in terms of virtue but also in terms of commonality of possession. A comrade is therefore one who fights with you at the same side of the barricade and shares the political vision of

abolishing private property, and thereby the withering of the family and the state. The revolutionary moment during the Paris Commune in 1871 enabled women to cross gender and class boundaries that had so far regulated their public and private behavior. Carolyn J. Eichner brings to light the myriad ways the Commune served as a fertile milieu for the birth of feminist socialisms, causing a rupture in established socio-political relations (Eichner, 2004). She scripts a different history of communardes underlying how this identity had not only opened up new forms of political belonging for women, through their challenging of institutions of marriage, family, they scripted a new vision of political, and social justice. During the 72 days, through the building and defending of the commune, the working-class women of Paris claimed their stake in the polity, to the new world as Communardes²⁶(female members of the commune).

As the dream for an egalitarian world spread over the world, the search for alternate egalitarian terms to address one another, to define political relationships too began. The liberal democratic revolutions of 1848 across Europe sparked the rise of socialism wherein the German word *kamerad* gained traction (Dean, 2019). In April 1884, the Socialist Democratic Front's magazine, *Justice*, first used the term 'comrade'. As the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848) read history of hitherto existing society as a history of class struggle, it laid bare the property relations that actually shaped the family and the state, tearing asunder other relationships between proletariats (Marx and Engels, 1848). The idea of the comrade, in this context, opened up new revelations as the comrade was not just a friend, or a fellow traveller but also people who shared the same political vision, as those who were on the same side of the class struggle (Dean, 2019). It indexed a new world building that was

²⁶ We find here a gendered term used for female members of the commune. While carrying the same valence as the word comrade, this word also carried with it the responsibility of worldbuilding that the Commune made possible at that moment.

slowly getting shaped through labour struggles, through ideological debates and battles waged against the capitalist world order.

The idea of political friendship that Marx and Engels lived and propagated, transforms in Leninism as a revolutionary weapon that can be wielded to take forward the class struggle as Lenin develops the idea of the party (Lenin, 1961) and the state (Lenin, 1999). Lenin advocates for friendship between workers, and friendship of workers with their peasant allies to be the basis on which the class war can be waged. The revolutionary party, in Leninist politics of friendship, becomes the platform where friendship, comradeship between people is fully expressed as political content: “The only serious organisational principle for the active workers of our movement should be the strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries. Given these qualities, something even more than “democratism” would be guaranteed to us, namely, complete, comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries” (Lenin, 1961). Furthermore, he insists on the interaction of the working class with segments of society outside itself, such that they may learn how each engages with class struggle, thereby urging for an intriguing encounter between political discourses on revolutionary struggle and concepts of friendship (Bushnell, 2013). It is therefore, one's position and role in the class struggle that becomes for Lenin the litmus test for defining who is a friend, who is an enemy. It is then no surprise that Lenin called the Tsarist Russia ‘a prison of the people’ and the ten days that shook the world vehemently tore it down and replaced it with ‘friendship of peoples’ (Lenin, 1894).

Thus, while the Greek philosophers conceived friendship to be the bedrock of liberal democracy in the republic, Lenin points out bourgeois democracy to merely being ‘freedom for the slave-owners’ wherein the modern wage slaves were too crushed by want and poverty to be bothered with democracy or politics, thereby arguing that “the majority of the population is debarred from participation in public and political life” (Lenin, 1919). The

seizing of means of production and the abolition of private property will then make the state redundant, and thereby make way for the establishment of people's democracy, where, "freed from capitalist slavery, from the untold horrors, savagery, absurdities, and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse" (Lenin, 1919).

Soon after, the vision of the new world becomes a reality in a flurry of events that shake the world. The Tsarist regime was replaced with the Soviet Union, with the USSR constitution in 1977 declaring it to be a union of "the working class, the collective-farm peasantry and the people's intelligentsia, the friendship of peoples and nationalities" (USSR Ninth Convocation, 1977). Writing at the helm of the establishment of Soviet Union, when these revolutionary changes in the ideas of nationalism, nation states and democracy were being instituted, Alexandra Kollontai, as a Marxist Feminist, posited comradeship and solidarity to be the principles on which the new communist society was to be built. In her vision of the new society, she defines solidarity not just as an awareness of common interests, but also as building from the intellectual and emotional ties that link members of the collective (Kollontai, 1923). Identifying how the bourgeois system has over the years tangled our emotions with the principles of property, thereby limiting its fullest exploration. She also recognises the inequality of the sexes, that often leaves women dependent on male complacency and insensitivity, as a hindrance to comradely feelings, The task of the proletarian ideology, she professes, is then to ensure the exploration of multi-sidedness of emotions for the realisation of the working-class ideals of comradeship. The ideal of love-comradeship ideated in 'Make Way for the Winged Eros', on which she hinges the foundations of the new world, primarily involves "recognition of rights and integrity of the other's personality, a mutual steadfast support and sensitive sympathy, and responsiveness to the other's needs" (Kollontai, 1923). With the abolition of the family and marriage as

institutions of control over private property, it is love-comradeship that she believes would form the basis of the new socio-political organisation. Furthermore, she indicates comradeship as an affective relationship that can spread its wings once the economic relationship is done away with. Comradeship in this context, becomes a political relation that also predicates on a new morality, making it as much an ethical relation. A comrade, therefore, is someone who believes in the inalienable rights of man, in preserving the integrity of human dignity and in the dismantling of all oppressive structures. While formulating proletarian morality thus she insists on conforming to three basic principles:

1. Equality in relationships an end to masculine egoism and the slavish suppression of the female personality;
2. Mutual recognition of the rights of the other, of the fact that one does not own the heart and soul of the other (the sense of property, encouraged by bourgeois culture);
3. Comradely sensitivity, the ability to listen and understand the inner workings of the loved person (bourgeois culture demanded this only from the woman) (Kollontai, 1923).

As Lenin talks about the abolition of private property to be one of the preconditions for true friendships, Kollontai gathering from her experiences with working with working class women, also talks about the abolition of family and socialisation of housework and care to be necessary for women to become their full personhood and thereby explore the political possibilities of friendship, comradeship: *'In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades'* (Kollontai, 1920).

Just as the revolutionary friendship of Marx and Engels changed the history of the world, a different communist herstory can be traced through the oft overlooked stories of revolutionary comradeships of Kollontai and Inessa Armand and Zoya Shadurskaya, Rosa

Luxembourg's passionate friendships with Clara Zetkin, Sophie Liebnicht, Lui Kautsky, Mathilde Jacob, Henriette Roland Holst. These friendships forged through shared political vision, through uncompromising fights against revisionism and sexism within the party, not only shed light on the revolutionary possibilities of women's friendships but also bring to light the complexities, the unbridled passion and the tenderness with which they lived their lives, cradled their dreams, and kept on the fight against insurmountable odds (Porter, 1980; Rose 2013; Dunayeskaya 2019). Raya Dunayevskaya (2019) writes about the role female friendships played in Rosa's life, in developing her feminist politics. While the mainstream communist biographies keep framing her life through her relationship with Jogiches, through her ideological fights with Lenin, Kautsky, Bebel, it is only through the labour of her female friends, that we get a glimpse of Rosa in all her complexities, all her passion (Dunayevskaya, 2019, Rose, 2013). It was these friendships, tempered through the fire of often having to fight from the margins, to shout to make themselves heard against blatant chauvinism and misogyny, that made Rosa, Clara realise the need for an autonomous women's movement. Thus, while the biographers have sketched Rosa in a certain way, her female friends and comrades had come together looking party censorship in the eye, defying Nazi diktats, to publish her letters so as to preserve the memory of Rosa in all her contradictions, in all her revolutionary passion. This dialectic between the liberal idea of friendship and the revolutionary idea of friendship can be further gauged from the way Kollontai framed her personal political journey in her autobiography vis a vis her own political views on love-comradeship. While her autobiography is aligned with the party line and uses the required political tone of a communist party worker, keeping the emotions at bay (Kollontai, 1926), it is her biography sketched by Cathy Porter (1980) that later brings to life the passionate revolutionary female friendships that sustained her political journey in the face of sexism and hostility. Also, where Kollontai's political treatises fall short, her fiction speaks. Perhaps, the

most palpable reflection of her idea of revolutionary comradeship between women can be found in Kollontai's fictional writings, specially in her story 'The Love of Three Generations' (1929) where she tells the story of an intergenerational female comradeship that seamlessly weaves in her political imaginations of revolutionary sisterhood and the ethics of love-comradeship.

It is these ideals of revolutionary friendship asserted by Rosa and Kollontai that we find resonated in Adrienne Rich's vision of feminist worldbuilding through the politics of female friendships. It is also what we see resonating in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's vision of socialist feminist worldbuilding in *Herland* (1915). It is also what we see travelling to India through cheap Soviet publications where the women's movement comes into shape as women begin to step out of the roles prescribed for them to claim a stake in the polity, to find themselves as comrades. We will discuss this in detail in the next chapter. Unpacking the history of the women's movement through the lens of friendship would therefore also mean to locate women's claiming of stake in the polity and thereby to understand what a revolutionary politics of feminist friendship would mean for the project of building a different world. It is in this context, that this thesis begins this search through the emergence of the figure of the woman comrade in Indian polity, and to trace the journey of the politics of feminist friendships in India from the idea of the comrade to that of the saheli.

Chapter 2

Another World is Possible: Party, Communes, and The Comrade Woman

Comrade bole daak dile keu, comrade bole daak

Buker bhetor rokthe chholat dheu chholat chholat

Uddam nadi paharer barricade

Sob mile daake ekakar comrade comrade

Dekho, lakho hridoyer bandore ek surya othe

Lakho swapner oronye shei eki ful rokthe fote

Lakho shaheeder sobuj samadhi rokthe pichil path

Tomakei tai daake barbar durjoy durbar

Comrade mane pashapashi thaka, comrade mane sathi

Comrade mane notun prithibi – notun ekta jaati

Dekho tritiyo duniya raage gorgor fushche

Karagar bhenge mukto aloy tomakei kachhe dakche,

Chabuker niche rokto ghome tumio to shei kalo manusher ekjon

Sara debe naki, debe naki sara,

Uttal ei raate,

Comrade comrade...

(De, 1995)

[When you are called comrade, when you become a comrade

Your heart is filled, blood rippling waves

Wild untamed rivers, barricades of mountains

All voices call in unison "comrade, comrade."

Look, in the harbour of millions of hearts, the same sun rises

In the forest of millions of dreams, the same fiery flower blooms

On the green graves of millions of martyrs, the path is slippery with blood

That's why they call you repeatedly, invincible, unstoppable

Comrade means fighting shoulder to shoulder; comrade means a fellow traveller

Comrade means a new world, a new people

Look, the Third World roars with fury, rumbling with rage.

Breaking free from prisons, the light of freedom calls you closer.

Under the whip, in blood and sweat, you too are one of the oppressed.

Will you respond, will you answer the call

On this stormy night?

Comrade, comrade...] (Author's translation)

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in 1941 during the Indian freedom struggle as a left cultural platform with the aim of organising local cultural squads as well as spread awareness amongst people through cultural medium. The song (written and composed by Ashok De) quoted above, performed by the IPTA, articulates not just the revolutionary ideal represented by the idea of the comrade but also the emotional and ethical aspects that such a politics of friendship and friendship in politics entails. It speaks to a political belongingness that inspired people to stake everything to, fight for an impossible dream. A 'comrade' is therefore not just a fellow traveller but one who enables and supports a difficult journey of social and personal transformation. The word encapsulates a relationship of passion and resilience forged through shared struggles and political vision. . A comrade is also someone whom one may not know personally, yet may feel intimately related to through a shared revolutionary ideal.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the task of social transformation required the imagination of new social relationalities, and a new morality articulated through a new politics of friendship. It is in this context that this chapter will explore what these ethical, emotional connotations meant for women's political subjectivity, for women claiming a stake in the polity through comradeships.

This chapter will unpack the histories of the social mobilisations that predated and prepared the ground for the emergence of the autonomous women's movement in the 1980s. Tracing the history of women's political participation in India, this chapter will read this history through women's subjectivity, struggles of social reproduction in communes, underground shelters and sites of resistance, the promises and failures of these experiments, to understand a politics of women's comradeships. The chapter will begin with a potted history of these years to contextualise the political economy that led to such widespread participation of

women in the revolutionary nationalist freedom struggle²⁷ (1930), Bombay mill strikes²⁸ (1929), Tebhaga²⁹ (1946), Telengana³⁰ (1944) and Naxalbari³¹ (1967) movement. It will understand the impact these struggles had in building the women's movement in India, and the enabling conditions it created for female friendships. However, it is imperative to note that while the large participation of women in these struggles made it possible for women to lay claim to the polity, it is only with recent scholarships (Custers, 1987; Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989; Panjabi, 2016; Loomba, 2018; Roy, 2012; Roy, 2010) that a feminist historiography has emerged of these times that looks back into these affective herstories with a feminist eye that is keen to read into politics of care, friendship, comradeship that had nurtured these movements. This chapter will therefore read the history of these years through the 'eye' of the recent feminist scholarship. The objective of this chapter, though, is not to retell the histories of events, but instead narrate an affective history through women's friendships, the legacies they built, and the way these shaped the autonomous women's movement in the years to come. This chapter is more of a pre-history to help contextualise the autonomous women's movement and the idea of *saheli*³² (meaning friend in hindi) that emerges through it. Since the autonomous women's movement emerged as both a rupture and continuum of the communist movement, the continuities of women's friendships and political affect from the idea of comrade to *saheli* equips us with a better understanding of the

²⁷ By the revolutionary nationalist freedom struggle this chapter primarily refers to the armed struggle in Bengal led by Surya Sen and his Indian Republican Army in 1930.

²⁸ Led by the Girni Kaamgar Union, the Bombay mill strike broke out with the demand for fair wages, standardisation of wages and bonus payments. Workers from around 64 mills had gone on strike across Bombay.

²⁹ The Tebhaga movement in 1946 under the slogan 'Adhi nai, tebhaga chai' was waged against landlords under the leadership of the All-India Kisan Sabha, the peasant front of the Communist Party of India. At that time sharecroppers were supposed to give away half of their harvest to the landlords. The demand for Tebhaga intended to reduce the landlord's share to one third.

³⁰ It was a Communist led peasant movement in Telengana against the exploitative nature of land-ownership and the forced labour system prevalent at the time.

³¹ The Naxalbari movement in 1967 had begun with a peasant struggle that had soon turned into a political challenge to the bourgeois Indian state.

³² The term 'saheli' used in the autonomous women's movement as a political relationality through which women could relate to women politicised women's friendships in India in a way it had not been done before. Chapter 3 discusses this idea in depth.

autonomous women's movement. The structure of this chapter will therefore not be diachronic, but rather be synchronic, focusing on themes and patterns that shaped the understanding of female friendship and ethics of comradeship in these years. The first section of this chapter will look at the political economy of India from the 1930s-1970s to unpack the enabling conditions that made women's entry into the political arena possible and the idea of comradeship that formed the basis of a new kind of worldbuilding. The second section, will construct the feminist historiography of these times through testimonies, stories and anecdotes. This section will also interrogate the emergence of 'the new woman' through the communist movement which created new contexts of women's political belonging comrade relations and political subjectivities. The third section will explore how the communist Party also created conditions for the emergence of the new communist family. Communist women's experiences of living in communes and underground shelters will be used to analyse the imagination of care that was fostered through comradeship and collectivisation of reproductive work. Through such an analysis, the section will discuss how the new family so forged tended to replicate the template of the patriarchal family. The fourth section will explore how feminist comradeship offered women a leverage to raise issues that might otherwise have been subsumed under the grand narrative of struggle, and enabled envisioning the idea of comradeship itself as an ethical relation that holds each other accountable to certain principles. The concluding section will cull out an ethics of comradeship that is intrinsically linked to the idea of fighting for a communist world and thereby trace the journey from comrade to saheli in the struggle against patriarchy through the experiences of women in these movements.

Brief Historical Background: Setting The Scene for Women's Entry to The Political Arena

As discussed in the previous chapter, ideas of friendship, comradeship in the western world had been the cornerstone of constructing the polis, of envisaging terms of citizenship, and of building democracy. Conceptualization of friendship therefore historically also corresponded with conceptualisation of the state, and thereby with dreams of a different world. The fight for a new world bore with it the struggle for a new vision for relationships that can be forged beyond feudal kinship structures, beyond the determinism of private property. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) song speaks to that quest. It posits comrade as a political relation that binds ideologically knit communities. Ideas of friendship, comradeship have therefore been at the heart of revolutionary struggle. As Jodi Dean defines in her book *Comrades: An Essay in Political Belonging*, "Comradeship binds action, and in this binding, this solidarity, it collectivizes and directs action in the shared vision for the future. For communists, this is the egalitarian future of a society emancipated from the determinations of private property and capitalism and reorganized according to the free association, common benefit and collective decisions of the producers." (Dean, 2019, p.10).

The establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917 made the impossible dream possible. Not only did it posit a different vision of development, of a worker's state, but also offered a new vision of relationships, a new morality, and a new internationalism. Formed with the promise of being a 'friendship of peoples and nationalities', the Communist Party of Soviet Union strove to spread its ideals across the world. It infused new hope in the nationalist freedom struggle in India. The imperialist forces in India were already shaken by the militant peasant

uprisings of Santal rebellion³³ in 1855-56, the Sepoy Mutiny³⁴ in 1857 and the Indigo revolt³⁵ in 1859-60. The Bombay textile mill strike in 1929 triggered militant struggles in factories as well that had women at the forefront. The influx of communist ideals from learnings of Russian revolution further consolidated communist revolutionaries in the Indian National Congress. The armed struggle that had organised students and youth found further political direction through the communist ideology of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) founded in 1928 under the leadership of Chandrasekhar Azad, Sachindranath and Bhagat Singh, and the Indian Republican Army (IRA) formed under the leadership of Surya Sen in 1930 and inspired by the Irish revolutionaries. These students and youth waged an ideological battle against British imperialism. The Swadeshi movement triggered by the partition of Bengal in 1905 had brought women to the streets, and Gandhi's call for satyagraha and the breaking of the salt laws had captured the imagination of women. While Gandhi encouraged the participation of women in mass struggle without disturbing too much the social fabric of feudo-patriarchal relations, the Chittagong Armoury Raid in 1930 under the leadership of Surya Sen not only brought the British government to its knees by making it a liberated zone for four days, but also presented to the political arena 'dangerous' revolutionary women like Kalpana Datta and Pritilata Waddedar whose involvement threatened to topple the status quo and push forth a radical new image of the woman comrade (Gupta, 2013). This was a new image of defiance that we then find reiterated through Bina

³³ Hool or the Santhal insurrection under the leadership of Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav, Phulo, Jhano was one of India's first armed struggles against British imperialism that not only attacked their autonomy over their land, but also imposed exploitative revenue systems. The entire region of Chhota Nagpur, then known as Daminni-Koh rose in rebellion to oust the dikus (outsiders).

³⁴ 'The Sepoys were in fact peasants in uniform' as propounded by Eric Stokes (1986). The Sepoy mutiny was waged against British social reforms, unjust land taxes. Initiated by the Bengal Native infantry, the rebellion soon spread amongst civilians as well.

³⁵ The Indigo revolt was waged against the Indigo plantation who were forcing peasants to cultivate indigo instead of food crops. The indigo planters provided loans to the farmers, and those who took loans became bonded labours on their own farms. The revolt began when the indigo farmers in Nadia district refused to grow indigo in their land, and soon it spread all across Bengal.

Das's unapologetic firing of the gun to kill the British Governor of Bengal in 1932³⁶ (Aranha, 2018), in Nanibala and Dukaribala's friendship in Presidency jail³⁷ (Singh, 1996), in Matangini Hazra's defiance in the face of police firing in Tamluk in 1942.

The growing contradiction between the landless peasants and the feudal landlords backed by colonial powers further intensified by the starvation and death in the Bengal famine. The politics of hunger made way for a new way of organizing as women poured into the polity, bringing with them reproductive work onto the streets. The Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS)³⁸ organized relief kitchens that fostered a new culture of comradeship born out of a politics of empathy, of an affective politics as the slogans '*Keu khabe ar keu khabe na ta hobe na ta hobe na*' (some will eat, some will not, that won't do, that won't do) raged in the air (Panjabi, 2016; Chakravartty, 2005). Panjabi (2016) notes how the ontological bonding forged by MARS comrades through reproductive work paved the way for organising peasant women in the Tebhaga movement in 1946. Similarly, the anger simmering over the autocratic policies of the Nizam in the princely state of Hyderabad and the oppression of the feudal production relations had erupted into the Telangana movement in 1944. Yet, it is imperative

³⁶ In her court statement in 1932, Bina Das stated, "I confess that I fired at the Governor on the last Convocation Day at the Senate House. I hold myself entirely responsible for it. My object was to die, and if I had to die, I wanted to do it nobly, fighting against this despotic system of government which has kept my country in perpetual subjection to its infinite shame and endless sufferings, and all the while fighting in a way which cannot but tell. I fired at the Governor impelled by my love for my country which is being repressed and what I attempted to do for the sake of my country was a great violence on my own nature too." (Aranha, 2018)

³⁷ Nanibala Devi, one of India's first woman state prisoner was arrested for providing shelter to leaders of the nationalist struggle. As an under-trial prisoner, Nanibala was subjected to brutal torture during state repression. When she was transferred to Presidency Jail in Kolkata, she had begun hunger strike to protest the torture meted out to her. It is here that she met Dukaribala Devi who was also a political prisoner. The two struck up an unlikely friendship.

³⁸ The Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) was formed in early 1940s. A people's front aligned with the Communist Party of India; MARS could be defined as one of the first militant women's mass organisations in India (Panjabi, 2016). Built during the Second World War when Japan entered into alliance with the axis powers, MARS was a joint anti-fascist front to create women's resistance against the imminent Japanese attack. While initially founded by urban middle class women, MARS played a critical role in battle of home and hearth during the Bengal famine, leading women to gherao ration shops and build relief kitchens, these programs also attracted working class women and thereby paved the ground for organising peasant women for the Tebhaga movement.

to note that the ‘official’ historiography of these movements mostly obfuscates women's voices, relegating them to the margins, to footnotes, only to be recovered later through feminist revisiting of these movements (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989; Panjabi, 2016; Loomba, 2019; Roy, 2012; Roy, 2011). The partition in 1947 broadened the faultlines in the newly emerging imagined community, with the refugee woman standing outlier to the framework of nationalism and dislodging “nation as the primary register of political imagination” and opening up myriad different “forms of civic and political belonging” (Chakraborty, 2018, p.16). The disillusionment of the refugees with the nationalist rhetoric as they struggled to build homes from scratch and fend for two square meals a day was wielded by the Communist Party into a political struggle for basic rights of citizenship. The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) was set up in 1950 closely followed by the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council (RCRC) who worked together to take to the streets with demands of adequate food, affordable public transport, fair wages, accommodation and peasants’ rights, thereby laying new claims to the polity and transforming the politics of the city (polis) (Sengupta, 2019). Women played a significant role in this battle for the home and the hearth, in anti-eviction struggles, from an affective level that no politicised these movements in a new way by feminising it.

This is also the time that Nehru’s non-aligned politics and his fascination with the Soviet experiment opened the gates for pouring in of Soviet books and magazines that ushered in a new dream, a new vision of worldbuilding, and newer ideas of comradeship in India. In a collection of essays on socialist culture in the third world curated and edited by Vijay Prashad (2019), Pankaj Mishra (2019), Deepa Bhasthi (2019), Revati Laul (2019) write how the vision of Progress publishers in Moscow and the setting up of Raduga publishers meant opening up of a new world for the third world. Drawing from his own experiences of growing up in a small railway town in North India reading *Soviet Literature*, *Soviet Life*, colourful

children's books of folklore from Russia, Ukraine and the sturdily bound red books containing collections of Marx, Lenin, Plekhanov, Stalin, Gorky, Tolstoy, Pushkin from subsidised Soviet bookshops, libraries, and book fairs set up even in small towns and cities "where nothing much happened", Mishra (2019) reminisces how for their generation "the Soviet Union alone appeared to promise an escape from our limited, dusty world" (Mishra, 2019, p. 67). As the subsidised Soviet books translated in different regional languages made their way into lower middle-class households all over India till the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, new ideals of comradeship and a new vocabulary trickled into *addas*, political discussions and rallies, and onto the streets. It also brought with it news of the world - of the Vietnamese people liberating themselves in 1945, of the Cuban people overthrowing the dictatorial regime of Batista to establish a socialist state in 1959, of the Chinese people ousting imperialist forces and establishing the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong in 1949. While the brutal state repression and the failure of the Communist Party to give shape to people's aspirations resulted in the withdrawing of the Tebhaga and Telangana movement, the anger, frustration and growing disillusionment over the promises of the Nehruvian state continued to simmer in the hinterland and cities as the Indian state began to more openly declare its allegiances to the Indian bourgeoisie and subservient to imperialist forces (DN, 1988). The expansionist aims of broadening the market pushed India into war with China in 1962, causing a rift in the Communist Party of India as it split into Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1964. The predatory exploitation of the countryside, the price rise and food crisis in Bengal paved the way for further mass struggles as the CPI(M) in Bengal organized gheraos of ration shops, and mass rallies forming the broad platform named Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC). Women were in the forefront of these struggles defying brutal state repression. Challenging the dominant understanding of insurgent politics as fringe

to parliamentary democracy in India, Samaddar (2019) looks at these popular movements of the 50s and 60s as prehistories of the Naxalite movement that initiated a 'collective claim-making' through people's struggles to expand democracy in the country. Revisiting the history of the refugee movement, the anti-tram fare rise movement and the teachers movement that shook Calcutta in 1953-54, then the food movement that brought together students, peasants, workers, women in 1959 and 1966, the caste wars that opened up a new politics of social justice in Bihar, the interaction of caste and class struggle in Andhra Pradesh, Samaddar (2019) discussed how the Naxalite movement not only gave a political imagination to these rumblings but also broke through the stalemate of habitual doing of left politics in India. The Naxalite movement, therefore, opened up "the politics of the country to new fault lines, new questions about the path of social transformation, nature of ruling regimes, the abiding relevance of street politics, peasant resistance, and many more ethical, political, and social issues" (Samaddar, 2019, p. 4). The Naxalbari movement in 1967 not only exposed the fault lines of Indian democracy. The movement also grew through a disillusionment and delegitimisation of the parliamentary left which had by then retired from the arena of militant ground struggles and restricted itself to electoral battles. The novelty of this movement which challenged the feudo-patriarchal structure of society and declared war against prevalent rituals and customs, captured the imagination of many women. These women found in this struggle, the seeds of their own liberation. The revolutionary subjectivity produced by the Naxalbari movement, also produced the new insurgent woman comrade, who found in the turbulence of the time, a possibility of breaking free of the societal norms of caste and gender, and pinned their hopes and aspirations in the new world that the movement aspired to give birth to.

While these four decades that played a critical formative role in Indian politics have been documented, analysed, historicized abundantly, the histories of these movements/ moments

have mostly shied away from the personal, from journeys of people who made these movements possible. Women have been all the more invisibilised and obfuscated from these histories. Much of the history thus remains undocumented, as stories, anecdotes, memories. Feminist historians have had to challenge the methodologies of mainstream historical archiving, read against the grain to rehabilitate women in history. These retellings and re-archiving often require listening through silences, gaps, pauses, ellipses. These require attention to the stories of friendships and comradeships, to the stories of romancing, believing in, and fighting for a shared vision – a collective belief in change, a collective will to make a different world possible. This chapter looks into such a feminist history of communist movement in India to interrogate the production of this revolutionary subjectivity and understand it through the politics of feminist friendships, comradeships.

‘The Party gave birth to us as Communist Women’: The Woman Comrade and Political Subjectivity

Women's entry into the political arena changed the dynamics of the public and private was through the production of women's political subjectivity, and this political subjectivity was intricately related to the sense of political belongingness that becoming a ‘comrade’ fostered. Becoming a ‘comrade’ meant not only transgressing boundaries of the home, transcending the gender roles prescribed for women, but also seeing oneself as part of a greater collective, a collective that one is bound with not through any familial obligation, but through a shared politics and shared struggle to transform society, and thereby transform each other. This task of worldbuilding thus also brought with it a sense of accountability towards one's co-travellers, towards the working class that the Communists represented. This is poignantly articulated in the last letter by the nationalist revolutionary, Pritilata Waddedar considered by

many as a Communist foremother. While Pritilata might not have declared herself as a Communist, or the term 'comrade' with all its implications had not been common parlance in her time, hers is a legacy that Communists in India have always held onto (Gupta, 2013), have passed on to the next generation³⁹. The letter titled 'Long Live Revolution' found in Pritilata's pocket during post mortem read:

I have got something to say to my countrymen. Many of them may think how it is that an Indian woman, throwing all her indigenous education and culture to the wind, can involve in the gruesome act like 'homicide'. I cannot but wonder how discrimination between men and women could be made in the struggle for freedom. ...When men and women worked side by side in civil disobedience movement, then why women will not be allowed to work together with men in the revolutionary movement? Is it due to the fact that the process is different or that the women are unfit? It's nothing new for the women taking up arms. In all countries where revolution was successful, there the women joined by hundreds. Why shall it be so deplorable in India alone? If ability is the yardstick of judgment, is it not unjustified to always consider the women as less able than men in the freedom struggle? Time has come to get rid of this false notion'. ... "I believe our sisters will forsake their weaknesses and join the revolutionary organisation by thousands. (Bangladesh Letters, 2018)

While leading the militant siege of the Pahartali European club in 1930, which she believed would be the last political act of her life, Pritilata carried this carefully penned letter. This shows her desire to be recognised and remembered as a political worker, as a woman

³⁹ While the Indian Republican Army (IRA) founded by Surya Sen where Pritilata was member did not articulate their ideological leanings as Communist, their ideological articulations inspired by the Irish Republican Army was one that showed communist leanings, and one that later Communists acknowledged as their lineage. It is therefore no surprise that most members of the IRA, including Pritilata's friend, Kalpana Dutta discovered Communist texts in prison, and became Communists.

revolutionary, a comrade of the people. Gupta (2013) traces how the image of Pritilata has been memorialised in myriad ways: Master Da Surya Sen's Indian Republican Army (IRA) remembered her as the *Agnikanya* (fiery girl) who could become an icon for women in Bengal⁴⁰; the Hindu nationalist project historicised her as the Hindu Goddess Durga thereby containing her revolutionary desire, her non-normative choices within the dominant discourse; yet each denied Pritilata the voice, the agency to claim her own legacy. Interrogating these images and interrupting this history, Gupta (2013) reflects on Pritilata's choices by locating her within the revolutionary discourse of the time, and by reconstructing her voice through her diary, letters and memories of her comrade, Kalpana Dutta. Gupta (2013) challenges the monolithic understanding of Pritilata's choice to lay down her life, thereby problematising the representation of Pritilata as a public political icon free from affect. She also problematises the public/ private divide that sought a 'public performance' of revolutionary accounts, relegating affective relations, intimacies, desires to the private. However, in her understanding of Pritilata's voice, Gupta (2013) too gets trapped within the masculine/ feminine binaries failing to recognise Pritilata as a political subject. While Gupta (2013) reads Pritilata's address to her 'sisters' in the letter as censorship of the erotic and expression of grief, I argue that in her last letter Pritilata painstakingly explains her actions to her 'sisters' as she feels herself accountable to her comrades. 'Sisters' here, though connoting familial relations, rather speaks of a political relation, of a comradeship, and above all, of an assertion of a political subjectivity through a public claiming of comradeship. Instead of reading it as an expression of private grief, or a public performance of political sacrifice for the sake of the nationalist movement, I would rather read this letter as an expression of a revolutionary desire to be one with a larger cause, the search for something bigger than what

⁴⁰ The IRA had distributed the letter as leaflets across Bengal post her death to inspire other women to join their cause ((Gupta, 2013)

society prescribed for women. It is the same desire that is reflected in Pritilata and Kalpana's friendship, in their leaning on each other to defy the patriarchal roles ascribed to women of the times and to expand the definition of femininity or women's political subjectivity within the revolutionary movement. Both Pritilata and Kalpana had to pass several litmus tests to becoming a 'comrade', to claiming their stake in the Party, to prove that they belonged, and it is in this sense of belonging, in this sense of seeing oneself as part of a larger movement, as part of a collective, as comrades, that they also build their own sense of self, their own personhood. It is through Kalpana's remembering of her comrade Priti *di*⁴¹, that one gets to understand Pritilata in her all revolutionary and affective desires, as her private grief, and public performance come together to build a feminist icon. This finding of one's subjectivity in relation to one's role as comrade has been integral to Pritilata and Kalpana's shaping of the political. For most women confined within domesticity and prescribed gender roles and norms, revolutionary struggles provided a space for belonging, a path to a new world order. In these new sites of struggle that had the potential to overthrow the old order and make way for the new, comradeship provided a mode of belonging freeing them from the isolation, and the oppression of bourgeois relations of work and family, opening up newer possibilities for collective struggle, and political agency.

The turbulence of the time that produced revolutionary comrades like Pritilata and Kalpana also enabled the comradeship of two women who emerged as labour organizers in the Bombay textile mill strike in 1928. Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore, two women became leaders of the Girni Kamgar Union, also known as Lal Bawta (Red Flag), which was one of the first unions that organised women workers in India. Describing the comradeship of the two women, Loomba (2019) writes,

⁴¹ Di here means elder sister in Bengali.

Ushabai hailed from a Brahmin family, whereas Parvatibai came from the low nai (barber) caste. Ushabai's life was shaped by her marriage to S.A.Danger, the trade union leader, while Parvatibai's was a constant attempt to escape her marriage to a spouse who had no political engagement at all. Ushabai felt that her domesticity was fraught because it was too enmeshed with the Communist Party, while Parvatibai's was fractious because it was too far removed from political world to which she belonged. (Loomba, 2019, p. 157)

Yet, despite the differences in their lived experiences, the two women found kinship in the political arena and enabled each other's journey, each other's belongingness. In her autobiography, poignantly titled *Who Listens To Me?* Ushabai Dange writes about her journey as a young widow, who provided an opportunity by S. A. Dange, and the Party to pursue her education and defy social norms (Loomba, 2019). At a time when the life of a 19th century widowhood was laid out for her, Ushabai's encounter with Dange and the Communist Party opened up for her a way to 'remake' her life. For Parvathibai Bhore, it was the balcony of the chawl that had become her gallery to the worker's struggle, her political classes that led her to pursue this bold new world where she felt she so rightly belonged (Loomba, 2019). In her memoir, *The Story of a Fighter*, she scripts almost a cinematic story of a working-class woman looking at the world through the balcony of a chawl that had become one of the epicenters of worker's struggles, "I could see distant mills and their chimneys. Often a strike or a rally where workers would go past shouting slogans. Every time I came out on balcony, I would wish I could work somewhere outside, like Dada" (Loomba, 2019, p. 183). It was here that she witnessed the magic of Ushabai, "a woman who steps out of her home and works" (Loomba 2019, p. 183), as she writes, "The moment we'd get to know about Usha Tai's arrival, we would flock to our balconies" (Loomba 2019, p. 183). As her colony became a war zone, she yearned to belong to this new world, and the glimpse of Ushabai prodded her

to go to a meeting with a woman worker friend while making up a story at home. For both Ushabai and Parvatibai, the political arena not only provided a mode of belonging, it opened up new ways of being, of relating to the world. These two women organised women for what was to be the first *gherao* in the history of Bombay mills in Bitia Mill in 1939 to protest the sacking of their fellow women comrades. The *gherao* and the strike itself was a picture of female friendships, camaraderie that was to infuse the labour movement with new revolutionary subjectivities. As the description in 'A Diary of the Strike' published by the Communist Party painted,

The women are marvellous. So charming even in their militancy. A woman worker gives the slogan in a high tremolo: 'Lal Bavta Ki Jai.' All the women take it up. Their voices ring out clear and gentle like silver bells. When they clap, how delicate and picturesque! They raise both their hands over their heads and clap. It's an exquisite sight! Thousands of hands going up in perfect unison. A thousand sopranos shouting revolutionary slogans! (as quoted in Loomba 2019, p. 169).

As the talks failed, the *gherao* turned into an indefinite strike led by Ushabai Dange and Parvathi Bhore. By 1940, the strike spread to 14 other mills with women still in the lead. Parvatibai writes how working alongside Ushabai during the Bitia mill strike had boosted her political confidence as she felt a sense of community that broadened her scope. When Ushabai got arrested during the movement, Parvathibai took her place as the Union executive (Loomba, 2019). Later, in the 1946 Party Conference in Bombay, Parvathibai raised the question why despite leading such militant strikes in Bombay, working class women were still not at the forefront of the Party (Loomba, 2019).

Women's entry into the political arena, therefore, not only circumvented as well as pushed the boundaries of femininity but also feminised the polity and thereby transformed the political itself.

A few years later we find the same yearning to belong echoed in Mallu Swarajyam's accounts of the Telangana struggle in 1946,

In those days we women came forward, we had an aim, we were filled with enthusiasm. We felt firmly that we were equal to the men. That was so important... So women had to be brought out of this condition. And we felt that there was a direction, a path in what these people are saying and we took up the responsibility... we felt that this was possible only through the struggle. Not only that: I feel that the Party took a far greater interest on the question of women in those days than it does today. To bring women out, to rid them of socially oppressive customs, they carried on a campaign at the same time. In their Party resolutions, in their books and documents, this conviction is evident. They claimed that women are not weak (abala) but strong (sabala). So, we were inspired. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p.231)

This conviction that Swarajyam (1989) articulates is also fuelled by a belief in seeing oneself as an instrument of worldbuilding, as an agent of history. The journey to becoming a communist revolutionary therefore began with the announcement of belonging, of taking side, of becoming comrades.

Being a communist woman also implied living up to certain ideals, discipline and ethics. While announcing one's political belonging enabled the choosing of one's comrades, it also simultaneously meant choosing one's enemies, what one was fighting against, as well as what one was fighting for. It is in this choosing that the ethics of comradeship was moulded. For women who had been confined within familial relationships, and the four walls of the

‘home’, this meant there was now a world to win. It meant forging new affective communities not only beyond blood relationships, but also all over the world across borders, across communities, class and caste. It was no easy solidarity, but rather resilient friendships built on every day practices of collective struggle, on trust developed through fighting brutal state repression, oppressive structures, laying bodies on barricades, putting everything at stake for the dream of a different world. Thus, while comradeship promised a sense of belonging, it also demanded accountability, commitment to certain common principles, and a politics of living, politicisation of friendships, relationships, and intimacies.

Collective Use of The Collective: Communes and The New Affective Family

Calling for the abolition of family, Kollontai in ‘Make Way For The Winged Eros’ (1920) had located comradeship, solidarity as the anchor necessary for building a communist society. Reflecting on the nature of human relationships in a communist society, she asserted that love-friendship-comradeship should be the building block of the new proletarian morality – the ‘feeling of belongingness’ that would bind free and equal workers (Kollontai, 1923; 1921; 1911; 1929). She envisioned that this relationship would replace the relationships forged through the family, private property and the state. Rejecting blood kinships that are consolidated through the transfer of private property, rejecting bourgeois state validated identities of ‘citizen’, she believed new proletarian morality would be built on democratic relationships, political belongingness. This ideologically knit community thus envisioned would be formed through the collective work of political struggle. Loomba (2019) notes how the Indian Communist Movement in the 1940s encountered Kollontai merely through what

was described to be the ‘glass of water theory’⁴² and through her debate with Lenin. Although she recalls one of her women respondents, Tara Reddy telling her of Party meetings where they hotly discussed Lenin's views on women and Kollontai, and other women's writings, Loomba (2019) states it was not the dominant discourse. However, while Kollontai's critique of the family was largely ignored, news of her experiments on socialization of housework and child care travelled to India and the Indian communists extolled Soviet child care and maternity. Experimenting with the ideas of collectivized housework and care, Communes cropped up across India in 1940s and 1950s, producing newer imaginings of collectives, affective communities and political belongingness, which initiated new ways of redefining the political (Loomba, 2019).

As women left oppressive families to join the communist struggle, the political arena became a space of possibilities (Sen, 1952), The Communist Party, in this context, became the site where practices of comradeship were played out through collective resistance. Interestingly though, for many, the romance of the family got sublimated into the Party. As the Party became the new ‘family’ it opened up new sites of struggle. Memoirs (Kaifi, 2010; Sen, 1952; Koteswaramma, 2015; Ramaswamy, 2022), testimonies and reminiscing by communist women (Loomba, 2019; Marik, 2013) articulate the trust and hope they had pinned on this new family where they were for the first time seen as political beings, as political workers, as comrades. It is imperative to note here that this chapter will not just examine women's comradeships with each other, but also their comradeships with men which included erotic intimacies, marriage, shared children, and social reproductive activities. It will explore how

⁴² Zhenia, one of the characters of Kollontai's story ‘The Loves of Three Generations’ (1923) is cited to have opined that sex was as natural and necessary as having a glass of water, and need not be accompanied by love. However, the story itself has no such lines but a more nuanced complex debate around the experiences of three women of three generations on non-monogamous relationships, and women's friendships. This sentence has often been taken out of context and mistakenly attributed to Kollontai to discredit her work and her views on love and friendship, her critique of family, and her proponent of a new morality. It was only through the feminist movement that Kollontai was rediscovered and reinterpreted.

the idea of the comrade redefined ways of women's relationalities with other women but also how they could relate to men. This new way of looking led to a rethinking of the idea of friendship itself, asking what does it mean to build kinship with a friend/ comrade all the while resisting the exclusionary aspects of kinship?

The Party communes, helped to build collectives that became the site where new affective communities were being built. In his writings, Sunil Janah described the commune as a space that enabled radical possibilities that facilitated new imaginings of the self,

Living and working together had generated kinships amongst us... There were people of all communities and of all kinds of economic backgrounds from all parts of the country in the Communist Party. I did not, or could not, think of myself as a Bengali middle-class Hindu from Calcutta, or Muqbul Batali as a Kashmiri peasant from Baramula, or of Parvathi as a Tamil Brahmin. We did not even have any need or compulsion to think of ourselves as Indians. We were human beings working for peace and social justice everywhere on the planet. I have never been able to understand some people's angst-ridden quest for their identity and the question, 'Who am I?' that it poses. The identity they seek is usually genealogical, racial, regional or religious. (as quoted in Loomba, 2019, p. 138)

The intersubjective praxis made way for a new political subjectivity that was born and nurtured in the communes. Yet, the liberal understanding of affect being personal, private, apolitical, meant that these spaces so built never acknowledged the emotions that held it together. Kiernan (2007) speaks of this contradiction as he notes how the commune provided the Party 'a political striking force'. As communists set out to revolutionise the world, the first step chosen was to revolutionise themselves. The methods of doing this were sometimes, as Kiernan (2007) described, 'schoolmasterly', as the Communists prided themselves in

being practical people who had no leisure for idle chatter, nor one presumes for emotions. However, testimonials of women living in communes underground and overground, speak passionately about this thrill and even the mess of collective living, of sharing work, labour, of moments spent arguing, reflecting, strategizing, singing, sloganeering in a space where they felt they belonged, which promised them to be equal stakeholders (Kaifi, 2010; Loomba, 2019; Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989; Marik, 2013). As Bani Dasgupta confided in her interview with Soma Marik (2013). For many of the women there, the communes ‘saved’ them.

In her memoir, *Kaifi and I*, Shaukat Azmi (2010) describes the Bombay commune as an extension/ opening up of the family terrain,

Although they were from different parts of India, these people were like one family where everyone was addressed as ‘Comrade’, which at the time meant an evolved human being...I saw that the people in the commune cared not only for those who were close to them, but were concerned about their immediate families as much as they did about the workers, the peasants and the labouring classes. Their aim in life was to free the weak from the cruel oppression of the exploitative capitalist system. (Kaifi, 2010, p. 49- 51)

Raised in a somewhat progressive Muslim family in a feudal state, for Shaukat the commune was a space she had never encountered before. It carried with it the romance of being connected to a struggle where the idea of family was not limited to just blood relatives or spouse but also to the bond one felt with the toiling masses. It was a world that enthralled her for its careless irreverence to familial customs as well as rebuilding of familial care structures for the many. She writes how comrades never shamed or unsettled them with disapproving looks, she also talks about how it was these comrades who had gone to convince her father of

the marriage, and later when they had to enroll their daughter in a school it was two of their English-speaking comrades who had posed as Shabana's parents to help ease the admission process. Shaukat wrote extensively about raising her children in a commune where caregiving was collectivised, although the task was undertaken collectively by all women rather than by everyone. Yet, this idea of collective living by people not bound by blood but by a shared ideological view, by like-mindedness was a novelty in those times. Reminiscing her first impression of the commune, thus Shaukat confessed," How different this was from the world I had left behind, where people lacked compassion and were quick to draw attention to what they considered a human weakness." (Kaifi, 2010, p. 43)

Loomba (2019) further notes how many women who were being forcibly married off by their families found refuge in these communes and Party work. Usha Dutta Verma shares her story of how when her parents were trying to marry her off at the age of 11, she ran away to Calcutta where she had heard some comrades were thinking of starting a commune for women,

I was told that I could join them if I wished. It felt as if I had been handed the moon without even asking for it... I tied up my bundles and arrived at the commune. I met a girl from Faridpur called Sachi Lahiri. It was here that I formed an unbroken relationship with Sachi. People would refer to us as Usha-Sachi. We would wander around everywhere; we would even sell the Party newspaper and pamphlets together.
(as translated in Loomba, 2019, p. 135)

We find similar resonance in the Telangana struggle where Kondapalli Koteswaramma recalled how women being forced to marry sought refuge in the Party shelters (Stree Mukti Sanghatana, 1989). Sen (1952) while reminiscing about young women's coming into the Communist Party speaks to this emotion wherein the Party's articulation of the question of

gender equality attracted women to the Party so much so that when it came in conflict with their family, many left homes and submerged themselves in Party work. The communes also made life bearable and work possible for people who after living underground for years had to come out and sustain themselves (Marik, 2013). In her interview with Soma Marik, Nivedita Nag fondly remembered, how during the Japanese raid she was able to rent a house at a cheaper rate that soon became a refuge for women, “*joto ma khedano baap taraano meye* (women driven away by their parents) landed on my shoulders” (Marik, 2023, p. 94). Similarly, Kanak Mukherjee wrote in her memoirs, “This atmosphere of joint life in our commune was quite warm... There may have developed differences of opinion over some issues, but I do not recollect conflicts over any petty self-interest. We who were married did not feel any unease at living with others while living a conjugal life.” (Translated by Marik, 2013, pp. 93–94)

The sharing of domestic work, everyday activities also opened up for women a new understanding of social reproduction, socialised housework, and collaborative parenting which relieved them of ‘domestic slavery’. Shaukat Kaifi (2010) reminisced how everyone shared the dining room, washed their own dishes and clothes, and took turns in sweeping and cleaning the floors. This idea of comradeship evoking equal sharing of labour became one of the points that attracted women to the Party as it created a space for them to be released from the drudgery of housework and grow as political workers.

Recalling the underground days of the Telangana struggle in 1946, Kondapalli Koteswarama related her experience of undergoing an abortion and being nursed by her comrade Narsimha:

We could not afford to have our neighbours notice us, so I couldn’t wash my blood-stained clothes and dry them outside. We did not have indoor bathrooms and lavatories back then. We bathed in makeshift bathrooms. I did not have the energy to

walk to those bathrooms either. Narsimha Rao used to take care of the sanitation. I must salute him for what he did for me... Perhaps the news about my health spread, for no comrade visited us during the next four days. Narsimha Rao took care of everything. In those days Party comrades did anything and everything imaginable or unimaginable for the sake of the Party and security, without fear or disgust. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p.33)

While some of these narratives reflected on the ways gender roles were reversed or housework shared in the communes, there was no denying the fact that it was mostly women who were entrusted with domestic work. As the Party became the new family, familial relationships were often replicated in this space with women being tasked to perform the emotional labour of caregiving and keeping the family together. In a tribute titled, 'Our Mai' published in the Party's paper 'People's Age', Joshi (1945) fondly talks about an elderly woman, Kalyanibai Syed, referred to as Mai, who was the surrogate 'mother' of the commune, reminiscent of the protagonist of Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel 'Mother', as someone who had extended her motherly love beyond the scope of blood ties, much as Kollontai had envisioned motherhood would be.

Similarly, women's testimonies of Telangana struggle fondly recall '*Bulemma*' (meaning mother), the woman who would run the commune, "There were others to help, but she knew each one's tastes and requirements. She knew who was ill, who needed exactly what. She lived in the commune... she was more tender and caring than a mother." (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p.129) They also spoke of Dr. Acchamma whose house was used as a maternity center for women who were to give birth: "To couples who had left home, Dr. Acchamma's house was the place they delivered their babies since there was no way they could go back to their parents. Acchamma's house was like their parent's home. She used to

say “why do you worry if your mother is not there – I am here after all” (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p.129).

Panjabi (2016) examines how the relief kitchens run by Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti during the Bengal famine in 1942 introduced a politics of care within the movement. It led to a transformation of political subjectivity for both the caregiver and the receiver – transformations that later translated to affective comradeships of the Tebhaga struggle. It was through the collective kitchens, the caring acts of cooking, cleaning, serving and readying shelters that resilient solidarities got forged across class, caste, religion which prepared the ground for the Tebhaga Movement. During the Naxalbari movement too, these systems of care not only helped spread the movement, but also strategically sustained the movement through its underground days (Roy, 2019). This promise of belonging, of being together on the same side of the revolutionary struggle, also led activists to surrender themselves selflessly to the Party, and one’s comrades, entrusting the collective to decide for individual selves. The idea of the self as being an instrument of a historical force, the romance of the commitment to a shared vision and the sense of belonging to a political community enables such submission of the self. This new family thus much like the feudal family took it upon itself to ensure disciplinary measures, make decisions for comrades and even guide them in matters of love, marriage, parenting. With so many people living together, it was also deemed necessary to maintain the ‘sanctity’ of the ‘family’ of communists and the Party quite often took the prerogative to do that. Sugunanna reflected on this when she spoke about the Telangana movement,

So, the Party was like a large common family. We dreamt that the Communist Government would come – and all families would be communes like this. Never would we go back to these separate families – with each for himself... Around that time when we were underground, some marriages took place... Two or three of the

men wanted to use me. Some of them were married. I felt greatly troubled that even in the Party people could be like this. After developing the faith that the Party was pure – nothing like this could happen, when it did happen, I felt that the only protection I could get would be through marriage. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p. 87)

Codes of comradeship were thus enforced by the Party which acted like the benevolent patriarch dictating who one should love, marry, be kin with. In his fiction, *Dada Comrade*, Yashpal drawing from his experiences as a worker in HSRA in the 1930s, writes how his relationship with fellow comrade Prakashvati was frowned upon by the HSRA and their very commitment to the movement, to their comrades were then brought into question (Yashpal, 2021). Similarly, Manikuntala Sen's autobiography in 1952 mentions her concern regarding the Party's disapproval of her marriage with Jolly Kaul in the 1950s because he was ten years junior and the Party felt this relationship would harm her public image (Sen, 1952). Kalpana Dutta too recollects how she had initially been hesitant to accept PC Joshi's proposal for marriage as she was in love with Tarakeswar Dastidar. However, when Dastidar became a martyr, she accepted Joshi's proposal at the insistence of the Party. One also comes upon stories of contract marriages or *farzi shaadi* as it was called then, initiated by the Party when two people had to live together underground.

Kiernan (2007), writing on his experiences in the Bombay commune during the Second World War, recalls how despite destabilising of the bourgeois family, familial hierarchical structures come to be replicated in the political organisational structures. Recalling how a young revolutionary had confided in him, Kiernan (2007) notes,

The Party had come to be her family, a young woman said to me, which she felt she must stick with in spite of not infrequent frictions. It must have had the same appeal to many of her generation, as a replacement for crumbling old family ties; and there

must have been a psychological link between the old despotic sway of the family and the new, equally irresistible rule of the Party. Youth was throwing off one authority and hastening to submit to another, as perhaps has often happened. (Kiernan, 2007, p. 67)

The Party therefore often demanded and enabled decisions regarding pregnancies and abortions. Couples who were underground or were both wholetimers and very active in the organization were often advised not to have children and the men were asked to undergo vasectomy. Such Party structure and practices continued in later movements as testimonies of women in Telengana movement show (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1987). Sen (2017) writes, how, even in the present-day Maoist Party, there was a rule that men who went underground had to undergo vasectomy. Alternative living arrangements and underground living therefore also contained within it strains of constant negotiation between the interests and aspirations of the individual and collective, contradictions between notions of individual freedom and Party discipline.

While the idea of professional revolutionaries inspired the radical reimagining of care structures and support systems, it often came at a cost for those who had/ chose to sever ties with the Party later owing to differences. Those who left the Party were often left to fend for themselves with no savings or family wealth or traditional care structures to fall back on. This became all the more difficult for women revolutionaries for whom chances of being accepted back into the biological or marital family that they had left to join the Party were more skewed than that of men. Manikotha Suryavathi shared how during the Telangana struggle, comrades were asked to give up their private property and give that money to the Party. However, when she had volunteered to give her share, the Party refused to take it, “In 1943, January, they called for Lenin Day and discussed whether women’s property should be taken or not... they felt that taking women’s property would cause problems. Suppose the Party

was not in a condition to support them. How would the women survive?” (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p. 152). These doubts, anxieties and hesitations also revealed the way women's participation in the struggle was forcing the Party to revisit their positions on policies, to rethink stakes in terms of comradeship.

In 1951, in the face of brutal state repression and furious debate and differences within the Party about calling off the armed struggle and pursuing legal means of negotiation, the Communist Party officially called off the Telangana rebellion. The decision caused a huge disillusionment among the peasants who had so far risked everything only to be told to de-escalate. In her testimony of the Telangana struggle, Sugunamma spoke about the alienation women faced when the armed struggle was suddenly withdrawn and women were asked to just go back to the homes they had so willingly left (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989). She shared how, for many women like her, the home was a site of suffering while the Party, with its promise of equality, served as a refuge, so much so that even getting arrested and going to jail was considered better than going back home to their families (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989). Having been in a Party marriage where there were no social rituals, having borne a child by that marriage, having lived for so long in underground dens where societal rules were suspended, Sugunamma's return to her 'home', where the legitimacy of her marriage, her child were questioned, where her behavior, beliefs were made suspect, was painful. It reflected the sense of unbelonging, the rupture in comradeship many women felt when the Telangana armed struggle was suddenly called off and they were asked to return to the very kitchens that had been their site of oppression. Not only did it destroy the new world they were trying to build in communes and through the struggle, but also created the rude awakening that women had perhaps never been seen as equal stakeholders, as comrades in the struggle.

The unbelongingness that often accompanied women's experiences within the Party, the litmus tests they had to go through to prove their worthiness and allegiances, thus, coloured all their experiences in the collective. Thus, they were often unable to fully explore the radical potential of comradeship as their efforts to transgress their gendered roles and become equal comrades were constantly thwarted, stunted, challenged. Furthermore, the burden of social reproduction refused to leave them even in communes and underground shelters, making it difficult for them to fully understand and explore their subjectivities and comradeships. It is only through later feminist revisiting of these experiences and moments, through collective sharing of experiences and breaking of silences, that women found the vocabulary to articulate the unease, the unbelongingness, the rupture in comradeship.

Feminist Comradeship: Fighting Patriarchy Within and Without

The unbelongingness women felt at confronting sexism within the Party and with male 'comrades' while causing a rupture of comradeship with male comrades, quite often brought women together within the movement. These feminist comradeships then were born out of an assertion of women's stake in the communist movement as well as their disillusionment with it. Thus, while stepping into the public space offered women the world, making that space their own had its own challenges. The promise of the political field as democratic, gender just, where one would be treated as equal comrades, as a community of political workers was soon broken, as women realised how patriarchal practices inhabited these spaces as well. The sense of betrayal that women felt therefore was also a betrayal of comradeship, and the common vision that they believed they were all fighting for. Yet, the dialectic between the personal and the political, the public and the private made it difficult for them to articulate this betrayal, to frame their critique while still claiming a stake in the belongingness. This

becomes evident in the way Manikuntala Sen begins her autobiography with a chapter titled 'Kaifeyot' (apology) wherein confiding, "I had come to this movement driven by an ideology. If that ideology crumbles down, what do I do? If a friend can sharpen their knife to stab another friend in the name of ideology, if ideology means poisoning each other, I would rather stay out of such a space" (Author's translation). We find a similar resonance in Bandopadhyay's (2008) recounting of her experiences as a woman Naxalite where she speaks about the guilt, she felt in articulating her critique of the movement in public. As comradeship emerged out of inter-subjective practices, this rupture in comradeship almost seemed like a betrayal of the self, one's own political subjectivity.

Manikuntala Sen while reminiscing her experiences of the Tebhaga in 1946 shared one such incident where the women of the Communist Party's mahila samiti were criticized by PC Joshi at the All India Peasants' Conference held in Netrakona, Mymensingh for not doing enough, for not being able to mingle more with the peasant women and organize them for the Tebhaga struggle

The accusation, roughly, was against us, the middle-class women who were present there. Our fault, apparently, was that we had not mixed with the peasant women the way we should have. We might have been in the wrong. But he made other complaints which I would not like to mention. We listened to this criticism with our heads bent... We were truly upset because he had chosen to vent his criticism in a public assembly. Had he called us aside or said the very same things at a Party meeting, we would not have felt so bad. It was the rule that leaders should come forth with their criticisms at a Party meeting. But this was a public meeting. (Panjabi, 2016, p.146)

Revisiting this moment, Kavita Panjabi (2016) remarks that the pain voiced by Manikuntala Sen here is not just personal, but also about a violation of principles of comradeship (Panjabi,

2016) She wrote how other women comrades had asked her to protest during the meeting but she had refused to do so as it was a public meeting and it would be against Party discipline, against the codes of comradeship. Sen in her interview with Punjabi (2016) shared that while she had adhered to these codes, PC Joshi did not. This rupture in comradeship also had its effects in the women's movement as many considered this as manifestation of a lack of confidence in the communist women itself. Some of the women felt demoralised and left the Party, Sen herself confessed that it took her a long time to 'regain confidence' as it had left her "troubled by feelings of guilt and had doubts about working for the Party" (Panjabi, 2016, p. 146). Bandopadhyay (2008) too in her reminiscing of the Naxalbari movement in the 70s had noted a similar incident where they had taken charge and performed an 'action' only to be criticised later, when their male comrades would be praised for similar actions. The sexism and patriarchal practices within the Party thus not only demoralised and humiliated women political workers, but also violated codes of comradeship, making them realise they were mere 'women', not equal political workers, comrades. This rupture in comradeship was experienced as betrayal both at a personal and political level in cases of intimate partner violence, or of sexual harassment perpetrated by fellow Party workers, and comrades. This is powerfully articulated in the piercing question 'why does my comrade beat me?' that holds within it the accountability, the ethics that the valency of the word comrade carried and how sexism, assault violated the very code of conduct, the morality that a comrade is supposed to live up to.

It is in this context, that, women's intimate negotiations with each other, friendships and comradeships provided the support system to keep faith and struggle going. Against all odds, these resilient relationships also provided women the leverage within the organization to raise uncomfortable questions, call out patriarchal practices, or create support structures for women. Ushabai Dange's accounts of the Bombay mill strike not only describes women's

militant participation in the strike, but also weaves a tale of feminist comradeship and working-class solidarity. She had organised a women's meeting to address patriarchal attitudes of male comrades towards female militancy demonstrated by striking men who took to cards and drinks when women were being harassed by the police while picketing. In response to this the women marched to the chawls and burnt the cards, and called for a women's demonstration the next day. Two months later, immediately after Ushabai gave birth to a daughter, naming Roza, after the fierce revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, the movement intensified in the face of police attack causing Ushabai to spring to action. She wrote:

There was no other way I could see other than joining the workers to picket at the door of the mills. I started going to the chawls and speaking in front of workers. Since Roza was born at the time of a strike, she was given the name 'Hartal Wali Bai' (the Girl of the Strike). I had to take her with me to the mills. The women workers used to look after her. Whichever woman was breastfeeding her own child, would feed her when she cried. In this way, several women workers became mothers to her. (Loomba, 2019, p.177).

With Dange still in jail, torn between the demands of her work as an organizer and that of motherhood, it was the women workers who became both Ushabai and Roza's family, she recalls, "In spite of being the mother of a little baby I got neither proper food nor rest. I had only one support and that was from the scores of women workers. They never let me experience aloneness." (Loomba, 2019, p. 177). Several accounts of women in Telangana struggle too speak of such moments of solidarity, wherein, when underground, in the absence of proper care structures, women often filled in for each other, and empowered each other's political journeys. In this feminist rewriting of history of a movement, Kondapalli Koteswaramma's account talks about women comrades who had become 'family',

We were like sisters. She had a baby boy and a girl. When I went out to work in the Mahila Sanghams and the cultural squads, if my baby cried, she would suckle her. After I returned, I would nurse her baby... we were not blood relations but we mingled with each other. We did not know any differences or quarrels. Our relationship was through the Communist Party. We felt this was the real thing and forgot our actual relations. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989, p.131)

As friendships enabled women to navigate the political field, the sense of being in collective struggle together, brought in a new idea of pleasure born out of the thrill and intrigue of being insiders, co-conspirators against the state. The affects of revolution also hinged on this thrill of subversion, this idea of defiance that came to shape women's political subjectivity. Panjabi (2016) notes how most women who had been in the Tebhaga movement, spoke of their days in the struggle as an 'adventure', '*mazaa*' (fun) where shared dangers, shared political experiences of plotting, subverting societal norms, and the triumph of being able to hoodwink the police helped cement women's solidarities across caste and community and boosted collective political agency. Bimala Majhi, one of the peasant leaders, shared one such incident in her interview with Panjabi (2016), where she along with other leaders had gone to hold a meeting with Bagdi women in Mednipur when they heard the police were coming. The women immediately put a '*mol*' (anklet) in her feet as was the custom there, so that she would look like one of them, and they together staged a pregnancy ritual to explain the large assembly of women. While the story of a woman on the verge of giving birth explained the crowd and opened up the opportunity for them to quietly slip into the crowd basket on their heads, when the police refused to let anyone leave, the women stood guard and declared, "if you dare touch any of them, we will cut you to pieces with the hesha (sickle)." (Panjabi, 2016, p.135).

These intersubjective experiences of women's camaraderie also brought in a new dynamic into the movement. Feminist friendships forged through the movement not only built enabling conditions for other women to sustain in an otherwise patriarchal world, but also feminized the sites of the movement itself. The cross-class, cross-caste friendships also became sites of learning and unlearning. When middle class women started organising peasant women, they realised that peasant women were also farm workers and needed to be recognised as such (Panjabi, 2016). It were these sites of comradeship that became sites of inter-subjective practices. As Bina Guha reflected on her work in Dinajpur, 'We [middle-class urban women] didn't consider the issue of women as equal workers. But the peasant women did. They said that we do the same kind of work as men do, so we also have to have the same rights. We work at home and in the fields, so we have to get our rights.' (Panjabi, 2016, p. 138)

Rani Dasgupta too spoke to Panjabi (2016) how peasant women with their newfound understanding of their economic contribution and role in production, insisted on taking control of their income. These sharing of experiences, and intersubjective understandings helped bring in more issues to the table. In Dinajpur, where the women's groups in Tebhaga was strong, peasant women could come together and demand that the Party take a stand against sexual violence. It was therefore a historical moment in Bengal's agrarian politics when the Party actually took an official stand against exploitative sexual practices. During the Naxalbari movement in Bengal too, as Suniti Biswakarma had shared, peasant women had come together to assert themselves as farm workers and demanded their right to till the land, demand loans for tractor and cattle (Roy, 2019).

Feminist friendships, therefore, became for many a sustaining force that not only drew more women into the movement but also helped to put in place codes of comradeship that would make these spaces more conducive for women. The arena of struggle therefore also witnessed

interesting strategic negotiations of societal norms in the political interest of recruiting more women. Kavita Panjabi (2016) narrates the story of Phuli Goldar and Sarala Singha's friendship. Phuli was a peasant woman from Narail, a 'licentious' child widow who had the makings of a fiery political worker (Panjabi, 2016). Anima Biswas, a Party activist had befriended Phuli and intended to persuade her to 'give up her wayward activities' and join the movement. While Phuli readily agreed, Anima had to convince her other comrades, especially her older comrade, Sarala Singha. A widow herself, Sarala, however, was known as a puritan. So when Anima introduced Phuli as a member of the samiti, Sarala threatened to leave, ensuing a debate on sexuality during the meeting as Anima raised the question, who was to be blamed. Sarala confessed that she was concerned that Phuli's recruitment will discredit the organization and therefore, for some days, Sarala went over to Phuli's village and stayed with her overnight so as to send the message that if a reputed chaste woman like Sarala could live with Phuli, no one would question Phuli's reputation. Sarala also challenged people openly saying "if anybody dares to malign Phuli anymore, I will tear him to bits. I, Sarala Singha, am beside her." (Panjabi, 2016, p.145). This marked the beginning of a longstanding comradeship between the two women as they fought shoulder to shoulder against the jotedar (group of influential wealthy peasants and landlords), police and state, while subverting societal strictures regarding chastity of widows.

This solidarity, however, was not any easy romantic sisterhood, as Panjabi (2016) reminds us, but one fraught with contentious identities. Comradeship herein had to be built through everyday practices that showed historical understanding and recognition of differences of location. The field of war, the fight against a common enemy, the struggle for a common vision in this case laid the ground for developing inter-subjective self-reflexive praxis grounded in histories of everyday experiences of oppression. Interestingly, the idea of comradeship as relationship forged between people collectively struggling to change the

world, also opened up possibilities of intergenerational friendships, friendships across countries, across time where stories of survival, stories of struggle, dream of a new world could be trusted to be passed on from one generation to another, from one site of struggle to another through songs and slogans, stories and anecdote posters and leaflets, dreams and visions, such that despite repression, and failures, the struggle can be carried on in newer ways, by new people.

From Comrade to Saheli: Towards a New Political Relationality

Comradeship is then, as the experiences discussed in the previous section point out, premised as much on inclusion, as on exclusion. In her theorisation of comradeship, Dean (2019) reminds us, anyone can become a comrade yet not everyone is a comrade. It is a relation that presupposes division and struggle. So when one raises the question ‘why does my comrade beat me’, not only does it bring the agenda of domestic violence on the table, but also announces how such behaviour is unbecoming of the comrade, unbecoming of those working on the side of people’s revolution, and thus, not just a violation of comradeship, but a violation of communist morality. Sugunamma’s feeling of betrayal on being told to go back to the kitchen by those comrades with whom she had embarked on an emancipatory struggle, hinged on a feeling of unbelongingness-- as though the world she believed she belonged to, had never acknowledged her belongingness. The rupture in comradeship, the violation of ethics of comradeship then translates to rupture from the Party itself.

Interestingly, while the Party is a site in which practices of comradeship are coordinated and organized, it is never the only site. Rather, it is the larger battleground, the site of people’s struggle that is configured as a space of belonging. Thus, many who have had to sever themselves from the Party, or have felt a sense of unbelongingness, may still see themselves

as part of the people's revolution, as comrade of the people. As Dean (2019) suggests, the idea of comrade is liberated from the determinations of specificity, it is rather the "shared destitution of those who endure" (Dean, 2019, p.51). Comrades relate not just to one's organization, but also to people across the world who are all fighting for people's revolution. Manikuntala Sen, wrote about the kinship they (Indian communist women?) felt with the Bolshevik women (Sen, 1952), Shanti Munda, peasant activist from Naxalbari spoke about the kinship with the revolutionary women in China, Suniti Biswakarma another peasant woman from Naxalbari talked about the comradeship she felt with the women of Tebhaga on hearing their stories as child (Roy, 2019). Comradeship therefore translated to a mode of belonging one felt through collective political agency of the revolutionary struggle across time and space.

The rupture in the ethical promises of comradeship also pushed women to then look for other modes of belonging. As the Party became more and more splintered and proved to be incapable of being vanguards in the struggle for women's liberation, a new search began for a newer mode of belonging, for new relationalities. With the parliamentary left losing its legitimacy, and the radical left surviving mostly in pockets and splinters, the crisis of legitimacy of the formal political process created room for what Kothari described as the "non-Party political process" (Kothari, 1984, p. 219). By the late 70s the limitations of and dissatisfaction of people with mainstream institutionalized politics led to a search for more 'people-oriented' political structures and institutions (Menon and Nigam 2007, Sen 1990). This new quest for a new way of organising, doing politics, while preparing the ground for the autonomous women's movement, also triggered a new search for women's political belongingness, and political relationality. It is interesting that in her autobiography Manikuntala Sen (1952), while writing about her intimate friendship with Latika Sen confesses that she prefers calling Latika her friend than her comrade as the word comrade did

not come naturally to her. This distinction that one made between a comrade and a friend speaks to the dialectic of the personal and the political that lay at the heart of the revolutionary struggle. A comrade is one's political co-traveller, while the relationship with the friend was seen as more intimate, emotional and personal. The Communist movement in India while founding its politics on the revolutionary idea of comradeship could neither envision comradeship as a robust challenge to the heteropatriarchal family nor could it rid itself of the liberal idea of privatised emotions and personalised friendships. Interestingly though, as the initial lines of the IPTA song quoted at the beginning of the chapter suggests, comradeship also evokes emotion and passion—the affect of standing shoulder to shoulder in a barricade risking everything for making the impossible possible. However, the reluctance to recognise and address that emotion also meant an incapacity to also understand the heartbreak experienced at the loss of that belongingness, and of comradeship. This reluctance to truly understand and invest in the revolutionary potential of comradeship also implied that despite the communes presenting radical possibilities, mostly they became extensions of the family. In this context, it is pertinent to examine a new form of political belongingness and relationality between women that the autonomous women's movement brings into being.

The peasant movements of Tebhaga, Telengana, Naxalbari and the turbulent worker's movements in Bombay mill strikes, the militant workers struggles had opened up possibilities of firebrand women organizing themselves, of militant working-class women being exposed to a different world outside their homes, of women demanding the Party to pass resolutions against sexual violence, of women undoing gender roles, raising issues of gendered work and demanding their stake in movements. It was the time that was also bound by the disillusionment of the unfinished revolutions, of the bitterness of women being sidelined, marginalized, of being told to go back to the kitchen, to conform to the Party doctrines that often chained women to care work and couriering jobs that were considered inferior to actual

work of organizing, of women being overlooked in decision making bodies, of being told to wait for the revolution to resolve the 'women question'. As women increasingly realised the women's liberation struggle could not be housed under a single Party, a search for a new home, new community began. Finding a new home here also meant finding new relationality, a new mode of political belonging through which women could relate to women politically, as friends, as comrades, as co-travellers in a new political journey. It is in this struggle that the 'saheli' comes into being. The autonomous women's movement being the creation of both the legacy of the Communist movement as well as the radical feminist movement, 'saheli' came to bear both the baggage and radical possibilities of the comrade as well as that of sisterhood and the radical hope of politicising the personal.

Chapter 3

Sahelis in Ruptures and Resistance: The Making of Feminist Friendships in The Autonomous Women's Movement (1980 - Contemporary Times)

Rise up, all you women,

Let us all unite together

Let us go tell the government

Now we are no longer helpless!

Give in to our demands –

See our army rising up –

We will not retreat,

We vow by our children

– Come on, unite!

O toiling women

Who labour in the house and out

Come on, unite!

(Suman, 1975⁴³)

The unbelongingness women felt in the Communist Party led movements, as discussed in depth in the previous chapter, coupled with the vacuum left in the space of ground struggles by the delegitimisation of the parliamentary left and the splintered nature of the radical left, post Emergency, initiated a new search for community, for a new articulation of belongingness and new ways of doing politics. It also meant that the Party structure was not hospitable to the women's liberation movement. Further, the failures of comradeship necessitated a search for new feminist communities. This new search looked for new vocabulary and a new form for politically articulating women's friendships.

The need for autonomy articulated in the autonomous women's movement in the 1980s needs to be located in the history of these new articulations of left politics and the quest for a new community. The question of autonomy was articulated not only in terms of autonomy from partisan politics, the state and from funded politics, but also in terms of bodily and sexual autonomy as the movement sought to find a new voice that would give primacy to the question of gender rather than deferring it or addressing it as afterthought or by product of class revolution (Shah and Gandhi, 1992; Kumar, 1993). This chapter will tease out the history of the movement through narratives of friendships and comradeships articulated not in disciplinary history but to be found in memories, in pamphlets, leaflets, newsletters, posters, and photographs, in the bricks, mortar and cement that built feminist communities and homes. It will trace how friendships in their liberal and revolutionary, private and public manifestations have given the autonomous women's movement its particular character, laying the foundation to both its fragile autonomy as well as its weaknesses.

⁴³ The song was written for the United Women's Liberation Conference organised by socialist feminist groups in 1975. The conference saw wide range participation of working-class women, Adivasi peasant women, along with middle class left women activists, students.

This chapter will therefore primarily address the search for communities and a home outside familial and marital kinship, the quest for belonging that initiated the politicisation of feminist friendships within the autonomous women's movement in India in the 1980s. It will trace the journey of transition from comrade to saheli and unpack what being a saheli meant for feminist activists as well as for the movement. It will also interrogate what determines who is and who is not a saheli, the dialectics of the personal and the political that played out within the women's movement, the way in which differences and dissonances were framed and managed through personal friendships. It will explore the cultures of friendship that became informed by feminist politics and the ethics that emanated from there. The chapter will revisit the history of the movement through the making, unmaking and remaking of the collective 'we' so as to then ask what 'made' feminist friendships? It will look at issues of structure and structurelessness within collectives and how it came to define the character of the movement, and the way it made way for two 'we's' in the collective, one built through personal friendships and the other made through the politics of the collective or organisation. It will also probe how this personalised political and the fractured 'we' so formed became the very reasons of its unique ability to stand up to neoliberal forces and growing identitarianism, while at the same time also being the reason for its partial surrender to these very forces. It will examine the emotional labour and care that went into sustaining collectives, the fights and the heartbreaks that often get written out of the history of a movement yet play such a critical role in making a movement. Finally, through these herstories, this chapter will draw out the politics of feminist friendships that get articulated by the movement, and understand what it means for the movement, and how its reliance on feminist friendships with all its strengths and weaknesses fuelled the movement as well as its project of feminist worldbuilding.

Finding Community, Finding Home

‘We have come into a new world here...’

The autonomous women’s movement in India, as discussed in the previous chapters, became ‘home’ to all those who were inspired and despaired by the times. Women within left political organizations frustrated with issues of gender being relegated to the margins (Kumar, 1993; Omvedt, 1980; Dattar, 1984), angry students across college university campuses responding to global events and protests, urban middle class women being inspired by western women’s liberation movements and the language of feminist politics, working class women negotiating patriarchy at home and workplace - all found refuge in the women’s movement. As the struggle for political autonomy joined forces with the struggle for personal autonomy (Shah and Gandhi, 1992), friendships forged through these everyday collective struggles became a critical organizing force, a political relation of belonging and of ‘home’.

In a FGD with Saheli, one of the members shared:

Once in 1986-87, I was coming to the saheli office in an auto and the driver asked what this place is... and I said it is a place for women, he asked what do women do there, women’s place is at home... this [the idea that women's place is at home and the wonder people felt it being a political space] was such a textbook reaction, it makes you realize how radical it was at that time to even build this space... 20 years ago you did not have a queer group that was out and queer... women getting together and not talking about men is very political and very radical... when do women get together and talk about their things other than their husbands, children... in that sense, it is like a little bubble... (FGD, 2022).

The scribblings in the souvenir documenting Saheli's first four years are filled with this awe, this feeling of relief women felt in belonging somewhere, the feeling of validation they felt of their pain, frustration, anger, and the new friendships that this new home promised. As Sharada had written in the souvenir, "...as a woman to know the pain of every woman - for a long time I had been looking for a space where I could talk to and meet women, and try and do something about their problems - now I have found Saheli." (Saheli, 1985). Satya Rani⁴⁴, whose daughter was among the women murdered and who later became a saheli, scribbled, "I am the unfortunate mother of a girl who was burnt at the altar of greed. Coming to Saheli, listening to the sorrows of other people, one forgets one's own sorrows. It sometimes seems that the whole world has turned its face away from us. But we have come into a new world here..." (Saheli, 1985)

This became one of the common threads in most of the interviews with women in the movement, as almost all of them tried to articulate a sense of novelty, a newness that drew them into the movement. As we find articulated in Lalita (1988) and Gail Omvedt's (1980) writings of the women's organisations of late 1980s, where women felt a complete disjunct with the liberal ideas stirring in the college and university spaces and the familial pressure for marriage most of these women experienced, one of the tenets that made this movement 'home' was the possibilities it provided of carving out independent lives outside institutions of family and marriage, and the exposure to and the friendships with other women who were making diverse life choices. Another feminist activist formerly associated with Saheli shared, "When saheli started it was perhaps the only place of its kind... that is why the name was

⁴⁴ In 1979 Satya Rani Chadha's twenty-year-old daughter was killed in her marital home. At that time 'dowry deaths' were routinely passed off as 'kitchen incidents' or 'bride burning'. Satya Rani had reported the incident as murder and her struggle for justice was one of the incidents that sparked the anti-dowry movement in India.

chosen to be saheli... that a woman in a difficult position would find a place [here]...”

(Personal Interview, 2024). Reflecting on her own journey she further reflected,

I was against marriage when I was very young ... when I saw people would come to “see” my sister I would make jokes... and I had read Engels in college, he influenced me a lot... so when I went to Saheli and saw the kind of lives single women were living... they were all such towers of strength... I don’t think they were very conscious about it but the ecosystem they created and the kind of generosity they spread... along with the politics, this abundance of strength that comes with women activists had a magnetic pull... (Personal Interview, 2024).

Similarly, a feminist activist from Delhi, who came into the movement through her politicisation in Rajasthan, talks about the refreshing radicalness that this finding ‘home’ brought in most of their lives as she reminisced her days in Jaipur wherein through friendships, she found her space and her direct connect with the movement:

Friendships played a role in co-journeying into the movement... then I left Delhi and went to Jammu... I was dealing with pressures from the family to get married... and I was very confused as to what I wanted to be, where I wanted to be... then I joined Times Research Foundation and that is where I met [someone] and we became friends... we worked together, sang together... we were very happy to be with each other... in the 80s it was a very new experience... I heard from a friend of mine that [another person] would come to Jaipur... it was almost like it was meant to happen... we became a trio of friends... this friendship... there was a lot of Faiz and politics... [The other friend] brought in a new world, I got to know [another activist] and this whole new world of rural women where they were working... the Women's

Development Programmes (WDP)⁴⁵ program... [Her] entry into my world meant that I found a way to be part of the movement in a much more direct way... when the Roop Kanwar sati happened, [a friend] broke the story... we went together, we spoke to the father... that time it was just a little snippet of news... we joined the anti-sati protest... those five years were years of friendship, politics... I was a sponge soaking everything... we had many journeys... we lived together for ten years... it was like our sense of having a different family... (Personal Interview, 2020)

One of the founding members of FAOW spoke about the diverse people that the forum attracted in Bombay in its initial days that influenced and shaped Forum⁴⁶'s politics in the years to come:

That was a period when the left was on the upswing... worker's movement in Bombay was quite vibrant... only post textile strike breakdown that it started going downhill... when the atmosphere is full of hope and rebellion... it had a lot of impact... press would cover everything... some looked at us like something is happening in my house so I would want you to come and demonstrate... also some of the left parties realised women could be organized around women's issues... then some Marxist Leninist (ML) parties formed their own groups and stopped coming... Stree Kruti Sambhabana was formed... [some people] formed something in the industrial area... one level these kinds of political formations started happening... Some realised we were not taking on women worker's issues and some of us formed Nari Sangharsh Samiti... we started working with the nurses' union... we would go to different hospitals... as forum we

⁴⁵ Women's Development Program was launched in 1984 in Rajasthan to create awareness building groups amongst rural women.

⁴⁶ Many activists while talking about FAOW referred to it as Forum in short.

were concentrating on violence in different areas, we would talk about sexual assault, domestic violence, hall would be full... (Personal Interview, 2019)

The diversity of ideas these collectives housed also drew in women across social locations and social struggles to find home here. A queer Muslim activist described FAOW as a space that she found 'colourful' as it attracted multiple identities, and it was this diversity that made the space more vibrant. However, it was also not a space that was easy to make a home of. The upper caste, upper middle-class constitution of the group, made it difficult for migrant women from different social locations to make their space in these collectives. A lower middle class, lower caste activist hailing from a village in Maharashtra, speaks of these contestations, these tensions in her experience of coming to FAOW, "most were from upper class, they would talk in English, and I would not understand most of the discussions... but I also felt free and was stubborn that I would stay with the feminist movement... and I stayed..." (Personal Interview, 2019).

The decision to stay though did not just hinge on any abstract idea of freedom one felt in the space, but rather on the work of friendship that was put in by both sides to make the space home. She shared, "I would feel it is as much my responsibility to stay and learn as it is of those who have been here before to keep me... So, if I felt uncomfortable in something, it was also their responsibility to listen and make me comfortable... they would ask why I am not coming... this pain that they took helped make friendships..." (Personal Interview, 2019).

Another activist too spoke of this work of friendship that went on to dissipate this alienation,

before coming to Bombay, I felt the women's liberation movement was an urban movement... when I came to Bombay, the people I lived with would go to Forum meetings... They were good friends... they introduced me to Forum... before that I was introduced to the queer movement and I would go to stree sangam meetings... people

would see me as someone from the village who did not know much... Everyone perceived me as such in Forum also... they felt I did not understand things... but I understood everything but could not articulate... even now it is the same... I find it difficult to express... initially when I would go to Forum everyone would speak in English and I was not that conversant in English... so I would sit in a corner and try to grasp... I realised even the way people talked here was different... but the ones I lived with would take me along to Forum meetings, Stree Sangam [now LABIA] meetings, pride marches... they exposed me to things... I couldn't follow Forum meetings but when I would go home these friends would explain to me everything in Hindi... in Forum meetings people did try to speak in Hindi but their natural language was English... so even if they would start speaking Hindi, they would unconsciously drift to English... they did not do it on purpose... but when I gradually began to share my work, they began respecting me... when someone came to this big city from a village, they would need emotional support... There are so many ups and downs in life... my family was not here... so more than politics, I found shelter in Forum... Forum people were there... you could share personal things in the group... if I felt lonely, I could go to any of their houses and stay over... that openness was there... I loved that about Forum... that space was always there... all their houses were my home... (Personal Interview, 2019)

The internal organisational discussions in both Saheli and FAOW during this period reflect this constant questioning these collectives faced and the effort they felt was needed to make new members feel at home, and thereby forge a meaningful collective 'we'. However, the informal nature of this task, the relegation of this duty to individual friendships also made it difficult for everyone to find home here. In the absence of structural set ups, the cracks that were being covered up/ bridged through personal friendships in the 1980s, were no longer

enough to cover the fractures created in the movement through the challenges that the 1990s brought.

Perhaps one of the first blows to the idea of a collective 'we' premised on friendships built through compassion and empathy for all women based on commonality of oppression came through the Roop Kanwar incident in 1987. As Roop Kanwar, drugged and decked in all her wedding finery was being made 'ready' for self-immolation in Deorala, Rajasthan, with a huge pomp and show that glorified Sati, it opened up a can of contradictions between urban and rural sensibilities, tradition and modernity, religion and state and spiritualism and materialism (Kumar, 1993). Slogans raged and women took to the streets asserting their right to be Sati. While activists in the autonomous women's movement went to Deorala, infiltrated the crowds and registered their protest, this was also a moment of dismay and unease, as they discovered through this campaign the "complex relations through which issues concerning women can be used to stake claims to power" (Kumar, 1993, p. 175). This was also the time that the right-wing forces were consolidating in the country and they tried to promote their own versions of "Hindutva feminism". Hindutva groups began to "persuade women to see themselves as legitimate, equal and valued participants in public and even political demonstrations of Hindu fervour and faith', while simultaneously and carefully erasing 'boundaries between home and the world, private and public spaces, religion and politics through ceremonial enactment of familiar household rituals" (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995, p. 9), thereby, transforming and reinscribing "the public Hindu cause as a deeply felt and experienced private wrong that every woman, irrespective of her caste and community origins, will willingly nurse in her heart" (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995, p. 9).

The implementation of the Mandal Commission Report and the agitation that followed in 1990 saw the militant participation of upper caste young women protesting against caste-based reservations. The demonstrations brought to light the centrality caste occupied in

political society in India and framed how caste dictated our ways of seeing and being in the world. The image of upper caste women taking to the streets holding placards, 'We want educated husbands' (Rege, 1998) exposed a fracture that the collective 'we' of the autonomous women's movement had glue-taped so far through personal friendships and negotiations. It became evident that these caste fissures within the women's movement could no longer be managed through the common identity of the saheli. Dalit women who had been in the forefront of Mahar Satyagraha and been an integral part of the Ambedkarite movement began to assert their identities independently, looking for a 'home' that they could neither find in the 'larger cause' of the anti-caste struggle, nor in the promised sisterhood of the autonomous women's movement (Moon and Pawar, 2008). It is this 'unhomeliness', that then urges women to 'talk differently' (Gopal Guru, 1995). This need to talk differently, however, did not mean a separatist movement, but rather fighting both within and without the existing women's movement. One of the manifestations of this was found in the Fifth National Conference on Women in Tirupati in January 1994 where a workshop on 'Dalit and Tribal Women' was introduced as a result of consistent lobbying by Dalit feminists (Joseph, 2004). In 1994, a public hearing was held in Bangalore on 'Violence against Dalit Women' that led to the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women and All India Dalit Women's Forum. At the state level too, Maharashtra saw the formation of the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana in 1995. While emergence of the Dalit women's movement challenged the women's movement's collapsing of caste differences into a common sisterhood, the National Federation of Dalit Women explicitly stated in its inception that it did not intend to become a separatist organisation but "called for strong alliances between the dalit movement, the women's movement and the emerging dalit women's movement in the common struggle for social, economic, and political empowerment, equality and equity" (Joseph, 2004).

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Rath Yatra heralding Hindutva politics wreaked havoc on the secular fabric of the country. As Hindutva women mobilized under the saffron banner and called for the rape and murder of Muslim women, illusions of women bonding as friends, as sisters merely by virtue of being women, merely by an idea of commonness of oppression and struggle lay shattered. In the Fourth National Conference on Women's Movement in India at Calicut in 1990, Stree Jagruti Samiti in a paper titled 'Why do we have the movement, but the fascists have the women', spoke of this breakdown of sisterhood, thereby urging the movement to reflect on the politics of who is and who is not a saheli.

Through all this it is becoming increasingly clear that the growth of fascism will break asunder the 'oneness and unity of sisterhood' which has been an article of faith for many feminists. Leave aside the Uma Bharatis, many women especially from the growing middle class who acquired the goodies of life can only be afraid of losing them due to the growing insecurity and the anarchy of social and political life. It is not difficult to sell them the need of a strong repressive state.... There is no need to mourn the breakdown of sisterhood. The anti-fascist women's movement can only be strengthened by such polarization. In the days to come, the antifascist women's movement will attract the best daughters of our land who refuse to seek their liberation outside the emancipation of millions of exploited and oppressed women of our country.... It is these women activists who will radically redefine the women's movement as India enters the turbulent 90s. (Stree Jagruti Samiti, 1990, p.6)

With the neoliberalisation of the economy in the 1990s a 'new economics of desire' transformed the very texture of everyday life and triggered a new imagination that was not just about consumption but also as much about affects of desire and pleasure (Menon and Nigam, 2007). This moment saw the proliferation of dating advertisements, friendship clubs -

all pulsating with new desire for intimacies that were to characterise urban India. Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam (2007) point out how the 1990s marked a shift in the discourse of sexuality from questions of violence to those of pleasure. But the women's movement was still caught up in the older concerns of sexual objectification of women and sexualised violence against women and deeply uneasy with discussing issues related to choice and agency in sexuality. The 1990s are therefore marked by women's protests at beauty pageants where feminists often found themselves on the same side as the Hindu Right although while the former was protesting against the market's exploitation of women's bodies, the latter was expressing outrage at the attack on the traditional Hindu woman. This caused considerable churning and fracturing in the women's movement which was slowly waking up to the demands of a more affirmative view of sexuality demanded by the women in the newly emerging sexuality rights movement.

This is also the time when the 'autonomy' of the women's movement faced a new challenge with the proliferation of NGOs and renewed debates on funding. A glance through the changing themes of the autonomous women's movement conferences mark this shift. The third national conference of autonomous women's movement held in Patna in 1988 named Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan (Women's Liberation Struggle Conference) had women from autonomous groups, socialist and Marxist Leninist groups leading the discussions with the themes being related to women's work, land rights, ecology, communalism and religious fundamentalism and struggles and challenges of organising - most of the discussions geared towards culling out a vision for women's liberation, initiating a process of worldbuilding through these struggles, through friendships and comradeships (Omvedt, Gala, and Kelkar, 1988). By the time the fourth women's movement conference was being held in Tirupati in 1993, the title 'nari mukti sangharsh' had been dropped as was the attempt to chart out a vision for women's liberation. In their newsletter in January 2000, Saheli noted this shift:

The period between the Fourth and the Fifth National Conference was characterised by certain major developments. Various forces were appropriating the feminist agenda. The number of NGOs and government-supported women's programmes had increased and so did the number of women in them. Questions were being raised about their functioning and their perspective on women's issues. Problems related with foreign-funded groups and the government supported women's development programmes were raised for the first time in the Patna Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan in 1988. The main problems related to such funded and government supported groups were with regard to their working on the issues as well as the depoliticising effect of the 'development' approach. Their accountability to funders and/or their governments stops these NGOs from raising political questions, which is an important aspect of any movement or struggle-oriented work. (Saheli, 2000)

The faultlines deepened in the late 90s with the release of the film '*Fire*'⁴⁷ and the rumblings of the Queer movement that further challenged and divided the very idea of 'woman'—the subject of the movement. As the naming of 'differences' was becoming clearer, boundaries were being pushed and feminist political praxis was being put to the test. The emergence and articulation of diverging identities led to a contestation for the 'authentic' and representative voice of the movement and made the forging of solidarities across differences increasingly challenging. These necessitated a re-examination of the ethics of women's friendships, at times even leading to an impasse, a complete breakdown of communications. The growing

⁴⁷ The film *Fire* by Deepa Mehta released in 1998 had portrayed a lesbian relationship within a Hindu household between two sisters-in-laws. The film caused much furore in India as it was one of the first depictions of lesbian relationships in mainstream Hindi film. Hindutva groups agitated in front of cinema halls claiming it was against Indian culture. They also claimed that the film intended to hurt Hindu sentiments as it vilified the Hindu household and named the two concerned characters Sita and Radha (characters from Hindu mythology and religious texts) and demanded that they be immediately changed to 'Muslim' names. This furore over *Fire* was also a critical moment in queer history in India as it not only visibilised queer sexuality in the mainstream, but the protests that followed against the Hindutva brigade by feminists, progressive democratic forces enabled the coming out of lesbian political subjectivity and initiated the queer movement in India.

threat of neoliberalism and Hindutva politics also meant that the movement could not afford the impasse-- , that newer ways of forging solidarities and alliances had to be found to keep the struggles going.

Despite the growing disagreements, the movement also reinvented the idea of a home.

Members of both Saheli and FAOW spoke about houses where almost everyone had a key, where anyone could drop in, stay, evenings full of discussions, joy and songs that infused the movement with an energy and ushered in a sense of belonging. But these shared homes could not keep the real differences at bay.

Institutionalisation and Fractured Home

Debates on institutionalisation of the movement and funding questions led to split in Saheli in 1985 as some of the founder members who left went on to found Action India, Jagori. With the intent of “empowering grassroots women”, Action India began its work in a resettlement colony in Delhi that had come into existence post a restructuring plan of the city in 1976. Action India's interactions with local women in Jahangirpuri basti through the women's movement now gave birth to Sabla Sanghs, grassroots women's organisations conceived as an offshoot of Action India's work on “community development through mobilisation and empowerment of women” (Mehrotra, 1997). Sabla Sangh infused new energy into the women's movement and eventually became one of the major connections of the movement with working class women thereby opening up new possibilities of friendships and comradeships across class divides. The play ‘*Mahaul Badalna Hain*’ on women's experiences of sexual violence and harassment at work was born out of these interactions and friendships which found a new and common voice through the play and which was performed in the lanes and alleys of these resettlement colonies (Saheli, 2006).

While the specific locations and friendships so forged framed the politics of these spaces, the creation of this home also warranted deliberations on who would belong, how and how much. Much of the discussions and ideological debates of the times can be traced back to this crucial contention of space, of belonging, of claims of comradeship.

Being a ‘saheli’

The novelty of building a home outside the marital and familial kinship also meant this new relationality needed to be named and politically asserted. Coming out of the closet of Swarnakumari Devi’s ‘Sakhi Samiti’⁴⁸ [Women’s Friendship League], referred to in chapter 1, which was conceived as an organisation of elite brahmanical women who would lend a helping hand to the hapless destitute, widow of 19th century, Saheli in the 1980s asserts itself boldly as an egalitarian and political association of women bound by a common vision of worldbuilding. The word has since acquired connotations of a feminist commitment that women make to each other in the movement. In a 2020 in an elegiac poem mourning the death of Kalpana Mehta, a women’s movement activist very active in shaping Saheli’s politics, two of her comrades who were then in Byculla women’s jail described her as “a saheli in all circumstances”⁴⁹. This becomes particularly interesting as the comrades mentioned above hail from radical left spaces and their attestment alluded to the politics Kalpana and many others carried with her easy travel from the autonomous women’s movement to other social movements. Being ‘saheli’ then enabled a building of subjectivity, of personhood, of making the personal political. It embodied in it the symbolism and legacy of political belonging that ‘comrade’ had come to mean, carrying within the vision of those

⁴⁸Women’s Friendship League formed to promote women’s education and awareness regarding issues of widows

⁴⁹ Personal email, 2020

being on the same side of the barricade, of those standing tall to build barricades (Dean, 2019), but it also implied the politics of joy that has been so intrinsic to radical feminist politics. Radha Kumar (1993) writes how the women's centres and collectives formed in the 1980s, like Sakhi Kendra in Kanpur, Snehedhi in Chennai, named themselves such that they represented traditionally accepted structures of friendship, yet infusing it with a new radical politics, providing not only safe spaces where women would feel comfortable but also spaces that could house “moments of play and pleasure”. She speaks of Saheli holding a feminist workshop in 1983 that was filled with songs, dance, drama, painting. She notes how this infusion of ‘fun’ not only enabled women to liberate themselves from inhibitions, but also helped to build spaces for solidarity and intimacy that could be expressed joyously through non-verbal forms (Kumar, 1993). However, the realms of the personal and the political were clearly demarcated in these spaces. Kumar reminds us, “Discussions, conversations, written statements, and so on, now grew to represent ‘politics’ in a public context; dancing and singing, on the other hand, were both means and signs of immediate, personal, culturally rooted and collective warmth” (Kumar, 1993, p.144). This infusion of informal pockets of fun enabled the loosening of caste-class barriers and inspired new forms of articulation for those who would not have otherwise opened up in discussion sessions, making them feel valued. However, hierarchies persisted between the two modes of communication, and the demarcation of the personal and the political also meant the cross-class friendships that were thus built through these moments, remained unequal, “for the middle-class women acted more out of a sense of duty and the poor women out of a sense of gratitude” (Kumar, 1993). This contradiction became all the starker since the NGOisation, as the pouring in of United Nations (UN) and other foreign funds influenced ideas of how friends in the movement were to be addressed, who could be ‘saheli’, ‘friend’, ‘*behna*’ or ‘comrade’. While urban middle class women called each other friends, while connecting with working class women or with

rural women, the traditional familial notion of 'behna' needed to be called upon to build affect⁵⁰. The idea of 'sistah' though borrowed from Black feminists was mediated by popular culture. It contained a certain artificiality and was mostly used when didis from the city went to their 'fields'. Saheli, on the other hand, was more of a modern term that contained in it a sense of equality. The tendencies of it could perhaps be traced back to this demarcation of the personal and political in feminist workshops, meetings, "consciousness raising programs" as 'the relegation of the verbal to the public-political sphere reinforced the dichotomy between the political and the personal, so that neither informed the other, and thus ideas of personal ethics and behaviour could not be lifted into political life" (Kumar, 1993, pp.143-144).

As women found home in the movement, they also found themselves through their sahelis, their comrades. While reflecting on her journey a member of FAOW articulated, "My work in the rural areas also informed Forum what was happening outside the city and these interactions also broadened my vision... in socialist movement there was no space for your individual self, in feminist movement I realised there was space for the individual and the collective... before I only thought you had to sacrifice everything to work for the movement... here, I realised my individual self is also important... and that helped me a lot..." (Personal Interview, 2019). The co-travellers of the movement triggered journeys of self-discovery and growth in the sahelis creating intersubjective feminist selves which provided strength and freedom from the isolations of unbelonging... As Savita scribbled in the Saheli diary, "When I am unable to take a decision about my future, find myself alone and helpless, feel totally trapped in the net of my doings, I remember Saheli. Saheli gives me a sense of belonging..." (Saheli, 1985).

⁵⁰ It is important to flag that this phenomenon was more prevalent in North India than the rest of the country.

The Collective ‘We’

One of the defining debates of the women’s movement since the beginning had been around the question: who constituted the ‘woman’ in the women’s movement, what kind of political space would then be conducive to bring together these ‘women’, what sort of political action, political vision would lead to the liberation of this ‘woman’, and eventually what sort of political relation would define the collective, would enable the transition of political subjectivity from ‘I’ to ‘we’. The 1980s were therefore rife with debates on the ideological template of reform or revolution of the women’s movement, on who would lead the movement and who would comprise it, on who would be a friend, who an ally or who would be a comrade. While collectives like Saheli defined themselves as socialist feminist groupings whose purpose was to work as pressure groups to intervene and strengthen revolutionary struggles, other collectives chose to be more ad hoc in their functioning responding to the demands of the times and the political aspirations of its members (Saheli, 1986).

One of the sahelis shared, “Being saheli is a political relationship... notion of sisterhood which is powerful and complicated... the notion is how we can relate to one another, come together and talk politically about women’s issues... the idea is to also talk about equality...coming out of marital and family institutions, and other institutions of state.... Saheli is a non-hierarchical word – it does not have the mission based idea... it is about coming together and making change...It’s a shared political vision which translates and cuts across space...” (FGD, 2022).

In the absence of any tangible structure, how does this belongingness play out? In the special issue published on its twentieth-year anniversary, the then members of Saheli ponder:

So what does it mean to 'be' a Saheli? In the early years, women seeking help, activists from a range of movements wanting to join forces on issues related to women's oppression and rights, college students and other youngsters restless to change the world, women too scared to speak their darkest fears, women ready to fearlessly take on the male order, the government, the unjust laws, the coercive population control lobby and the unethical scientific establishment, and as importantly, women seeking to discover a sisterhood that wouldn't be as judgmental as the world around... we all came together in Saheli. (Saheli, 2006)

The question of belonging then also warrants discussions on accountability, of claiming stakes, and thereby brings to the question of what does it then mean to formalise these modes of belonging and friendships? Can friendship even be formalised? What does it mean for the problematic of the public and the private, the personal and the political? The idea of membership has thus plagued autonomous women's collectives right from its inception. While FAOW still refuses to maintain records or formalize membership informally just maintaining a mail chain and whatsapp group, and a minutes book for functioning, Saheli has had a complex negotiation with it as they reflect in their newsletter:

What does being a Saheli entail – what rights does it bring, what privileges, what burdens? What can each saheli expect from the other, or all from each other? Whose time and commitment can be called upon, who has the right or responsibility to attend meetings and have a role in decision making, keep the keys of the office and the Daily Diary that we use to share most internal information, and now, in the age of email, access to the password of our email account, or the onus of speaking on behalf of, or representing the group in outside forums, to the media etc. (Saheli, 2006).

Torn between building an accessible inclusive space without the hierarchy of structures but also putting in place some formal codes to ensure accountability and effective functioning, they defined and redefined membership with experiments throughout their journey. A 2 rupee to 100 rupee a month membership was introduced, at different points of time different roles were introduced, there were experiments to navigate the idea of dual membership.

It is this idea of equality, of forging political relations based on shared vision, shared ideological commitment that also shaped the kind of work that Saheli did. It is why the members of the organization debated so passionately whether or not they wished to continue casework (Saheli, 1995) and how they should relate to the women who came to them for help. In Bombay too a similar idea worked as people from FAOW built the Women's Centre in the early 80s— an office where women could just drop in with their 'cases' seeking help, volunteering or just sharing experiences. While these spaces were imagined to nurture friendships and solidarity, it was a very tight rope that one walked in building spaces that would transform from beneficiary benefactor relationship to something more political and egalitarian. The idea of casework meant handholding women, standing with them in court, helping them manage finances, ensure children's education and health. It became learning spaces for both the one helping and the one seeking help, as for the one it meant learning to handle things on their own, and for the other it was a training in patience, in learning to help without patronising. The barriers of class, caste were being pushed through these sharing of experiences, these learning and unlearning. It was in these learning and unlearning those feminist friendships got built, it was also what gave the women's movement its fuel, its edge. The discussions around it invariably exposed structures in society that perpetuate and consolidate patriarchy, especially in the lives of ordinary women. Enabling women to rebuild their lives would make activists see the functioning of courts, hospitals, banks,

administration, and the education system from the vantage point of a woman who has separated or is still negotiating with her family.

Reflecting on their work with Sabla Sangh in Jahangirpuri basti, Saheli discussed the need for consciousness raising and its intricate relationship with helping individual women (Saheli, 1985). As they had to intervene more and more in domestic violence 'cases' and deal with the intricacies of law, the question of consciousness raising, the need to look at these 'cases' not as individual problems or as personal rights but as manifestations of oppression and exploitation that is linked to the exploitation of a vast majority in the country. This pushed them to interrogate what one means by consciousness raising, what the role of women's organizations should be, and how one would need to connect these struggles to the struggle for social change. This question also then leads one to wonder who then is a saheli, and what kind of relationship one would foster amongst sahelis. In 1991, it was this very concern that after much debate and deliberation made Saheli decide on taking a pause from 'casework':

Women who come to us for concrete help in resolving their problems belong to all classes. We have believed that family violence and female exploitation cut across all class barriers. We have placed faith in the processes of equal sharing, mutuality, vulnerability and openness, to help in linking women irrespective of class, in a bond of sisterhood, strength and friendship. However, even with a lot of conscious individual and collective effort, these processes are often difficult to put into actual practice. Many factors impinge on the relationship between ourselves as Saheli workers and women who come to us for problem resolution.... (Saheli, 1991)

While the political concern at work here had primarily been the risk of institutionalization, of becoming a 'service providing centre', such concerns also raised questions of how one works to transcend the differences, the benefactor-beneficiary relationship to truly become 'sahelis'.

While FAOW did not have an official discussion or debate on this issue, its members voiced similar concerns as one of members pondered:

Most of the time our houses were really open... if anyone came out of an abusive house, they would come in our houses... I remember clearly there was this one woman whose husband was in Air India she had walked out and she was staying with me and she had never worked in her life... we got her a job... and she was living with me and I remember in the morning I would have to wake her up and she would go about slowly brushing her hair while I would nag... I realised that she had never had to do this... and at 38/39 years of age if you have to reinvent yourself... the relationship between the two of us was so unequal... after some time she lost her job and all of it created tension... so even though it was an open house... you are always the benefactor... the other person is always the taker... and we haven't been able to discuss this... at that time whenever something would happen people would come and take shelter in one of our houses... we haven't been able to negotiate this... we haven't talked about it amongst ourselves also... (Personal Interview, 2019).

The institutionalization of the women's movement and with the 'service providing model' of NGOs taking over 'casework' further provoked a breach in the friendships. Relationships became more transactional, hierarchical, and professional, spaces for dissent, raising questions and criticality began to shrink. Questions were raised about who then 'make' up the movement, who are its primary stakeholders, who should lead it and how. It also meant a change of vocabularies. The 'casework' debate in Saheli begins with a small note of dissent on calling women 'cases' which objectifies their lives and problems as well as the uneasy inequality it suggests between those seeking help and those dispensing it:

We have placed faith in the processes of equal sharing, mutual openness and vulnerability, to help in linking women despite class differences, and forge bonds of strength, solidarity and sisterhood. However, despite conscious individual and collective effort, these processes are often difficult to put into practice. Many factors impinge on the relationship we develop between ourselves as Saheli workers, and women who come to us for problem resolution. These include varying class backgrounds, power differences etc. Some of us felt that there is a distinct shift in approach of later volunteers. There was more de-linking of the personal from the political, less mutual sharing, openness about one's own life, and more of a 'third-person' approach, as though we as activists and feminists have resolved all these issues in our own lives, while the unfortunate women who came as 'cases' needed our help. Even the change in our language was symptomatic of these shifts. It became easier to refer to women who came for help as 'cases', and support work as 'casework', setting the tone for a more unequal atmosphere. These issues have become increasingly difficult to tackle with the increase in volume of cases pouring into Saheli. (Saheli, 1981-95)

While the collectives feared that this continuous "case work" of supporting individual women would lead to a kind of institutionalisation, chipping away the politics, and the vision of structural change, many members of both Saheli and FAOW noted how this work also allowed them to be in touch with women's lives, break class barriers and infuse the collective with fresh perspectives. Quite a few of the members of Saheli were women who had come to the collective with their 'cases' and chose to stay on. One such Saheli shared:

I went to Saheli and then stayed... I went with my problem and I was intrigued by the way Saheli worked... so through them I realised it is not just me a lot of women like me are in trouble... so I kept going and I would go to dharna, procession and I would

ask other women to join... these friendships played a big role... I learnt a lot from friends in Saheli... I did not know how to talk, I would rarely speak up, I would rarely step out of home... I was too weak to even fight for myself... Saheli gave me that strength, taught me to speak up, fight back... (Personal Interview, 2020)

This experience of the journey from the personal to the political therefore also reflected people's subjective perspectives and location -the Saheli who had come there with her problem, felt this was a good way of bringing women into the movement.

The changing lifestyles in the 1990s with the middle class emerging as a beneficiary also exposed new fissures of class. A former member of Saheli who had left the collective in the mid-2000s shared,

The changes ushered in by the economic reforms of the nineties where the middle class were the direct beneficiaries began to show in our organizations, in Saheli too. Later, the implementation of the much-awaited 6th Pay Commission also made lives comfortable and cosy. Earlier there would be one car in Saheli, we would pile all posters and leaflets in the dickey. It was used like a Saheli car. In the 2000s, many cars came and so fewer of us were left walking to the bus stop. The long chats over peanuts at the bus top never came back. Delhi is lavish, you know... There is a palpable material difference in 80s, 90s and early 2000s. I worked on myself to remain politically astute for fear of losing myself in this turmoil caused by the newfound prosperity of the middle class even though I do hold other privileges like education, skills and an upper caste background... From 96 two-three of us were working on behalf of Saheli with Janwadi Adhikar Manch that was a coalition addressing factory closures and basti demolitions in Delhi. That helped see even more

closely the deepening class inequalities. On 8th March, 2000 DJAM⁵¹ had a press conference along with the women of the families that were affected by the factory closures and basti demolitions... My feelings of alienation deepened as it was so clear who is gaining at whose cost. While the lives of people like us were improving, I was getting accommodation for free, there were Yamuna Pushta Bastis being demolished as in Yamuna Pushta and other places... that turmoil had started in the late 90s....

(Personal Interview, 2024)

Conferences and meetings of autonomous collectives on perspectives of women's liberation movements are fraught with these questions, concerns, doubts, dilemmas (FAOW, 1985; Saheli, 2000; Omvedt, 1980; Omvedt, Gala, and Kelkar, 1988). At one such meeting organized by socialist feminist groups in Bombay, Rohini reflected on the class character of the women's movement, stressing the need to rethink the "form of organization in which proletarian women can begin to break out of their isolation, feel a sense of solidarity and community in common struggle" (Banerji, 1987). Rohini's concerns get further echoed in the perspective papers put forth by Stree Jagruti Samiti, and other organizations raising the more fundamental question of what then drives the women's liberation struggle - reform or revolution?

Of Structures and Structurelessness

The bitter experiences of partisan left organizations where women often found themselves to be unheard, marginalized, invisibilized, triggered feminists to think of alternatives to structures. One of the ways autonomy got defined was also a way to find their own form of

⁵¹ That report was *Things Fall Apart* (DJAM, 2000)

organisation, their own way of doing things. The women's liberation movement in the West in 1960-80s had by then, while experimenting with creating non-hierarchical, democratic spaces stumbled on circular, horizontal structures (Hanisch, 2001). These ideas trickled into the women's movement in India as they too embraced and experimented with the same. The quest for challenging male dominated social formation and building alternate spaces pushed collectives to grapple with questions of power and hierarchy. Reflecting on the sticker 'Question Authority!' that sticks out from a cabinet on their office over the flyover, and looking back on their 25 years of journey, Saheli reflected in their souvenir:

Saheli did not want to replicate hierarchical structures and traditional leadership based on authority of one person or 'head'. If we wanted to challenge patriarchal structures, which are based on privilege, cut-throat competitiveness, and one upmanship in society, we had to evolve a different style of functioning within the group. Saheli began as a collective... a conscious decision to evolve decision making processes that were in keeping with feminist principles of equality, consensus, participation and validating personal experience. (Saheli, 2006)

The quest for this space that would nurture egalitarian democratic political relationships, comradeships, however, was a checkered one. While the critique of top-down structures hindering equal democratic relationships, urged feminists to demolish the old to build anew, the absence of it mostly created little friendship cliques that then emerged to build invisible informal structures that further made it difficult for 'outsiders' to enter or navigate.

Talking of their experiences within autonomous collectives, some of the members of FAOW shared how difficult it had been for those who had come from a different socio-political location, who were not so fluent in English or aware of the workings of urban groups to become 'one of them' to find themselves at home with the collective. While the 'older'

members with the best intentions tried to be welcoming and tried to make them feel at home, the barriers of social locations were still difficult to overcome. As one of the members of FAOW who had been a migrant from another city, from another collective, shared her hesitations, as she felt being new to a city, one also lacks ‘geopolitical capital’:

That thing about cultural embeddedness, safety also comes from there...safety, familiarity, knowing the codes.... I think these are linked. when we say autonomous women's movement, we meant it in terms of being linked to political party or not... but autonomy as such does not exist, you are embedded in the politics of that space... we all called ourselves leftists in the 80s - as a form of affiliation....[for me] it was easy to enter Sappho... it is something that I can call geopolitical capital... being part of the space, knowing the space, knowing the codes, the language, being familiar with the space, knowing the cultural references... whereas coming to another queer space in another city was not easy... knowing people is not enough, having some friendships helps... having someone in the collective who actually asks you in is almost how it happens always... (Personal Interview, 2019)

Knowing the codes, the language, the history also comes from a shared caste, class background. As a member of FAOW shared, “I have had some individual experiences in Forum also, there are some people who would say english is not important, but then while representing Forum they will look for english speaking people... you have to ignore this, but if you keep ignoring the friendships become superficial... remaining in Forum is also a struggle... sometimes I feel it is so open that people don't even ask if I stop coming... it would make me feel if I do not go, Forum will not even miss anything...” (Personal Interview, 2019).

In an eye-opening article that had shaken the western women's liberation movement in 1972, Jo Freeman talked about the tyranny of structurelessness highlighting how the absence of structures merely reformulated hierarchies in the movement as elites were now created often unintentionally through friendship groups built through socio-political positional commonness or merely through allocation of time:

These friendship groups function as networks of communication outside any regular channels for such communication that may have been set up by a group. If no channels are set up, they function as the only networks of communication. Because people are friends, usually sharing the same values and orientations, because they talk to each other socially and consult with each other when common decisions have to be made, the people involved in these networks have more power in the group than those who don't. And it is a rare group that does not establish some informal networks of communication through the friends that are made in it. (Freeman, 1972).

While the experiences of new entrants and marginalized women tore away the illusion of 'structurelessness', the effort to steer away from structures and leadership often cost the groups their efficacies as the ad hoc nature of working, and the spontaneous mode of decision making often) led to moments of paralysis and stalemate.

In reviewing their organizational structure in a conference of autonomous women's groups in Bombay, FAOW members reflected on the question of accountability and hierarchy of experience, of being, "Though it is true that the Forum is surviving and sustaining through all these difficulties, isn't it also a question of accountability? We are not 'accountable' to anyone. We can organize a demonstration, raise issues, shout slogans, express our emotions and leave. Nobody can come to us and tell us that we did wrong, that we better get lost. OR that we were helpful and helped to raise issues that were important to them. And this we

think, is also telling on our work, on our enthusiasm.” (Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1985). Saheli too echoed similar concerns, reflecting how the pressure of sisterhood often pushed issues related to power under the rug. A quick glance of the daily diary Saheli maintains to pass on notes, converse, share ideas, thoughts, concerns is enough to underline the work it takes maintain office, to balance the tightrope of ensuring accountability without falling into hierarchies, to usher in new members and initiate them to a collective, to friendship clusters that are loaded with shared histories, of togetherness as well as dissonance (Saheli, 2006). Their journey of twenty years is therefore lined with experiments, grappling for a mode of functioning that would be ideal for such a collective. Looking back at their functioning, Saheli members deliberated on how everyday dealings with women are emotional in nature, and members also looked to the collective as a space where they sought emotional sustenance to combat the alienation that they faced on account of their ideological beliefs. However, this intense emotional bond between members, this friendship forged among comrades can at times become an impenetrable fort for newer members. In the absence of structures, it is the shared history that puts in place invisible hierarchies that becomes almost impossible to navigate or break through. In a paper presented at the autonomous women's group conference in Bombay, members of Saheli reflected:

Dynamics within and external to the organisation make collective functioning difficult. Some of the workers who either have more time or are working full-time have better access to information. Old timers are better versed with the history of the organisation, the movement and the reasoning which has gone in the past. New timers feel a bit unsure not only due to these reasons but also because they have had little exposure to the way the group functions... Most old timers, over a period, develop close emotional bonds with each other as well as with organisation... (Saheli, 1986)

These claims of belonging in the organisation also then translates into claims to decision making - who can influence decisions, and who cannot - thereby also determining who belongs and who remains in the margin. With no structure in place, these claims often take on an overdetermining role in the functioning of the organisation. A former sahelī shared how the fact that the meetings were held mostly in the house of a single person, and a lot of them being single could stay back and continue with the discussions also led to a lot of contentions and dismay within the group:

We would have these discussions with some one on one, but the collective discussion was more about agendas ahead and right and wrong... those of us who were single would carry on the discussion even after a meeting, and those married or with families would feel left behind... this was characteristic of sahelī and it would show during the meetings as tensions... maybe we have taken a decision before and it shows in the way the meeting was conducted and they would say that you are enjoying, meeting each other, and have had these discussions already... but we made our lives like that so that the evenings are also with friends and activists and discussing politics and the [informal] meetings were always mostly at Davi's, Kalpana's house and some of these things were also seen as power imbalances in sahelī...(Personal Interview, 2024)

Being autonomous too came at a cost as organisations had to think through how to run offices, enforce work discipline in a context where all members were juggling time between work, family and the movement. This was a tricky decision as it also entailed difficult questions like whose time can one call upon, who could be a volunteer or a wholtimer, and the claims and stakes in the organisation that either of these roles afforded. Members of Sahelī reflected in their paper on organising:

When payment of any kind is made for the time spent within organisation, additional complications arise because a sort of staff-volunteer equation develops which may be unequal. This again is specific to the Indian cultural milieu where unpaid work in these sectors has had a long tradition and sacrifices of monetary income command respect of sorts. (Saheli, 1986)

The concern that these tendencies could become markers of institutionalisation also influenced Saheli's decision to stop 'casework'. Closing casework put an end to the tradition of having full time paid workers. Entangled with it was the question of class as the amount of time one could devote in an organization, the extent to which one could volunteer was tied to the political question of who had the time to spare. While it helped some people to raise questions, it muffled some voices. The emotional bond people shared made registering dissent difficult. As someone formerly associated with Saheli confided, "I was this little one who was nurtured by so many people but later on when two of us raised questions on class differences we would become bad... and we would wonder how is it that when you work you are a star and when you raise questions you are difficult... it was not deliberate but it felt like that..." (Personal Interview, 2024). The adhocism in the issues raised and the structurelessness meant that a member's position in the collective was negotiated depending on whether the issues raised by her resonated with the immediate concerns of the collective or not. A member of FAOW who has been associated with a Muslim women's collective and a queer collective put it:

In organizations too your position goes up and down. In Aawaaz-e-Niswaan⁵² (AEN) if I spoke more about my Muslim identity, about Muslim women I would be

⁵² Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (in Urdu meaning Voice of Women) is a Muslim women's organisation founded in 1987. It later registered itself as an NGO. The organisation was born out of the Muslim women's movement emerging at that time through the struggles of Shah Bano and Shehnaz Hussain over the question of maintenance and

appreciated. In Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA)⁵³ if I did not wear my sexual orientation on my sleeve I would lag behind. In Forum everyone came with different information, different codes and readings. It was a different world for me. It took some work to crack those codes, to understand things, and only then I could gather the confidence to speak. And when I began speaking, there was no going back. Initially when I started speaking, people were startled a bit. Some might complain about the way I put my arguments, so I would say I have just learnt to speak, gradually I will learn to present arguments well so. There have been strains in friendship as well. Now I know how to put forward my arguments, how to present them and how to manage friendships, how to navigate the political field so that the movement is not weakened. All of it took work, took a lot of learning. (Personal Interview, 2019)

It is significant to note that FAOW worked very closely with AEN and LABIA since its foundation, informing and shaping each other's politics. There was quite a significant overlap between the membership of the three organisations. FAOW played a critical role in handholding these organisations in its initial days. Yet despite there being an intimate friendship between the three organisations, there was also an implicit hierarchy between them. This will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. While each of these questions has been difficult to resolve, the implications of the uneasy resolution determined the making of the collective 'we', the defining of friendships that got forged as one of the

religious patriarchy. Post 1992, they also began working closely in communally affected areas and have played an important role in anti-communal, anti-fascist struggles.

⁵³ A queer trans collective founded in 1995. At that time, it functioned under the name Stree Sangam as it seemed sanitised and did not call to attention immediately allowing it to offer a safe space for a lot of people who were not ready to come out then. It was only in 2002 that, at the face of right-wing onslaught, the organisation chose to name itself LABIA, which while being an acronym for Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action also referred to the female genitalia, deliberately, boldly asserting its queerness.

chits left by Vandana Prasad in tribute to Saheli's twenty years read, "Because Saheli is small it can work consistently and has been able to build a reputation for quality... Because it does voluntary work done in time not spent making livelihoods, it cannot be everywhere all the time and must pick and choose its interventions. Because it maintains a radical politics, it will not find millions of partners and friends. Because it does not hesitate to criticize, it may lose a few too!... and I, for one, would not like it any different." (Saheli, 2006, p. 81).

So, does one then ever stop being a 'saheli'? Interestingly, while the aversion to structures in autonomous collectives makes way for setting up of groups and lobbies based on friendships, the porous nature of the collectives also allows space for coming back. Several activists of Forum and Saheli confided how they have been on and off workers, how sometimes dissonances or burnouts or even just diverse interests have made them take a break from the collective, pause, reflect, work elsewhere and sometimes find their way back to the collective. The collective 'we' that then gets constructed through this porous network is built on trust, affect, and belief in each other's commitment and faith in the core idea of the common fight against patriarchy that continues to be shared despite fractures and cracks, leaving a way out for healing and repair.

While the structurelessness forced these collectives to interrogate the uneasy relationship women shared with power, the constant back and forth between the decision-making process and action also many a times led to paralysis of action. While remembering their saheli, Kalpana Mehta, Ranjana Padhi and Laxmi Murthy, shared Kalpana's discomfort with structurelessness that she had articulated in a long meeting in 1980, "The form of organisation closest to my ideal would be democratic centralism. I am torn between the two – collective decision making, for which I have theoretical commitment, but feel democratic centralism is better. In democratic centralism, all have rights but not opinions, to exercise rights in different avenues. There is no negation of hierarchy, but everyone has a chance to

move up. With the practice of collective decision-making, the leadership has not felt a responsibility to the rank and file. In the name of “Collective” if we come minus preparation then it is a loose ineffective structure. For a Collective to work there has to be some common minimum ideological understanding.” (Padhi and Murthy, 2020). To break this stalemate, Saheli experimented with different kinds of structures that would enable participatory democracy yet keep the work going. As its members shared, “We have also tried different structures... core group, coordinators, etc... Then there were partly paid workers but even that did not work, then we arrived at the monthly coordinator... all of it to organise work and functioning... to try and democratise them, the struggle to mediate a lot of issues, balance between ethical process and efficiency...” (FGD, 2022). FAOW, on the other hand, chose to remain a structureless, porous, more open group. One of the members shared, that Forum could survive for forty years without structure, funding, and registering by pushing some things under the carpet, while this was something that riled her up at one time, over the years she has also come to look at it as being healthy:

[As Forum severed ties with the Women's Centre] the organic relationship with women was lost... and we became rootless... we never confronted each other on this... now we know where each of us stand and so we keep to our boundaries... that is not friendship... we have kept it healthy... it does not do justice to friendship... Bombay life is such you can keep aloofness... the city allows you that... we have had these discussions and the pushing of things under the carpet...a few years back I would have seen it as compromise, but now I think it is healthy... (Personal Interview, 2019)

In the absence of structures, or any other tangible form of accountability, personal friendships, private informal intimacies took that place, helping to lay down the ground rules of who is and who is not a saheli, and how much. In the absence of a clear political vision,

these affective ties bound the community together and steered the movement forward bridging over the personal and the political.

The Informality of Feminist Friendships: Collectives negotiate the personal and the political

While structures enable possibilities for diversifying feminist political associations and modes of belonging, the multifarious and complex journeys of the women's movement also open up ways in which one navigates the personal and the political, the public and the private, and more importantly what makes the personal political. In her short memoir, titled, 'I am Not a Wall That Divides, I am a Crack in That Wall', Kamla Bhasin (2011) writes that feminism and the women's movement, while being exciting, energizing, creativity enhancing and much more, is a difficult ideology to commit to. Living a feminist life demands disruption, creating disturbance in the normative, and almost always extracts a price as it enters into our homes, families, bedrooms, classrooms, workplaces and most intimate personal relationships (Bhasin, 2011). Furthermore, women's friendships have historically been so repressed, so undermined, undervalued, that giving primacy to friendships, living a life around friendships itself becomes a political act. It involves breaking free from the idea of privatised emotions, privatised intimacies. One of the sahelis described, "it's also a kinship that you feel when you walk into a space like that... you didn't know these people were like you but you find them like you... there is no word for that... but it is a resonance... it is not friendship, it is not solidarity... it is nothing except an affirmation of who you think you are... specially at a time when we entered where there was nothing outside..." (FGD, 2022).

Making and Unmaking of the 'We'

In a context where the journey of figuring out what we are fighting for, and what we are fighting to be, also translates to working out the 'we' that Sara Ahmed (2017) denotes to be the hopeful signifier of the feminist collective. Feminist histories, she writes, 'are histories of the difficulty of that we – history of those who have had to be part of a feminist collective' (Ahmed, 2017). Yet while a lot of deliberation has gone into unpacking the 'we' – who constitutes the 'we', who are the 'we' that become so moved as to move what is, who are the 'we' around whom the movement should anchor itself, and what makes the 'we' work, how does one sustain the 'we', yet historiographies of the movement shies away from addressing this ghost, this central space that friendship occupies in our feminist lives, in our praxis. As an activist associated with the FAOW pointed out, "the thing is nobody gives centrality to friendships that is why no one talks about it... but there have been many many heartbreaks due to friendships. In these 40 years I have seen more heartbreaks because of friendships than because of relationships... some people have walked out of your friendship and there is no clue... and because there is no recognition of what it means to walk out... if it had been in a romantic relationship I could have more claims to ask for an explanation why this friendship went away..." (Personal Interview, 2019) This inability to talk about what friendship means to us also withheld people to understand the implications of it in a collective, in feminist politics, to understand the radical possibilities it carries. The idea of these conversations on losing friendships being conceived as personal stalled the movement to explore the revolutionary possibilities of friendship and left everyone with a sense of unease that no one knew how to deal with. It also made invisible the alternate revolutionary cultures that these histories of friendships, comradeships could potentially build, the disruptions it could cause to the capitalist world order.

Rummaging through this ‘fragile archive’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17) as discussed in the introduction, also open doors to understanding the central role friendships played in politicizing people, in developing solidarity with people across class, caste, religion. In her recollections of the autonomous women’s movement, Sheba Chhachhi (2011) writes these little scenographies of friendship, camaraderie that are built through the movement – scenes that talk of sisterhood, of feminist disruption, resistance, and moments of nurture, care and support that work to further consolidate one’s sense of belonging, to assert one’s claim to the movement:

Her voice falters, tentative, coloured by a sudden rush of anger. A voice that has learnt to name, to speak out. I, in turn, speak. The knowing in her eyes.

Stories told, stories heard, pain shared. Hands that hold and ease. Bodies moving, dancing, faces flushed with song. No, not simply angry women. Our anger is no longer simple. Growing, digging deep, exploring ways to re-imagine ourselves.

This kinship has a substantial quality, forged through processes of shared reflection, not by blood or class or profession. We are each other’s primary resource; all other forms of prostheses become secondary.

In the midst of the disappointments, the betrayals, the self-serving tendencies, the splits, the fights, I return to this shared subjectivity. (Chhachhi, 2011, p. 154)

The shared ‘we’ that Sheba writes about is reflected through her photographs that mirrors the scenographies of friendship, of collectivity, the playfulness and pleasure, that builds the feminist ‘we’. One of the working-class activists from Delhi, talks about the intensity and strength of this emotional bond built through this ‘sharing of lives’, in her own way as *“talwar se bhi nahin dhalne wale woh dosti thi”* (“Friendships that refused to budge even

under the wrath of the sword” [Author’s Translation]) (Personal Interview, 2020). She goes on to narrate,

... once we had gone to Seelampur for a case, and we were attacked... we faced many such situations but the friendships kept us going... friendships were based on a shared ideal of feminism... that is why the friendships were so intense... we worked day and night... from this village to that... we would travel stealthily at night so that the thakurs⁵⁴, zamindaris do not get to know... they would otherwise drive us away accusing us of leading women astray... the zamindars exploited people, there was corruption in ration shops, wages would be very less... when we raised these issues we made a lot of enemies... it was only these friendships that sustained us. (Personal Interview, 2020).

These intense friendships that the movement builds allow spaces for new claimants, new claims that perhaps calls for a different kind of political living where the personal becomes the political. As one of the activists very succinctly put it, “walking on a thin and sharp razor of friendship and politics” (Personal Interview, 2024) also meant being alert to not personalising the political. The dialectic of the public and private, and the costs that the collective often had to bear for the volatility of the personal, of the emotional also compelled collectives to sometimes shy away from nurturing friendships, succumbing to the liberal notion of what was personal, and what became the political. A recent member of FAOW voiced, “Forum is a space where there is not much space for expression, people are very cognitive...” (Personal Interview, 2019). Drawing from her experiences of being part of alternate Marxist collectives and then the autonomous women's movement space, she adds:

⁵⁴ Upper caste landowning class

this is also having to do with all movement spaces where you have to take an immediate stand there is no legitimate space for the psychic... So even though we have overturned the Marxist idea that the political must overshadow the personal, but the personal also we have understood in a structural way... women who have faced domestic violence, women who have faced violence in custody... and obviously these are structural things, but what about this woman? How does she experience this differently... or when I talk about it, how do I resolve my trauma... there is no space for that.... that is something I experienced in earlier collectives also that I was formatively part of, and even now... so one is constantly struggling for space... there is an acknowledgement today that we need to pay more attention to feelings... otherwise you get called a difficult person... but actually these are things that make or break a collective, influence collective decisions, movement forward... (Personal Interview, 2019)

Another member of FAOW who had also been a founding member of a queer collective reflects on the demarcation she makes about sharing her intimate sphere between friends in the two collectives:

And they don't stem from the fact that those are better more close relationships but it stems from the fact that how we understand private and personal... there is much more that I can intrude upon and I allow intrusion than the latter collectives there is much more guarding of space and there isn't that ease of connecting there isn't that ease where I can just call and cry or ask for smaller things... may be big things you can ask but smaller things do not really matter... and probably they are more reflection of the times in which they were formed or it could be that the basis of that interaction was different from this or it could be that because you had such strong bonds you did not make more strong bonds... there could be many reasons. (Personal Interview, 2019).

The acknowledgement of claimants to our spaces, also allows guarding of these spaces – preserving these spaces of nurturance, care, sharing. In a society that looks at claims of romance and blood kinship to be more natural, more rightful, the informality friendships often made it precarious. One of the members of FAOW shared how when she had chosen to live with her partner, there was an intense heartbreak with her friends who had so far been the sole claimant of that space. Her concern, and anxiety about the space being corrupted by new claimants is further echoed by another feminist activist in Delhi as she reflects on the changing dynamics that the entry of her partner and her eventual marriage brought into her friendships,

It was like your world is through friendships... there was no separation... We were like friends, sisters, feminists... everything had merged... when you live together you share a history... that journey together is a very important journey... it also had to do a lot with trust... [about] who can you trust... certain friendships really spell out [that trust]... therefore all the more making the separation was very difficult... so when my friend got into a relationship it was not easy for a fourth person to come when you have lived for ten years [in a different dynamic]... When I got married, we said it was not a big deal but I think it led to some anxiety... it's like your coupledness got formalised... there are new claimants of your space and there is a recognition of your relationship that is not there in terms of friendship... there is no kinship pattern... when I had a daughter it was a new point of stress... it was also being aware of what it all means... you are kind of in structures and still trying to break them... so you break them for a while but you are in the structure... The only thing was our passion for feminism, for our work, our respect for each other helped sustain it... although there is no formal recognition of this kind of relationship... (Personal Interview, 2020)

The unchartedness of the territory also meant there was no roadmap, nor were there any rules or ethics to fall back on. The only template of friendship available is a liberal idea that looks at it as a private, personal relationality that would always be temporary, that would bear no claims, and always be secondary to our familial, marital obligations. Navigating intimacies within the organisation often became tricky in this context, especially in case of romantic relations and ruptures within a collective. Many of the activists confided how several people stopped coming to the collective when their (romantic) relationship with someone within the collective broke down. A member of FAOW and LABIA shared, “Once I took a break when a personal relationship with a member went astray... and I took a distance... It was about a broken friendship but it affected everybody... in LABIA also it keeps happening there are heartbreaks and people leave... or sometimes they are mature enough to deal with it while everybody else tries to act as buffers...” (Personal Interview, 2019). How the collective may intervene or not intervene in such cases is another uncharted area where collectives often fumble. One of the members of FAOW and LABIA shared:

If you were in a relationship with someone and that doesn't work out and you are both in the collective... how do you navigate this minefield... one person quits sometimes... sometimes we continue to occupy the same space and there is no talk about this affective dynamite that is there... and that's where I feel we choose not to talk about it... we think it will not affect because everyone is an adult but no one is that adult and becoming that adult is also a process of talking [about] these things...processing this but we choose not to... we don't have the vocabulary, we don't have the signposts in collective living as in in collective political work to actually realise these are also affective spaces, intimate spaces and they are never going to be separate and you have to find a way of addressing this... except when individuals have managed to address/ navigate... whenever collectives have discussed what should be done it's [either] been

disciplinary action or behave yourself/ grow up/ don't bring it here or there is silence and silencing... whenever collectives have taken a call it's been a disciplinary call... that's strange considering we say that the personal is political. (Personal Interview, 2019)

The lack of vocabulary to talk about these things in a collective or the baggage that one has had about losses of friendship, intimate relationship also made some collectives shy away from bringing in the personal, yet the problems persisted despite being unacknowledged leading to further fragmentation, people quietly leaving the collective. In my Focus Group Discussion with Saheli, a young member had shared, “One of the first things I remember in going to these feminist spaces is being able to look at these women who have been living outside the structures that I have grown up knowing... and I think what also happens is when we come here, we are disappointed with the world, we are looking for community, and when I came here I was told this is a political space, where you work, and friendships may happen over time... so it was quite shocking because I thought why should it be such a task” (FGD, 2022). This had sparked an interesting discussion on why people came to collectives, what one expected from such spaces, how it also varied based on at what point of one's life one entered a collective, as an older saheli had interjected:

When I came to saheli in the mid-80s I was not looking for any friendship, and I had not developed many friendships within saheli for a long time... the friendship wala thing came much later... it had something to do with my personality, something to do with the nature of the group... There are many reasons why I did not integrate into the group... it depends on a lot about where you are in life... I came here to do political work and to do something for the cause of women because of some things I had witnessed in my family and friends circle that I had strong feelings for... So I was keen on doing something that leads to some kind of betterment of women in society...

for a long time I was only thinking about that and at a personal level I had not developed any friendships around anybody... I was going to sahelî for work... (FGD, 2022)

This discussion also revealed how the idea of the personal and political, of friendships, affect, care and what made the collective what it is also varied from generation to generation. As the younger sahelî had articulated:

Why do these people come to this space to seek solidarity or some form of friendship... most of the time you are estranged from family, you are new to the city and you absolutely have no one... so it becomes your social space... and that kind of isolation can happen because you are queer, you don't belong to the city, complicated mental health issues... there are volunteers who came in later and they did not have same kind of expectations as some of us have... because their lives are situated very differently and it is a mitigating factor that you seek from these spaces and that is why when ruptures happen sometimes they become very bitter, some people take it... you know it's difficult for the group but for some people a part of the group is not working... At least these things are being articulated now... mental health has been a journey in sahelî itself... who is the person coming in, what kind of person coming in plays a big role... (FGD, 2022).

What this discussion highlights is also how the problematics of the public and the private, the political and emotional, seeps into the construction of feminist political collectives. The political economy of the times also determined what came to be constituted as 'necessary sharing', and defined the categories of personal and political as a sahelî reflected:

Every generation will carry a stigma that is not carried to the public domain... so there were queer people or people with mental health illness, to take an example, but that

remained shared only within personal friendships and was not the knowledge of the larger group or did not become the group experience... there are some things that still remain within the private domain, within subsets of people... for instance, [the film] *Fire* pushed some to become political subjects... a lot of comforts, discomforts around homosexuality was there within the group... so it is also the changing times that determined what got shared, what people felt necessary to share... (FGD, 2022)

What remains unsaid is that this idea of what becomes necessary sharing is also driven by the liberal idea of what constitutes the personal and what becomes the political. In an intense discussion of family and marriage in *Economic and Political Weekly* by different activists from the women's movement, Mary John (2005) pointed out how this dichotomy of what was personal and what was deemed to be political also framed the question of marriage and family in the movement such that while many of the lived experiences of feminist activists vehemently opposed and questioned these structures, somehow this politics of living could not filter into the campaigns, the programs that the movement took up:

Within small groups, among friends, or even in solitude, we passionately struggled over questions related to sexual experiences, love, relationships, monogamy, the institution of marriage, having children, saying no to marriage, remaining single. And yet, it was really only around violence that it was possible to have sustained public debate and awareness building. Many critical issues – such as the different forms of the family, so-called ‘arranged’ and ‘love’ marriages, and troubling questions related to sexuality, remained more ‘personal’ than ‘political’ and did not get translated into wider forms of questioning. We therefore need to understand better, what consequences this had for the significant number of feminists who remained single, or who built their lives with other women. (John, 2005).

It, therefore, becomes interesting to mark the distinction many activists made in defining the personal and the political, in demarcating friendship and comradeship, and the journey between the two. For some the distinction was very clear, wherein friendship is marked by the personal, by shared histories of growing up, comradeship on the other hand is marked by commonality of struggle, and shared political vision, of co-travelling in a fight for a different world. It also marks the coming together of the two ‘we’s in the collective: the ‘we’ of personal friendship, and the ‘we’ of the larger collective - the two sometimes co-existing peacefully, sometimes in conflict, strengthening or disrupting the collective. The queering of lives becomes possible when tossing out the liberal idea of personal, friendship claims centrality, when the fragility, vulnerability is acknowledged. This fragility also instills in us the responsibility to take care, to work with care, to build shelter, to blur the lines between friendship and comradeship, and expand it to the collective ‘we’, putting forth a revolutionary politics of friendship. The feminist project then becomes to not just create homes and spaces of belongingness but to also find ways in which women can exist in relation to each other, to unravel how women can be in relation to each other, in Kamla Bhasin’s words expanding the feminist arithmetic of ‘*ek aur ek gyarah*’. We will deliberate on the political economy of it in further chapters.

Negotiating Neoliberalisation, NGOisation and Institutionalisation of the Movement

Conversations around friendships and organising inevitably brings one to the conversation of dissonances – how political dissonances affect friendship and how dissonances in friendships affect one’s politics. It also demands deliberation on how friendships fail when there comes a

rupture in the political imagination, bringing to light the crisis both friendship and feminist organising face from neoliberalism, and informality of friendships and the collectives. One of the first splits that had rocked the movement was when a bunch of activists left *Manushi*⁵⁵ due to differences with one of the founding members. While the details of the split were never documented, the other split that had rocked the movement was the one is Saheli in 1985 on the question of funding and institutionalisation. Some of the founding members left to then found NGOs while the rest continued to work within articulating a strong critique of professionalisation of feminism. While the split made the friendships within the group more fragile, it was also deemed inevitable as it signalled a clash in how one envisioned the movement politically. These clashes while making friendships fragile led to the fragmentation of the movement such that conversation even now becomes laden with guilt and hurt, when it is mentioned.

NGOisation and Fragmentation of Friendships

As discussed earlier, the pouring in of foreign funds post the 90s and the NGOisation of the movement not only chipped away the radical politics of the movement, it also put friendships to test. A lot of tensions and contradictions within the movement are satirically presented in a song written and composed by Saheli in 1991⁵⁶:

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi (2)

⁵⁵ Manushi was a feminist magazine formed in 1978. Initially it was perceived to be the voice of the movement. However, with some of the founding members taking a rightwing turn led to split of the magazine and its distance from the movement.

⁵⁶ The song was written as a parody to Gorakh Pandey's Samajwaad aya written as both a self-critique and self-reflection of the autonomous women's movement that they themselves were part of.

England se aayi; Amrica se aayi

Dilli se aayi; Mumbai se aayi

Jan Andolan to ban hi naa paayi

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi

World Bank se aayi; McArthur se aayi

Oxfam se aayi; Norad se aayi

Phir bhi autonomous kahlaai

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi

Nafrat netagiri se aur dikkat hai hierarchy se

Nafrat netagiri se aur dikkat hai hierarchy se

Par Collective ne sab ko rulaayi

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi

Sarkaar se aayi, Mahila Aayog se aayi

U.N. se aayi, Beijingva se aayi

Sab milke khichri pakai

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi

Congress ne uthayi, BhaJaPa bhi uthayi

Mulayam, Laloo ne bhi doharayi

Par arakshan ne band bajayi

Naarivaad unka dhire dhire aayi

Nirasha Left se paayi, Saat Behne apnayi

Aath March manayi, morcha khub chalayi

Par woh lesbian saawal se sharmayi

Yeh kaisi naarivad aayi?!

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi!

Naarivaad behna dhire dhire aayi⁵⁷

[Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily (2)

Hailing from England; from America

From Delhi; From Mumbai

Yet, we could never build a mass movement.

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily.

It came from the World Bank; from McArthur

From Oxfam; and from Norad

Still, they claimed it to be autonomous.

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily.

⁵⁷ Personal communication, 2024. The song has been compiled through various versions that activists recollected from memory.

Unease with leadership, discomfort with hierarchy,

Unease with leadership, discomfort with hierarchy,

Yet the collective structure made us all cry.

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily.

It came from the government, from the Women's Commission

It came from the UN, from Beijing too

Together, they made a mishmash.

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily.

The Congress picked it up, the BJP picked it up too,

Even Mulayam and Lalu voiced it,

But reservations ruined their plans.

Their feminism came slowly and steadily.

Disappointed with the Left, the seven sisters embraced us,

We celebrated March 8, organized big marches,

But we shied away from the lesbian question.

Was this the kind of feminism envisioned?!

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily.

Feminism, sister, came slowly and steadily] [Author's Translation]

However, Saheli remained firm in its position on NGOs and disavowed dual membership, making it a rule that board members of NGOs could not be members of Saheli. FAOW on the other hand, while being critical of NGOs and institutionalisation, remained more relaxed in its membership, with several of its members being both members of NGOs, as well as being a part of FAOW. A member described, "Forum never had any issues with people in NGOs

being part of the group... double membership was never an issue with Forum and we have been able to compartmentalise things...” (Personal Interview, 2019). This decision though often caused dissonances within the collective. One of the members of FAOW who had to work as an NGO employee shared her critique of Ngo cultures, “Those talking about labour rights, exploit workers in their NGOs... those clamouring to women's right to wear what they want, judge people's clothes in their NGO... they would give speeches against discrimination and then discriminate in your NGO...” (Personal Interview, 2019). The question of duality also raised another critical ideological question as another member raised, “There are people in Forum who run NGOs as well... Forum's politics, ideals are different... but when they are in NGOs their whole attitude changes... they work differently there...” (Personal Interview, 2019). The tensions within the movement around NGOisation also seeped into the Autonomous Women's Movement Conferences⁵⁸ as the autonomous groups formed their own separate network and began debating whether they would continue with the conferences in this format (Saheli, 1995).

Academic Feminism, Feminist Friendships and the Autonomous Women's Movement

If NGOs were one symptom of institutionalisation of the movement, the other happened through what may be called in a neologism the ‘academification’ of the movement through Women's Studies programs. While the discipline of women's studies emerged from the movement in the 70s, it had had its own chequered journey. Imagined as a field that would support the movement by generating socially relevant research arising from the needs of the

⁵⁸ The Autonomous Women's Movement Conferences were organised by left and autonomous women's collectives since the 1980s. It became the platform for tabling important discussions, flagging debates and hashing out differences. Both Saheli and FAOW were core organisers of these conferences. After the first two conferences some NGOs like Jagori, etc also joined these conferences. The joining of the NGOs also led to a change in the tonality and format of the conferences which left the autonomous collectives feeling disgruntled and betrayed. One of the critical debates on this conference was regarding participating in the Beijing UN Conference. While the NGOised groups debated the need to participate, autonomous collectives like FAOW and Saheli were sceptical and a debate on the politics of UN and NGOisation had ensued.

movement, the discipline of Women's Studies always held a precarious position in academia (Pandhe, 1988) struggling to conform to the needs of disciplinary academic criteria while maintaining its connections with radical feminist politics. The marginality of the Women's Studies departments made them susceptible to the co-option of the field by the state as well as by imperialist lobbies. In her article titled 'Whatever Happened To Women's Studies?' MS Sreerekha (2016) comments on this predicament, "marginalised disciplines in the academia have to struggle to prove their credibility to speak or listen to beyond the conventional disciplinary boundaries. It is also certain that as an academic discipline, women's/gender studies would challenge the epistemological base of many disciplines and it will further challenge other disciplines on their capability to break the barriers, to question the existing social hierarchies and marginalisation, and contribute to bring in social change". This professionalisation of women's studies caused further ruptures within the movement and even within autonomous collectives. The nexus of women's studies centres with NGOs too threw up other dynamics to the debate on ideology, funding and collectives. The culture of project-based work, data mining from the grassroots, and treating grassroots activists merely as data sources not only depoliticised the discipline but also put a strain on ethics of friendship. The dissonances and fallout of the movement with the Women's Studies discipline can be gauged more clearly from some fiery letter exchanges between friends post the IAWS conference in Wardha in 2011 where the protest of a Dalit feminist activist was suppressed. This was also the time that PUCL National Vice President Binayak Sen was jailed, and feminist activist and his partner, Ilina Sen was an important part of the IAWS conference. The police had entered the venue of the conference surveilling, interrogating people. A rally was called and there was a minor tussle with the police where members of Saheli were labelled nuisance makers for taking on a more agitative role in the protests. Angry emails were exchanged on a feminist mail chain, where members of Saheli asked:

Is there a more pleasant way to say no to police presence and to security staff freely walking into the book stalls and hall and questioning people...Are we to tune off "anger" and "outrage" when we enter women's studies' spaces? And we are told it is good to have activists merge in women's studies spaces? To decorate them as ornaments? Where did women's studies come from? Libraries? Meditation? Laboratories? Quiet peace? (Padhi, 2011).

This sparked a larger debate on how the IAWS organisers failed Ilina and the principles of the movement by asking friends to tone down their protests, and hush things up. The email exchanges, while pointing out the blatant depoliticisation of the women's studies centres, also spoke of a betrayal of feminist ethics, of feminist friendships.

The question of funding and institutionalisation had been a sore point from the beginning of the movement. The very definition of autonomy required the collectives to take a firm stand on it as question of accountability to funders betrayed the political ethics of the movement and replaced the vision for social change with just deliverables and project deadlines (Biswas, 2006). However, with the proliferation of NGOs post the Eighth Planned Commission and the introduction of New Economic Policy it became an ideological battle with several friendships becoming casualties. There have been several instances of autonomous collectives and individual activists in the movement trying to seek some sort of accountability from friends running NGOs, yet most of the conversations were unable to go anywhere. Nilanjana Biswas writes of one such instance,

In Delhi many years ago when a well-known NGO had summarily fired a few employees, a rare attempt was made at unionising NGO employees. Since no clear definition of management and workers exists in the NGO context, which is a context of so-called volunteerism, the first few meetings were attended both by the staff and

the bosses of several NGOs. Needless to say, utter confusion prevailed, the real issues were never articulated for fear of reprisal, and the whole thing petered out in no time.

(Biswas, 2006)

That many of these NGOs had reaped the harvest of the movement further intensified the tensions. The fuzzy employer employee relationship in NGOs had taken the template of the movement and deployed a rhetoric of friendship which was merely superficial. It is interesting to note here that Saheli's relationship with the women of Sabla Sangh, as discussed in the first section, were quite interesting in this context. The Sabla Sangh project was hosted by an NGO run by some former Saheli members. This made the working-class women of the Jahangirpuri slum employees of activists who were friends of Saheli. This often put them in a difficult position as their friends in Sabla Sangh would bring their complaints to Saheli requiring them to intervene with their friends who were now NGO employers leading to strains in personal relationships, and calling out of the betrayal of feminist ethics. As the restructuring of the Indian economy made the job market more competitive, exploitative, and casualised, the strong ideological position in the movement against funding too began to wither away. The pervasive culture of NGOs began to seep into the movement further threatening its autonomy. One of the activists in Bombay associated with FAOW reflected,

The movement has been professionalised... how much resources you have, your social networks.... all those have become so important... these don't strengthen the movement... Ideology is very important... in queer movement, those who can talk the language, who know all the terms are able to claim space... but for those who are not that articulate, who have still lot to learn, who have not grown up with that vocabulary, it becomes difficult for them to claim space... now it is all about expertise... It is positive... when experts become representative it is a tactical move in

case of negotiating with the state, but if that becomes the only way of struggle it is a problem... Within the movement expertise is positive but can also become a bargaining power. (Personal Interview, 2019)

The State also tried to coopt the movement through Women's Development Programmes forcing collectives to re-examine the movement's relationship with the state. In March 1991, autonomous women's collectives received letters from two women's groups in Rajasthan, Mahila Samooh Kekri and Mahila Samooh Ajmer reporting the arbitrary dismissal of six women workers who were working as saathins and *pracheta*⁵⁹ in the government run women's development programme. These women had participated in the Fourth National Conference on Women's Movement in India, held in Calicut, where they had actively participated in the debates and discussions in the conference as representatives of Mahila Samooh Kekri⁶⁰, a local women's group in Ajmer. The women stated they had self-financed their journey to and from Calicut. Yet, upon their return, they were called to district office and were harassed, and reprimanded for tarnishing the prestige of the Women's Development Programme by raising an independent banner at the Calicut conference, and their services were eventually terminated without cause. Betrayed for having to lose their jobs as saathins merely for attending a conference, the letter asked,

What is our fault? Was it wrong of us to have participated in the Calicut Conference?

During our training we are taught to organize. The women from our village did

⁵⁹ Coordinator of saathins in government run women's development programme.

⁶⁰ A support group of women that was built as an outcome of the struggles of women in Kekri Panchayat Samiti. While these women came together through Women's Development Programme, the group grew a life of its own, as the saathins so politicized 'transgressed' the limits of their work, and entered the political field, holding protests, agitations against feudal landlords wherein the women organized on their own around issues of land rights, excesses of family planning, etc. much to the dismay of government officials.

organize. We spent our own money (to attend the conference). What was wrong if we brought the banner of our group? (Saheli; Sabla Sangh; et al, 1991)⁶¹.

The letter drafted by the saathins and sent to the organizations, collectives in the movement was more like an appeal for solidarity made to sahelis to take an ethical stand and re-examine the movement's position vis-a-vis the state. It is imperative to note here that the term saathin invoking the idea of friendship was coined and introduced by the government. It was an appeal towards friends urging them to reexamine one's associations and determine one's relationship with institutions that treated their friends so unjustly. Meetings and discussions followed, and a fact-finding team was set up with representatives from Saheli, Sabla Sangh, Action India, Disha from Delhi and Women's Centre, FAOW, Aawaaz-e-Niswaan from Bombay. Listening to the testimonials of women working and participating in the government run Women's Development Programme raised critical questions on who the development was for, forcing the movement to take into cognizance how 'state feminism'⁶² affected and impacted the collective 'we'. It tested loyalties and ethics of feminist friendships as while some stood in support as they believed women's development cannot be brought about by the exploitation and control of rural women workers. There were feminists who could not speak up as their professional work was tied up to these women's development programmes. It was

⁶¹ 'Development for whom? A critique of Women's Development Programmes' was a report published by the Fact Finding team in 1991. The report drew from testimonials of saathins and prachetas and other women workers in government programmes and while addressing the arbitrary dismissal of the six workers also delved into the contradictions within the movement with regard to its intention to reach maximum women by collaborating with the government and in return becoming coopted into the state patriarchy. The report was one of the first articulations of the autonomous women's groups on the problems of collaborating with the state and the issues of funding and NGOisation and how it tames and depoliticizes the movement. It also reflects on unfair labour practices within these institutions and how it subsumes the class question under gender concerns and steers energy away from raising questions on structural change. The report was published by 7 groups – Saheli, Delhi; Sabla Sangh, Delhi; Action India, Delhi; Disha, Delhi; Women's Centre, Bombay; FAOW, Bombay; Aawaaz-e-Niswaan, Bombay.

⁶² The state adopting policies geared towards women's empowerment. While the women's movement does engage with the state to bring in policies that would be beneficial for women, state feminism also runs the risk of appropriating the movement and depoliticizing it, making bureaucrats out of activists.

a vexed moment for both, separately too. Some autonomous women's groups brought out a critique of the way these state-run programs appropriated the legitimacy of the women's movement to project "women's empowerment" only to reduce people's distrust of the state and build safety valves to contain people's discontents (Saheli; Sabla Sangh; et al, 1991).

Neoliberalism and Ruptures, Heartbreaks in Feminist Friendships

The changes in lifestyle ushered in by neoliberalism and its impact in the way of thinking and doing politics too became a critical litmus test. An activist once engaged with the autonomous women's movement in Delhi shared a story of how while travelling outstation, six of them were on the same train from the same collective, yet while those who could then afford went off to buy AC tickets and three of them were left to travel in the sleeper coach. While this may be seen as a personal dissonance, it also speaks to changes in the culture of collectivity in the women's movement that were becoming more and more visible in the 2000s. Her reflection of the betrayal they felt for being left out also then points to a betrayal of friendship, a rupture of ethics of feminist friendship that was very political in nature (Personal Interview, 2024). While some were able to raise these discomforts and dissonances in the group, what gets finally addressed in a meeting and what gets brushed under the carpet also depends on a lingering question that was asked by several people in the interviews while voicing their unease: 'whose voice is the collective?'

Neoliberalisation affected women of different classes very differently. As discussed above, it bettered the life of middle-class women, while the working class faced threats to their jobs and homes. As gaps between the poor and middle-classes widened, sahelis from varying class backgrounds found it more and more difficult to assert their equality in the movement.

Saheli's work with the Delhi Janvadi Adhikar Manch during the factory closures around late 1990s opened them up to these questions raised by their working-class friends, "I have also

been singing with this sister on 8 March. My daughter can also sing ‘*Tod tod ke bandhanon ko*’ [a song of women's liberation]. I used to work in an NGO. I used to train women in health programmes. But I couldn't get rid of this unwanted pregnancy because the bulldozers came. How can I go to the hospital from here? What's the difference between you and me, sister? Only that I am poor” (Padhi, 2007, p.88). The question here not only exposes the superficiality of the idea of sisterhood when it becomes depoliticised and refuses to acknowledge class differences, it also questions the very ethics of feminist friendship.

The ethics of feminist friendship was put to the test in a debate in FAOW around similar times about a member whose partner had recently become a member of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)⁶³ raising questions about one's allegiance to the movement as well as to one's fellow travellers and their shared politics—the very ethics of feminist friendship. While some members saw it as a betrayal and wanted to ask the said member to leave, others wanted a more nuanced discussion, “There was a lot of tension in Forum, when one of the member's partner joined the BJP and people felt if the member did not protest against it at home and resist it, they cannot be part of forum... even if she is our friend, we can be individual friends but as long as she does not confront her partner and continue to live with him, she cannot be part of Forum... I did not understand this stance at all... I feel how can you do that to a friend?” (Personal Interview, 2019). She also spoke about the difficulty people face in resisting marriage, in resisting family and how the confidence to resist also comes from one's caste, class, social location, and an ethics of friendship then calls for extending that benefit of doubt, of being more understanding and patient. She points out how extending that benefit of doubt happens selectively depending on friendship equations, and asks, “If you are opposing

⁶³ A right-wing political party in India.

capitalism and then you are exploiting workers in your own NGO... how is that not as problematic as someone having a partner in BJP..." (Personal Interview, 2019).

The other form of institutionalisation of the movement happened through the establishment of independent feminist publishing houses. Kaali for Women was founded by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon in 1984. While the novelty of the project and the need for an independent feminist publishing house meant overwhelming support pouring in from the movement, the structures needed to be put in place to ensure smooth running of it which triggered some concerns. One of the founding members shared, "it is not just NGOization, it is institutionalisation, because what do you call a publishing house like ours? Publishing is a commercial area, but we don't make any money, we don't even lose money, and we base ourselves in transformational politics..." (Personal Interview, 2022). Looking back at the reaction of their comrades to such a space, she recalls:

The kind of work we did in Kali was in the traditional model of publishing... but [the work of feminist publishing] was also coming out of the movement... [because of this] we also encountered a lot of women who did not have the confidence of becoming writers... so your role as feminist publisher comes out in approaching them from a position of solidarity and not profit... you have to provide that nurturing and caring to give the confidence that you have things to say... you have to go that extra mile as feminist publisher that others would not go because that is not economical... and that is also where friendship comes in very interesting way... but when friends see you going in that structure and become suspicious because it goes against everything that you protested together... because many of your comrades think that you have sold out... but it takes a while for people to come around... in the beginning there was a lot of excitement and solidarity, but then when people realised they cannot control the pricing and other things some of the hostility creeps in... but over the years women

have seen the importance of creating a body of knowledge... it has been a process to regain that trust... it has not been an easy process... this kind of debate is very central for me... it has been very challenging and helpful for people like us to have these people raising these questions, keeping us accountable... (Personal Interview, 2022)

So how does one navigate differences in a collective? How does one navigate differences in a movement? These questions have caused ruptures and heartbreak within the collectives and the movement. While the women's movement has had an uneasy relationship with power, the struggle to do away with hierarchy has been an arduous journey. In 2016, Saheli held a national conference titled 'Autonomous Politics: Kal, Aaj aur Kal' (Autonomous Politics: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow) to reflect back on their own journey and begin an inter-movement dialogue to unpack the relevance of autonomous politics today. Reflecting back on their way of functioning, Saheli noted:

Perhaps the most important and most challenging [thing] for us has been the idea of consensus. Working collectively means that every decision we make, every statement or article we write, is done with the input of the entire group. Sometimes, this means that things take longer than they would otherwise – internal disagreements can be messy and are not always easily resolvable – but at the same time, working in a space like this can be an excellent education in how to deal with differences of opinion, even how to learn to live with them. Being autonomous and not held to a 'party line', gives us a certain freedom to be self-critical, to revisit old positions and to evolve and think together as a group. (Saheli, 2016)

The Question of Caste, Hindutva Politics and The Collective 'We'

One of the early challenges to the women's movement in this context came through the question of caste. The upper caste agitation against the Mandal Commission in 1990 as

discussed above sent out a clear message that the category of 'women' in the women's movement needed to be interrogated as per its social locations. A Dalit activist from Bombay spoke of her own journey in the women's movement vis a vis these differences, "There were talk of feminism... ideas of friendship, sisterhood... from west also you saw all women as one... but these women would talk about racism, about black women but not talk about casteism... I keep saying to bring *maitribhab* [friendship] you need to listen to each other, understand each other's life... it cannot happen only by eating, living together... it will happen because of shared beliefs... shared politics..." (Personal Interview, 2019). Members of Saheli too recalled a former Dalit saheli who left because she felt a form of unbelongingness within the collective and wanted to continue working more on caste while maintaining individual friendships with some members of the collective. The autonomous women's movement remained more upper caste, middle class in their composition despite limited efforts to address questions of caste in the aftermath of the Durban conference⁶⁴ in 2001 and the session on caste in the Tirupati conference in 1993. Although the autonomous women's movement had grappled with caste questions fairly early through its interactions with the adivasi movement in Maharashtra (Swathe, 1990; Omvedt, 1990), and Chhattisgarh (Sen, 1990), the engagement was mostly confined to feminist friendships built by individual activists. The rise of identity politics in tandem with the widespread NGOisation made it impossible for small collectives and personal friendships to influence the movement at large. While there were genuine interests on the part of Saheli and FAOW to initiate deeper discussions on caste it failed to bridge the widening gap.

Organisationally, the complex and serious engagement with caste came during the Gujarat pogrom in 2002. It was a moment when the women's movement, which had so far seen only

⁶⁴ World conference against Racism held in Durban in 2001 where the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) tabled a debate on caste and patriarchy.

women as victims of violence, was confronted with the image of women as perpetrators. Abandoned by the State and neoliberal development models, Adivasi and Dalit women gravitated towards right-wing forces who were presenting them with possibilities of self-assertion (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995). This moment exposed starkly the real the costs the movement was paying for failing to address caste adequately and for losing Dalit and Adivasi women to Hindutva forces. A meeting called by FAOW to reach out to Dalit women activists fell through as they asked, ‘where were you before?’ (Personal Interview, 2019), When FAOW began working on a report on the closure of dance bars in Bombay in 2005, their friendships with the Dalit feminist activists became all the more tense. While FAOW looked at bar dancing as ‘work’ and critiqued the ban from the perspective of labour, Dalit feminists challenged their position pointing out bar dancing was a caste-based occupation (Personal Interview, 2019). The reluctance of women's groups to take up issues of caste atrocities or sexual violence of Dalit women had been another sore point in the movement. A Dalit activist pointed out, “it is not like people did not want to look at things... but it was not in their mission... then what are friendships for...” (Personal Interview, 2019). In the national meeting organised by Saheli, Lata, a Dalit activist who had worked closely with Saheli asked, “Did the women’s movement reach Surekha Bhotmange⁶⁵’s house and has she reached mainstream feminism?” (Saheli, 2016).

Yet, where organisations faltered, personal friendships could try to bridge gaps. One of the members of FAOW shared how working on the dance bar report, they had developed close friendships with some of the women dancers some of whom took shelter in their homes (Personal Interview, 2019). Many individual members of the collectives shared close personal

⁶⁵ In 2006, four members of a Dalit family were murdered in what is known as the Khairlanji massacre. Surekha Bhotmange, a Dalit woman had lodged a complaint in the local police station over a land dispute. The accused had dragged Surekha along with her sons and daughters, paraded them naked in their village and then hung to death in Khairlanji (a district in Maharashtra).

friendships with Dalit feminist activists that helped to keep the conversation open despite the animosity and sense of betrayal. Personal friendships, in such cases often had to bear the burden of becoming the sole points of solidarity. But these personal friendships and conversations leading to individual soul-searching could not influence the larger movement and overcome the crisis precipitated by identity politics. The movement became more and more fragmented and suffered huge losses.

Community, Identity and Feminist Friendships

As discussed above, similar to the way the movement tried to engage with the question of caste merely through personal friendships, the movement also staggered in its engagement with the question of communitarian identities and religion. It was personal friendship between two activists that made FAOW take on the Shehnaz Sheikh case in 1993 that sparked the Muslim women's movement (Punwani, 2017). While FAOW's relationship with Aawaaz e Niswaan (AEN)⁶⁶ and later Bebaak Collective shaped much of its politics and helped build its position on personal laws, the relationship had its own ups and downs in terms of navigating differences. One of the members of FAOW shared how they felt uneasy when Aawaaz e Niswaan decided to get registered but did not let it hamper the relationship as they felt their relationship was not conditional. Perhaps it was because the uneasiness was entangled with funding issues. NGOisation offered marginalised women a tangible way of maintaining its ties with the movement as the vision or imagination of any other way of doing politics remained skewed within the movement. The activist shared how the personal bonds brought the two organisations together, “going into the women’s homes... building personal relationships... those relationships... when Autonomous Women's Network became 25, those

⁶⁶ Aawaaz e Niswaan (AEN) was a Muslim women's organisation founded in 1987. FAOW had played an influential role in its foundation and in shaping its politics. However, when AEN registered itself and became a funded organisation, there was some ideological contestation with FAOW on that.

women all came... because the kind of personal bonds that got formed because you were also dealing with the women's daily issues... which is not the case with any of the organizations today... the relationships are very different... it is actually that of a service provider... that time we were part of their lives... today none of us are..." (Personal Interview, 2019). While Aawaaz e Niswaan and FAOW kept working closely despite their differences in functioning, the difference in the class backgrounds, the differences in being believers and non-believers in religion often crept in, as an activist shared:

there is a sisterhood of these two organizations... We have celebrated holidays with each other... so it has been more than friendship... but because we are not working in similar fashion there are some differences... There's also class... their lives are much more controlled by familial ties... now they are much freer... culturally also... I don't know if it is believer or non-believer [issue]. For instance, in Forum we never invited people for diwali... but they would invite us for Eid and we also went as a gesture of solidarity... but it is not equal... you go to their house but we did not celebrate anything there was nothing we could invite them for... then they lived with their families so we came to interact with their families as well... but they do not know our families... but it has been an exercise in learning to live across class, across belief systems... also it is not just class but it is also living differently... There were very few people we were able to build equal friendships... it has been a relationship of concern, it has been a relationship of care... that is how collectives mature... where you don't encourage, you try and build a sense of equality across differences... (Personal Interview, 2019)

Questions of hierarchy also crept in in terms of the way FAOW often played an influential role in (Aawaaz e Niswaan's politics, in its functioning, as a member stated, "With Aawaaz e Niswaan and LABIA, the hierarchy remained... with LABIA not so much, and they became

part of Forum, but it was not true with Aawaaz e Niswaan... we used to go there, except [one person], they did not come here... so there is an inequality there... I am not very sure if it was friendship... of course we learnt a lot... with LABIA it was a more equal relationship... there are common threads... but Aawaaz e Niswaan is different..." (Personal Interview, 2019). The sentiment was echoed by another member who had been a member of both collectives:

At one point, Forum took a decision about Aawaaz e Niswaan... and I was very upset. Why would Forum take that decision. Let Aawaaz e Niswaan take its own decision... Then what is the meaning of collective? I had the courage to ask these questions, to voice my dissent... I can bring my experiences of Aawaaz e Niswaan to Forum and ask for advice, to seek suggestions. They can give advice, suggest. But they can't dictate decisions. So whose collective is it? Who has a voice? One who is able to articulate, one who has a stable job... are only they collective? They are the ones who are able to claim space in non-funded groups. (Personal Interview, 2019).

The question called for an interrogation of the ethics of solidarity and autonomy, underlining the hierarchised positions urban middle class autonomous collectives took vis-a-vis community based funded organisations. However, the very fact that these difficult questions could be asked pointed towards the affective bonds forged through friendships that allowed space for radical vulnerability, as discussed in the introduction, which can accommodate dissent, critiques and self-reflections.

In 1994 Flavia Agnes wrote how the demolition of Babri Masjid and the riots in Bombay made visible the Hindu character of the women's movement. Calling out the practices of borrowing from Hindu rituals, cultural frameworks and references, Agnes pointed out how the women's movement often countered accusations of feminism being a western concept by deploying Hindu rituals. She asserted how the Babri Masjid demolition demanded a

rethinking of the “secular” framework of the movement and a redefining of its agenda (Agnes, 1994).

The Queer Challenge: Revisiting Feminist Friendships

The agitation by Hindu right-wing outfits over the release of the film *Fire* as mentioned before, brought forth a new feminist political subject in the form of the lesbian woman. It also brought in questions of sexuality in the collective in a new way. Saheli members shared how it was a momentous occasion when some of their friends came out as queer in the collective. The formation of Campaign for Lesbian Rights in India (CALERI)⁶⁷ ushered in new moments of learning in the collective as the members grappled with the questions that queer politics threw up. It also gave Saheli the opportunity to form friendships with other groups, bringing in the queer politics in those interactions. A former member shared:

The protests against the vandalising of the posters and theatres screening the film *Fire* in Delhi led to the formation of Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI). It was like a fresh lease of life as intense discussions on critiques of compulsory heterosexuality, marriage and monogamy took place that I had not found in the feminist collective in quite the same way. It used to happen in small discussions among a few only. Saheli took a long time for the entire collective to take a position on queer relationships, say from Tirupati to Ranchi conference, as genuine unlearning of homophobic responses takes time and self-introspection. And *Fire* gave the much-needed synergy as the protests were in the public. In CALERI and later on in PRISM⁶⁸, we shared experiences, read many Indian writings as well as Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin.

⁶⁷ CALERI was a Delhi based autonomous platform of individuals and organisations who joined forces post the Hindutva attack during the release of *Fire*. The group campaigned for lesbian rights.

⁶⁸ PRISM was coalition of human rights organizations working on women’s rights, LGBT rights and child rights. Formed in early 2000s their objective was to spread awareness on issues related to sexuality and form alliances to advocate for sexuality rights.

The lived experiences of how women opposed to marriage negotiate sexuality made the contours of heteropatriarchy clearer to me instead of simply patriarchy or the NGOised hullabaloo over single women. Prior to that, ABVA⁶⁹'s impressive report *Less Than Gay* had already broken new ground; however, CALERI and PRISM opened new paths of self-expression and identity with friends and comrades we already knew, brought new fellow travellers, opened new spaces, more houses. We also had youth and students from radical left organizations discussing homosexuality and asking myriad questions stepping out of their own confines of political engagement. The smugness of the Saheli in me experienced a lightness of being both politically and socially. (Personal Interview, 2024)

These new interactions organically built-up new solidarities and friendships, as she added, “in 2004 there was a lot of repression on Adivasis resisting bauxite mining in Kashipur⁷⁰, Queer friends joined the protest outside Odisha Bhavan with placards ‘Lesbians against Bauxite mining’. So, it was like a remarkable day.” (Personal Interview, 2024) Organised meetings were held seeking solidarity and collaboration from left and Dalit groups and students unions to share their perspectives on how they see their work and vision tied up with queer rights and recognition. Saheli became very active in the Voices against 377⁷¹ campaign.

In Bombay, the question of lesbian sexuality came much earlier when in 1987, news reached those two policewomen from Madhya Pradesh, Leela Ramdeo and Urmila Shrivastava had

⁶⁹ AIDS Bhedbhao Birodhi Andolon (ABVA) was a group that worked on health, sex work, etc had brought out a report titled ‘Less Than Gay’ that had broken the silence on homosexuality before Fire.

⁷⁰ Since 1993 the Adivasi people in Kashipur, Odisha has been engaged in a relentless struggle against UAIL's bauxite mining project. At that time the Government of Odisha had entered into MoU with several multinational corporations for projects that would affect the lives and livelihoods of several people while at the same time destroying the ecology of the place. The forces representing private profiteers and the police fired on protesters and have been trying to brutally suppress the movement.

⁷¹ Voices against 377 was also a Delhi based coalition of several organisations and individuals formed to build campaign in support of the Naz Foundation case against the constitutionality of section 377 that criminalised homosexuality and labelled any form of non-reproductive sex to be unnatural.

got married. They were fired from their jobs and while the police moved to imprison them quite a few local groups and people stood by them. Some of the members in FAOW were in lesbian relationships and those journeys and experiences too influenced FAOW's understanding of queer politics. Thus, when Stree Sangam was formed, and later Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA) came into being FAOW became its natural sister. Several members in FAOW and LABIA also overlapped. However, a moment of rupture came when discussions were pushed in the collective of who the 'woman' in the organisational name FAOW was, and would it open its membership for transpeople? While some people felt the need for a separate women's space, there were others who pushed for a rethinking of the category of gender through the experiences of trans lives, and the issue remained unresolved. Although the collective moved on, the unresolvedness of the debate hurt personal friendships as a member shared, "it is something that also hurts... to think that your political paths are slightly different and to think that this is your close circle is not an easy thing to do... and you come to terms with it and figure out ways...I don't agree with everybody on everything in Forum... by now I don't feel the same kind of centeredness that I had felt in Forum and I did take a break at some point... not many people noticed also... but it helped me come to terms with it that there are certain viewpoints where we have different battles... but I still feel the need to go to forum because I believe in the larger politics that it does and I have now made peace with those clashes..." (Personal Interview, 2019).

So, the question lingers, how does one navigate differences such as these in a collective? Members of Saheli interject, "It is not about solidarity or navigating but also about undoing damage... we have not seen caste, not seen minorities... you have to put in emotional and intellectual labour for it... there are no shortcuts to it..." (FGD, 2022). Putting in the emotional and intellectual labour to recognise differences and undo damage then also

becomes the work of feminist friendships, comradeships. The question that then lingers is one that is articulated yet remains unarticulated, undefined: what makes feminist friendships?

Feminist Friendships and Joyful Militancy: Towards a politics of Care

Milkar ladti jayenge ,woh aage badhte jayenge

Haan meri behna ,aab aage badhte jayenge

Nachenge aur gayenge, woh faankari dikhayenge

Haan meri behna ab milkar khushi manayenge

Gaya jamana pitne ka

Ji ab gaya zamana mitne ka

Tod tod ke bandhano ko dekho behne aye he... (Bhasin, 2013 a)

[We will fight shoulder to shoulder,

We will keep marching forward

Yes, my sisters, we will keep marching on

We will dance, we will sing, we will have fun

Yes, my sisters we will celebrate together

The time for getting beaten is gone

The time for being obliterated is gone

Breaking shackles, our sisters keep coming...] (Author's Translation)

So, what makes feminist friendships? The song that had almost become an anthem in the autonomous women's movement in the 1980s perhaps best articulates the joy, the song, the dance, the fun, the celebration, the laughter that had been an integral part of the movement, and what had also formed the ground for friendships, comradeships, intimacies within the movement. Yet, perhaps the struggle for legitimising the movement in popular imagination, and mainstream discourse also meant an official history of the movement would have to leave out the politics of affect, the high emotions, heartbreaks, anger, frustration, hurt, and the love that had all made up feminist militancy, that had been a critical part of being *saheli*. However, the 'excesses', the 'trivialities', the 'personal' that got written out of these official history (Shah and Gandhi, 1992; Kumar, 1993) find expression in hushed anecdotes, in long passionate letters, in obituaries, songs, photographs, scribbles, journals, magazines, as well as in hesitations, faltering, silences and rants that framed most of the interviews.

One of the central problems one encounters in this question of absence of feminist herstories of friendship is the absence of vocabulary in talking about friendships. The centrality of marriage and family in women's lives always made female friendships suspect, relegating them to the margins, in the realm of the private. It is in this context, the women's movement attempted to build a new language for emotional reproduction. It could be seen in the passionate way almost all the activists described these spaces, it could be felt in the way dissonances, ruptures, fragmentation affected people, it could be gauged through the hesitations one felt in talking about the dissonances, in voicing heartbreaks as though it were a betrayal to the spaces they had all collectively built, it could be understood through the powerful ways one kept coming back to these spaces despite everything, it could be read through the various ways one negotiated, navigated, and sometimes even compromised to sustain these spaces, and above all, it could be culled out from the politics of care that

emerged out of these spaces that survived fallouts, quarrels, and articulated a new ethics of friendship.

Reflecting on the personal relationships forged in the movement, a member of FAOW had shared about the session on organising in the 1985 conference of the autonomous women's movement in which FAOW had participated. As members revisited their organisational structures and the power dynamics within the collective most of them began crying: “1985 topic was feminist organizing... we were all tormented and troubled by how we dealt with the hierarchies within the organization... I remember when we were presenting the paper we were all crying... can you imagine crying over your own organizational issues... how you function that was something that troubled us so much... because [during] all that period we were literally living in each other’s homes... the bonds were so strong” (Personal Interview, 2019).

So, what made one so passionate about this space? Another member of FAOW who part of Dalit struggles had been, spoke about the difference she felt in articulation of politics, in building care, in the space of the women's movement:

I was going through a breakup and I realised their understanding of relationships and perspective on it was very different from mine... still they took pains to understand and be there for me... they shared responsibility to be in touch with me, be there for me... this love cemented my love for the movement and I realised that the care they showed for me, I should do the same for others... I also knew if anyone dismissed me or tried to disrespect my values, I would fight back... and I have fought to make this space... This is the difference in women's movement. I could fight and make this space [my own] ... in other movements, I found it difficult to even do that... there is no space for that... The movement where I belonged before there were really good friendships but now, they have all become strangers... (Personal Interview, 2019)

The emotional labour one spent in building the movement space perhaps formed one of the formative principles of feminist friendships. For many, the feminist experimentation with horizontal leadership, with breaking hierarchies, laid the ground for feminist friendships, as another member of FAOW pointed out, “My first learning in Forum is to build cross generation friendships... I was amazed that you could call such senior people by just their first name... and you can strike up a conversation, build a connection with anyone without knowing their background...” (Personal Interview, 2019). Again, for some it was the shared political vision, the work of feminist worldbuilding that ‘made’ feminist friendships, as an activist shared wistfully how they would all sit together on Sundays and discuss what kind of society they wanted, how a feminist world would look like (Personal Interview, 2019). Another activist shared how feminist collectives and friendships are spaces that allow one to breathe, to understand a politics without having to articulate. She described how her experience in feminist collectives differed from the Marxist spaces she had occupied before:

In Marxist spaces there was no space of gendered talk of a feminist kind... because they occupied so much space in academia and politics that it was difficult to get a word in that sounded different... that in large extent is perhaps still true... and the friendships and care networks are all impacted by them... if I am in a space where I can't talk about sexism that immediately impacts [my belongingness]... in a place like FAOW or LABIA I don't have to complete my sentence, the level of comfort and the way you can share affective response... that degree of comfort is not there... partly because the understanding is not there, partly also because the experience is not there... so then care that follows on a particular understanding [is very different]... (Personal Interview, 2019)

The instinctive understanding comes from a resonance that is born out of common struggles. fighting side by side on the same side of barricades, having each other's back through sun

and shower. It is also born out of a politics that then becomes your refuge no matter what. While it is forged through personal intimacies and bonding, the shared vision ensures that it translates to the political. One of the younger sahelis points out, “I have come to realise that feminist solidarity is quite different... people may turn up for you in quite different ways than you expect in 'university friendships' [ones that are not forged through a shared politics]” (FGD, 2022). A member of FAOW while talking about some of her differences with the group had mused, “I can have a big disagreement with you but also walk back with you...” (Personal Interview, 2019) This ‘turning up’, choosing to ‘walk together’ despite differences is then perhaps what feminist politics of friendship also is. It is what makes people stick around, what makes collectives sustain despite everything. A member of FAOW explained, “These are our people... all our friendships, intimacies, love, anger, frustration are with them... so you can't leave them either... Where would you go? We have fraught relationships with family, with blood kinships... we broke out of family to build this space, so we feel responsible for it... we have a responsibility to sustain it” (Personal Interview, 2019). It is this shared love for the space that everyone gave their blood and sweat to build that kept friendships going even when some people chose to part ways with the collective. A former member of Saheli shared how despite having left the organization a few years back, she felt a pit in her stomach and wept when she saw the Saheli office in flames on TV. She had written back to the group addressing her dearest friends:

I ask myself many times what is lost. I ask myself many times what can be restored. I ask myself many times how long will it take to finally dim the image of the terrible fire licking up all those precious docs and papers and files and registers and publications. and I still persist to ask what has it taken away...really. and I tell myself there is no fire really that can rip apart what sahelis has given to us all, and what it

stands for us. It is a critical moment for all of us. We are as intact as ever - maybe more so in the face of this huge loss. we only surge ahead now... (Padhi, 2011⁷²)

This responsibility one feels towards the space, towards each other, towards sustaining friendships also makes these affective relationalities sites of resistance.

South Asian Feminism: Friendships Defying Barbed Wires

Feminist friendships forged through the movement have not just been a source of sustenance for care, but also been a locus standi through which one could critique institutions of state, patriarchy, marriage. It is what gave the South Asian women's movement the audacity to transgress borders, critique nationalism and nation states and build transnational solidarities. As one of the feminist activists who founded the South Asian women's networks noted, "Most of us in the women's movement did not believe in borders... we never gave up our politics because of patriotism... I am not a wall that divides/ I am a crack in the wall... we would say we come from the regions of South Asia... we started Women For Peace In South Asia (WIPSA), we started Pakistan India People's Democratic Forum (PIPDF)... when Pakistan and Bangladesh were at war, feminists organised a conference where women from Pakistan apologized to Bangladeshi feminists that their states did that... Our homes would all be open homes..." (Personal Interview, 2020). Another activist in Delhi too recalled a South Asian conference held on the 30th anniversary of Bangladesh Liberation War in 2001. She reminisced about a session on how the war had impacted people. It was a poignant moment as when the news about Pakistan's war crimes in Bangladesh had come out, it had become difficult for feminists from Pakistan to converse with their friends in Bangladesh. It was only through the South Asian women's network, only through their feminist friends in India, that feminists from Pakistan were able to tender their apology to Bangladeshi friends. She

⁷² Personal email, 2011

reflected, “On 25th March we all gathered, the day the Pakistan army marched its troupe... and Nighat played Nayaara Noor... it was electrifying... we had women from the Revolutionary Association of Women Afghanistan (RAWA) attending... Tahera Madar Ali was there... she was an old communist... she said women had come out on the streets in protest and they were stoned... there were discussions about the Vietnam war and how feminists had the position to call out hyper-nationalism...” (Personal Interview, 2020).

Echoing the magical ways in which feminist friendships were able to forge politics of care beyond borders, another activist from Delhi recalled the legacy this history of resilient friendships meant for them:

I think one looks at the legacy of the South Asian women's movement as a legacy that we were really lucky to have... and looking back I don't know how those connections were built but they were and are some of my closest connections... some of my closest friends in the movement were in Pakistan, some of my closest friends are in Bangladesh... they were like my family... and together we did so much... it was so important to resist those borders... so you learn a lot from many of these connections, and those solidarities help you build a lot... (Personal Interview, 2022)

While the national borders could at one time be obliterated through the resilience of feminist friendships, the internal borders were perhaps harder to negotiate. It is there that friendships were relied on to play a key role in building trust (Personal Interview, 2022). Thus, when the Indian state performed atrocities in Indian occupied Kashmir, in Manipur, or Nagaland trying to shove a monolithic idea of nationalism down our throats, feminists have time and again reached out to their friends and comrades in solidarity, making space for their voices to be heard, bringing out factfinding reports to counter the lies peddled by the state, and build resistance, thereby slowly giving shape to a politics of feminist friendship.

Towards Politics of Care

In 2011, an independent feminist publishing house, Zubaan had sent a call asking feminists across the country to share their memories of the movement so as to create an archive of the autonomous women's movement. Responding to that call, Shals Mahajan, queer feminist activist from Bombay who had formerly been associated with FAOW and LABIA, while penning some of their memories of the movement had written:

My memories are somewhat faded. These stories were told to me in 1995 when I first joined this group. I was not in Bombay in 1992-93, the years that changed this city in so many ways. I have had to fill this parenthetical gap in my life endlessly and when I first came to Forum, the first ever time I was part of a collective or any sort of radical politics for that matter, I could never have my fill of stories. This was very recent history and often while telling of what they had seen, lived through, the anger and horror, but mostly the pain, would shine in the eyes of these women. I learned what it meant to be an activist through these tales over endless cups of tea and shared cigarettes. I learned from the generosity with which my endless demands for reading materials and explanations were met... And I learned that being in such a group is akin to being in love, being in a formless relationship, and not just a web of individual interactions. I learned this from the intensity with which I would wait for the meetings, but also from the stories of fissures that I heard over time. In larger meetings, with other groups, where the surface interactions seemed to seethe with emotions that I could not understand, where statements meant more, where contexts ran deep. And being ever curious about such undercurrents, I spent hours and hours listening to the narratives of these women, over coffee, over drinks, sometimes just standing at bus stops. (Mahajan, 2011)

It is this communion that is created through shared struggle, history, hatred for injustice and a shared ethics of care, through endless cups of chai, through singing, dancing, sloganeering together, through challenging family, marriage, and various forms of unfreedom that feminist friendships get built. As Kalpana had scribbled in the daily diary of Saheli during its initial days, “I come because I belong. It is not always love and warmth, it is fights and bickering as well. It is not always the work I think I should be doing - but then I belong, here, with all other Sahelis and I come” (Saheli, 1984).

It is when we break down all the ‘joyful militancy’, a term coined by Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery (2017) to denote a new conception of affective militancy born out of a fierce commitment to life in the face of imperialism, neoliberalism, when we break down all the passionate love and care, all the empathy that makes up feminist friendships that we realise, to talk about feminist friendships, it is also imperative to talk about social reproduction. In the next chapter we will engage more deeply with the politics of care that is built on feminist friendships, and the possibilities it holds in redefining the political.

Chapter 4

Reimagining Care through Politics of Friendship in the Autonomous Women's Movement

Tumhara saath milne se ehsaas-e-quwwat aya hain

Nayi duniya banane ka junoon fir hum pe chhaya hain

Kuchh tanha tanha mein thi, kuchh tanhayi tumhe thi

Dono mein thi lachari, dono thi thak ke haari

Izhaar-e-raaz karne se ghutan ko kuchh ghataya hain

Thora mein tumko samjhi, thora tum mujhko samjheen

Kuchh aisa lag raha hain, ki pyaar ho gaya hai

Naye rishton, naye naaton ne kaisa rang jamaaya hain

Humkhayal hain jab hum tum, humsafar bhi ban jaayen

Chaahe jaise hon mausam, ik dooje ko panpaaten

Inheen sapnon ke rangon ne, humein phir gudgudaya hai (Bhasin,2013 b)

[Since I've met you, I've felt a surge of might

A passion for building anew, has seen the light

You were alone in your way, I in mine

Both weary and lost, repeatedly toeing the line

Sharing our secrets has eased the weight in our heart

I've understood you a little, you've played a similar part

It feels like love has blossomed fine

New bonds, intimacies, new colours shine

When we think alike, we become companions too

Through every season, we'll nurture and renew

These colorful dreams have awakened our souls anew] [Author's Translation]

The making of 'saheli' as discussed in the previous chapter, hinges on a radical politics of care that puts feminist friendship at the centre. Such a radical politics of care, as reiterated through the above quoted song written by Kamla Bhasin, entails challenging the primacy of family and asserting the claims of friendship and the claims of family, the rumblings of which could be felt throughout the history of the women's movement. As explored in the previous chapter, the autonomous women's movement while bringing the personal to the political arena also visibilised processes of social reproduction. It challenged the public/ private divide, which relegated care to the domain of the individual, the informal, the private. In this chapter, we will explore how the centrality of feminist friendships in the movement both enabled it to question institutions of marriage, family, kinship structures, while at the same time, the liberal notion of personalised friendships made the movement succumb to the neoliberal system and leave the current organising of labour unquestioned. As the song written by Kamla Bhasin for the movement imagines feminist friendships as a bond based on sharing, caring, leaning on each other to weave colourful dreams for a world based on

companionship, love and solidarity, it visibilises the process of social and emotional reproduction that are at work in building these bonds and the radical potential it bears in sowing the seeds for feminist worldbuilding.

The chapter will dwell on feminist explorations of informalization⁷³ and women's work, and revisit Marxist feminist discourse on care through cultures of friendship and comradeship built through the women's movement in India so as to explore the queer potential of friendship. In the first section, this chapter will unpack the historical processes by which labour was organised, and thereby, study how the organising of care and the public/ private divide evolved from the post industrialisation period to the current times. The next section will look at Marxist feminist explorations [like that of Heidi Hartman (1981), Sheila Rowbotham (1976), Sylvia Federici (2020), Alexandra Kollontai (1920)] that have challenged this organising and have repeatedly brought the purview of social reproduction into the political field. It will also explore experimentations practiced in Soviet and post revolution China and how these learnings filtered into the Indian feminist understanding of social reproduction and politics of care. It is through these frameworks then that this chapter will interrogate the autonomous women's movement and posit the reimagining of care that this movement nurtured. Finally, it will interrogate the sphere of care, and argue for the possibilities that a radical politics of friendship holds in building resistance to the neoliberal defining and organizing of labour and care.

⁷³ Care work is provided privately in the space of the family by individual women or outsourced to other women supervised by the mistresses who are outsourcing their work to these paid workers; care work is devalued, deemed unskilled/semiskilled, feminine work, non-institutionalized, not guided by framework of policies and rights (India still does not have national policy on domestic work), based on gender and caste norms and thereby can be called informal. The work is informal because it is either unpaid labour, or paid labour with low wages, no security, no rules and policies

Public/ Private divide, the Organization of Care, and the Women's Movement

Sheila Rowbotham, one of the most influential Marxist feminist theorists of women's work, in her book *Hidden from History* (1976) located the Puritan age as the beginning of the redefining of public/ private divide and gendered division of labour as the Puritan family ideal projected the man as the head of the household who exerted control over women, children and servants (Rowbotham, 1976, p.7). This idea challenged conventional economic theories of the time who solely pinned the reworking of the public/ private sphere through the post industrialisation period. Rowbotham coming from the women's movement knew to write a history of the women's work necessitated a relooking at unconventional sources so as to write a history that not only challenges the androcentrism in economic history, but also redefined the whole premise of political economy. Following Rowbotham, feminists (Tilly and Scott, 1989) have marked how the post industrialization construction of capitalist modernity necessitated the construction of a clear public/ private divide as it demanded a clear demarcation between the site of production⁷⁴ and the site of reproduction⁷⁵, the 'factory' and the 'home'. Scholars like Andre Beitelli have shown how, as societies moved from pre modern to modern, the economic came to be considered as part of the public, distinct and separate from family and kinship (Beteilli, 2003). This 'public' was so shaped and defined by the economic, then also came to be framed through citizenship contract, through process of democratization, while the private continued to be shaped through the informal, through kinship organizing of work, of social and emotional reproduction. Thus, while the 'polity' was forged through affec

⁷⁴ Process of manufacturing of products and services that have monetary value wherein the producers are compensated in exchange of paid wage.

⁷⁵ The process by which the labour power of the worker is replenished.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2017/11/breaking-savarna-feminism-rules-how-raya-sarkar-s-list-alleged-harassers> ts of brotherhood, fraternity, and citizenship was claimed through public male friendships, that steered clear of affect, ‘care work’ mostly remained relegated to the home, to be performed by women, and organized through family, marriage, kinship.

The history of women's works as charted by feminist economists (Tilly and Scott, 1989) locate women's entry to the production sphere as a family strategy to supplement family income and sources of cheap labour. Their participation in the public sphere, however, did not relieve them of their ‘duties’ in private. With advancement in technology, women workers were the first to be replaced in the mature industrialization phase, as the responsibility of the household and care predominantly became their responsibility, establishing the male provider/ female carer norm. The World War brought in a shuffling and churning in the public and private scene. Post world war necessitated a reorganizing of the home. Women, however, were still responsible to manage work in the private sphere and perform the emotional labour to keep the family together. Interestingly though, while this work has been under the purview of individual families, this enormous work has also been managed through the hidden, invisible networks of women's friendships – of friendships forged within families at home, of friendships between neighbours, of friendships forged through common social circles. Yet, while male public friendships were valued, prioritized to familial bonds as means of laying claim to the ‘polity’, women's citizenship, being mediated through kinship, family, marriage, meant that these friendships, solidarities, had to be subordinate to their familial bonds.

With the establishment of cotton mills in Europe, colonialism set in motion a process of deindustrialization in the colonies, including India. Agriculture and the subsistence economy underwent a major shift with imposition of cash crops for international trade, leading to rise

in landlessness and indentured labour., Further, men migrated from rural areas to work in the cotton and jute mills in India leaving their wives back home to manage subsistence farming. Women's farm and non-farm work not only kept households running but also supported migrant husbands, fathers and brothers at factories and urban centres. The public and private in India, therefore, overlapped, collapsed, encroached, and impinged on each other, with the claims and obligations of kinship, of family almost always seeping into the public, the economic.

As the reform movements during colonial rule sought to expand women's claim to the public, nationalist sentiments redefined the public/private (Chatterjee, 1987). Women's work, even in the public sphere, here, had been managed through kinship networks, through mill owners going through informal channels drawing from existing caste, regional relations, to create a differentiated, hierarchised, dispensable, flexible workforce (Sengupta, 2022). Women's need in the private sphere were, therefore, one of the most common excuses cited for retrenchment. Brahmanical families though restricted women's entry to the labour market, constructing the image of the 'good woman' through her domesticity.

The new nation formed in 1947 took on the role of the welfare state, putting in place regulations to mediate relations for industry and labour. However, women's paid and unpaid work continued to be invisibilised, devalued, and informalised. In fact, India witnessed very low workforce participation rates of women since independence owing largely to existing gender and caste norms and also because a large part of women's work, both productive and reproductive, remained invisibilised and undercounted. More than 90 percent of women workers typically belonged to the informal sector, whether subsistence agricultural labour, daily wage jobs, home based work or paid domestic work.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s while promising feminization of labour, actually pushed women more to their homes. The structural adjustment programs imposed on India by the World Bank and IMF worked to consolidate the process of sourcing home-based workers. The emergence of the women professionals, also meant that the private too now needed to be reorganized. The liberation of middle-class women from the drudgery of housework to lay claim to the public, therefore, hinged on the cheap, and often coerced labour of the working class, mostly lower caste women (Dasgupta, 2020). As the upper middle class, 'upper caste' woman struggled with wage gaps and glass ceilings in her workspace, her social reproductive work was outsourced to 'lower caste', working class women. The public and the private in this context, therefore, remained deeply marked by caste, class and gender identities determining who did which type and how much of work. This in turn determined who could claim care, how and how much⁷⁶.

Marxist Feminist Interventions on Social Reproduction and Its Impact on The Women's Movement

A significant intervention of feminist activism has been in challenging the public/ private divide and thereby raising questions like 'what is work', 'who is the worker', and more importantly, 'who/ what produces the worker'. One of the first articulations of reorganizing social reproduction came in the Soviet experimentation of collectivizing housework, and motherhood post 1917 (Kollontai, 1920). While the thrust was still on bringing women to the factory gate, to make her part of the class struggle, this was the first time that the private sphere, that had so far been perceived as the domain of the informal, of individual families,

⁷⁶ Care in upper middle class, upper caste households came to be provided through the labour of lower caste, working class women, while working class, lower caste households projected to be undeserving of care had to rely on the labour of the elderly mother and the elder girl child.

was being brought under the purview of the state. As the newly formed worker's state set up collective kitchens, and laundries and set up maternity homes declaring child care to be the responsibility of the state, not only did it visibilize the gendered labour that goes on in producing the worker, but also transformed the individualized, informalized nature of that work. The possibilities that socialization of housework, care work held in changing social relations were short lived, as some of the progressive steps were later reverted, and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union led to the demise of the dream. Kollontai's (1920) vision of the transformation of both social and emotional reproduction in the new society, held a blueprint to what could have been - possibilities that later theorisations could take a leaf from

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the workers' state needs new relations between the sexes, just as the narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand until it extends to all the children of the great, proletarian family, the indissoluble marriage based on the servitude of women is replaced by a free union of two equal members of the workers' state who are united by love and mutual respect. In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades. This is what relations between men and women in the communist society will be like. These new relations will ensure for humanity all the joys of a love unknown in the commercial society of a love that is free and based on the true social equality of the partners. (Kollontai, 1920)

This was also one of the first articulations of the role friendships, comradeship could play in building a new society. With women becoming equal stakeholders in the public, the private too, Kollontai believed would be transformed not only through collectivization of hitherto gendered domestic labour and carework, but also through the freeing of emotions, of love,

affect from the fetters of privatization, thereby making way for the winged eros, of love comradeship that would bind the individual with the collective (Kollontai, 1920).

The Soviet model of socialization of housework, care work provided a critical theoretical and practical ground for looking at the organization of care in society. Its leaning on women's integration in production, society and politics, though, left the gendered division of labour in the sphere of social reproduction unchallenged as the process relied mostly on assigning of housework, childcare to 'experts'. The objective of the socialization of housework therefore lay in releasing women from the chains of everyday drudgery of the household so that she could step out from the private to explore her full potential in the public.

The Soviet model was explored further during the Chinese Revolution in 1949. While the preoccupation with the productive sphere remained, Chinese experimentation with collectivization of housework and carework, was preceded by a conscious attempt to break the hierarchy between intellectual and manual labour. As the cultural norms and glass ceiling ensured that most women's work would be in the realm of manual labour, with hardly any one making it to decision making bodies, the Chinese women's movement made it their agenda to challenge the hierarchization and ensure mobility, advocating women's integration into the production sphere would only be fully possible if everyone at the site is involved with all processes of production (Broyelle, 1977). The Chinese path to socialisation of housework and childcare too differed a little from the Soviet route. Critiquing the Bolshevik model of handing over housework to a small corp of workers (primarily women) as a step to destroying the family as an economic and political unit, the Chinese women called for redistribution of social reproduction work equally amongst all, 'with everyone doing his' and having to engage with the 'repetitive, absurd aspect' of it (Broyelle, 1977). The collectivization of work, then, also meant a cultural transformation in the way the work of

social reproduction is perceived. Instead of building separate designated spaces for this work to be done, the Chinese slogan of '*Collectivization first, then mechanization*', then, advocated for integration of men too into the sphere of reproduction (Broyelle, 1977). The struggle for collectivization of land had already established rural women as a political force, the collectivization of the household, then, enabled transformation of the private, both culturally and economically. The integration of men, elderly people, even children into the work of social reproduction, made it visible and established it as a socially useful work, organized like any other production unit. It also then became a site of bonding, of forging friendships, comradeships, solidarities. Broyelle (1977) describes how the collective spaces became animated sites of political debates on government policy, issues concerning society building, role of women in the revolution, and at times performing sites for local theatre troupe.

While these experiments on ground informed Marxist feminist theorisations, it was only in the 1970s that there began a serious engagement with social reproduction within the women's movement. Heidi Hartman's infamous essay in 1975, 'The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism' laid bare the overlooked site of reproductive labour, and spelled out how capitalism benefited from women's subordination, how the primacy given to class struggle in Marxism often eclipsed gender oppression and thereby called for a more progressive union of Marxism and feminism. The essay had created quite a furore among Marxists, feminists, and Marxist feminists as it unequivocally stated that Marxist theory was sex blind, while feminist theory was insufficiently materialist and thereby what was required was a more progressive union of the two (Sargent, 1981) She traced how the spectre of family wage, gendered wage differentiation and gendered labour markets attempted to resolve the conflict over women's labour power between patriarchal and capitalist interests. (Hartman, 1981). Such wage differentiation did not remain limited to gender but extended to race, ethnicity and other markers of marginalisation. Lisa Vogel, like Hartman, critiqued the economist view of

development of history⁷⁷, she interrogates socialist feminist debates on mode of reproduction, women's relation to wage labour as both paid and unpaid workers and thereby depicts how 'women's activity as consumers and unpaid domestic labourers [can be regarded] as the dominant factor shaping women's consciousness, whether or not she participates in wage labour' (Vogel, 1981).

These socialist feminist debates on mode of reproduction also flagged off the 'Wages for Housework' campaign in the 1970s headed by Dalla Costa, Selma James, Sylvia Federici, who took the struggle from the kitchen to the streets, from the informalised private to the organised public. As recognition of housework and unpaid labour that 'produced' workers became one of the central demands for the campaign, the movement not only challenged the classical Marxist idea of bringing women to the factory gates, and politicized the home and the hearth, stating that the site of reproduction had never actually been outside capitalist relations. It also initiated a radical rethinking of the politics of care. Exposing the link between gendered division of labour and social power, it projected the campaign as a revolutionary demand that forced capital to restructure social relations and thereby, consolidate unification of class⁷⁸. Interestingly, this framework then also helped look at the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality from a Marxist point of view and politicized love and friendship. Federici (2020) argued,

The subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labour power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable sexual behaviour. In reality, every genuine communication has a sexual component, for our bodies and

⁷⁷ That looked at entry into wage labour as the primary precondition to revolutionary struggle.

⁷⁸ Considering how men too benefited from women's subordination, devaluation of women's work and thereby devaluation of their being actually proved to be detrimental to a united class struggle against the capitalists who were the owners of means of production and filled their coffers through women's unpaid reproductive labour.

emotions are indivisible and we communicate at all levels all the time. But sexual contact with women is forbidden because, in bourgeois morality, anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted. This has meant the imposition of a true schizophrenic condition upon us, as early in our lives we must learn to draw a line between the people we can love and the people we just talk to, those to whom we can open our body and those to whom we can only open our “souls,” our lovers and our friends. (Federici, 2020, p. 25)

In challenging the primacy given to heterosexual romantic relationship over other kinds of intimacies, friendships, in confining love to bourgeois notions of morality, Federici (2020) echoed Kollontai in propagating a new politics of love comradeship, of friendship that could have the potential to restructure social relations and reorganize care.

Taking cue from Lisa Vogel’s idea of a unitary theory⁷⁹, and developing on the idea of site of reproduction not being outside capitalist relations, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) further pushed for a broader understanding of labour, as being ‘the first premise of all history’⁸⁰ (Bhattacharya, 2017). Proposing a framework of looking at production and reproduction as an integrated circuit, wherein social reproduction entails all life making processes, SRT then not only dismantled the public private division of labour, but also looked at different axes of oppression being co-constitutive. Care in such a context, was not just restricted to ‘care work’ per se, but also covered healthcare, education, pension, childcare - all life making processes that were involved in replenishing labour power, on a daily basis as well as generationally (Bhattacharya, 2017). In looking at structures of inequality, SRT also investigated

⁷⁹ Differing from Hartman’s call for a union of marxist and feminist theories, Vogel called for a more integrated approach that would look at production and reproduction as an integrated whole.

⁸⁰ In his materialist concept of history Marx locates human labour to be the material basis of society and therefore described the existence of living individual to be the first premise of all history.

reproduction of social inequalities and the norms and values that got transmitted through such reproduction. That a reorganizing of care from its informalized, privatized mode would then call for abolition of family and private property was something that has been hammered time and again by Marxist and socialist feminists.

Reimaginings of Care from Autonomous Women's Movement in India

Perhaps, one of the most radical reimaginings of care from India could be gauged through Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain's utopic novella, 'Sultana's Dream'⁸¹ (1905). As discussed in the first chapter, turning the gendered division of public/ private on its head, Rokeya sketches a new 'polity', where women were the natural inhabitants of the public, whereas men were confined in the 'zenana'. In this utopic world where scientific innovations worked to relieve people of work, goading them to pursue their dreams, to have the leisure to do 'what they will', in the absence of private property, or family, kinship, care is organized through friendship, through collective accountability to each other. This was a world of collective kitchens and two-hour workdays, of a country ruled by women who do not covet other people's lands and instead dive into the gifts of knowledge, of scientific innovations that make cooking not a task but a pleasure (Hussain, 1905). Despite Rokeya's radical imagining, the women's movement in this time, largely consolidated through bargaining with patriarchy, through laying claim to the public, and the political. Yet, even in the nineteenth century, women's articulations of female friendships sprung up through the cracks in the grand narrative of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. Mahadevi Verma's articulations of her 'family of friends', as mentioned in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, who she writes about as '*path ke saathi*' (fellow wayfarers). Reflecting on Mahadevi Verma's

⁸¹ In a utopic science fiction, Rokeya imagines a land ('Ladyland') where the men are locked in the zenana while the women are in charge of running the country.

friendships. Poonam Saxena (2021) writes, “Mahadevi’s family consisted of the subalterns she befriended and wrote about all her life — marginalised people like Alopī the sightless vegetable seller; impoverished nine-year-old Ghisa, who had no books but a thirst for reading; Bhaktin the tormented widow, and many others”. Verma's writings articulated what remained otherwise unexpressed through the women's movement that was framed primarily through the rhetoric of reform. It is also glimpsed through Tagore's sketch of Mrinal in *Streer Patra* (Letter from the Wife) (1914) as she articulates her friendship with Bindu built through the daily routines of social reproduction. It is articulated through Pritilata's last letter (1932) that voices her desire to lay claim to the public as a ‘comrade’, and through it also in a way lends voice to women’s indomitable urge to break out of their prescribed ‘homes’, of their prescribed roles in society, and a quest for new modes of belonging, new homes.

Interestingly, while the early feminist articulations of the nineteenth century failed to challenge the public/ private divide, or initiate conversations around social reproduction, women’s entry into the political arena also brought the social reproduction process into the political struggle. Anecdotes, stories, testimonies of women seeking ‘home’ in the Communist Party in the 1920s, as discussed in Chapter II, brings to the fore the manifold ways women defied social norms and claimed their space in the struggle, building enabling spaces for women to raise crucial questions on women’s work, on the gendered division of labour, on women’s identity as workers. Ania Loomba (2019) notes how women fleeing their homes in fear of being married off, sought refuge in the Bombay commune and became party workers. The collective care that was being nurtured in the commune with comrades talking, strategizing, debating, eating, working, singing, sloganeering, living together fostered imaginings of political belonging founded on what Jodi Dean describes to be ‘collective use of the collective’ (Dean, 2019, p. 52). However, while the collective care model of the commune challenged the organizing of care through individualized familial units, the onus of

developing this model still remained largely on women, with the commune soon becoming another surrogate family that organized care relying heavily on women's invisibilized labour. As the party became the new family, familial relationships were often transported to this space with women being tasked to perform emotional labour of caregiving and keeping the family together.

Although care was still essentially understood to be a natural attribute of women, women's participation in the struggle was able to politicize care. Kavita Panjabi (2016) noted how the relief kitchens run by Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) during the Bengal famine in 1943 further brought the realm of social reproduction to the streets. As the imperialist forces unleashed man-made famine seeking to determine who would deserve care and who would not, care work undertaken by the MARS ceased to be a mere extension of natural feminine act, but rather became a political tool for organizing, for refusing to give the imperialists the power to dictate who would be cared for, and under what circumstances⁸². The relief kitchens thus not only became spaces of affective comradeships that later formed the whetstone of the militant Tebhaga uprising, but also became a crucial space for carving out a new politics of care, a new entry point for communist organizing in the hinterland (Sen, 1952; Panjabi, 2016). As hunger crumbled the walls of public and private, spilling care onto the streets, the social recognition and visibilization of reproductive labour in the public political arena, also helped women recognize the value of their labour. For rural women, who had traditionally learnt to perceive their work in the field as mere extension of their housework, who had learnt to see their role as food rioters, merely in fulfilment of their duty as caregiver, the political struggle of laying claim to their share of harvest, of fighting against feudal and imperial

⁸² One of the slogans of the time, '*Keu khabe ar keu khabe na, ta hobe na, ta hobe na*' (Some will eat, while others starve, that won't do) spoke of a politics of care born out of resistance against the man made famine unleashed by imperialist forces.

forces opened up possibilities of reinvestigating the kinship contract and gendered division of labour. Their fight was not just about laying stakes in the movement as nurturers, but as peasants, as landless farm labourers (Panjabi, 2016; Roy, 2019). The absence of recognition of this role, the lack of value attributed to these works then foiled their understanding of liberation, pushing them to ask, to claim their space in not just half but the whole sky.

Social Reproduction, Care and the Autonomous Women's Movement

Conscious feminist engagement with the political implications of social reproduction in India began during the autonomous women's movement in the 1980s. As the 'Towards Equality' report of 1972 set off a flurry of uneasy questions on the status of women in India, it also set in motion a series of development actions by the government with the aim of generating employment for poor women. Devaki Jain and Malilini Chand's (1982) groundbreaking time allocation study in 1984 turned the spotlight further on the valuation of women's work.

Women's workspaces being mostly private, informal, casualised also meant that this work remained unaccounted and unacknowledged. Some members of FAOW and Saheli shared how they were introduced to the works of Kollontai in these times through cyclostyled copies that were exchanged among friends in the 1980s. An activist formerly associated with FAOW had shared, "I remember I got a selection of your essays cyclostyled in the late 1980s and circulated them widely. They sorted me out, and I felt they should be prescribed reading for all activists in the movement"⁸³. These discussions among friend circles also played an influential role in shaping ideas of care in these collectives.

The struggle for political autonomy, intertwined with the struggle for personal autonomy, as discussed in Chapter III, meant that friendships forged through these everyday collective

⁸³ Personal email, 2022

struggles became a critical organizing force, a political relation of belonging, of 'home'. The very task of organizing women, in such a context, quite organically demanded an engagement with social reproduction. For women whose time was chained to providing care and subsistence at home, even to come to meetings, to come out to protest meant thinking of ways to break out of that chain. Meetings, protest sites, thereby, also had to become spaces of nurturance, of collective childcare, of leaning on each other to find the time to think, to strategize, to politicize, to protest. As an activist in Bombay now a member of FAOW, reflected on her journey with alternate Marxist collectives and the women's movement to mark a shift in the way social reproduction, care and affect was envisaged:

I think in the Marxist spaces where I occupied in the late 1980s, care networks were understood to be familial and if not familial, familial networks were given priority... so you are part of a collective and whichever member was married and had kids would draft single members into the work of that family...so the framework was familial... any other kinds of equations had to be read through and explained through familial framework... and you were not 'family' understood in the heteronormative sense... so you either stepped back or you had to find some way of aligning with the family - natal, marital so that you would be allowed in participating with the care network... this sort of manifests in so many ways... these ideas or meetings would happen in someone's house... it would mostly be the place of the man who is living with his natal family and has a room or in the marital home of a man where the familial arrangement.. the chai and such things would come and the women in the collective would participate because we would be dying of guilt... and the meetings will go on till late and only some people would have this realisation that this needs to wind up for this guy to join others for dinner or they would not have to make dinner at home... (Personal Interview, 2019)

In feminist spaces that she later came to inhabit, ethics of care would be born out of implicit instinctive understanding of the ‘work’ of social reproduction, “having meetings in the evening because you have job, which may segue you into lets go and eat something together...care networks where you think this person can't have mirchi so let's go to so and so place or this person has too far to go so let's wind up early, or someone has not come so what's going on... being attentive... they are also much more fragile...” (Personal Interview, 2019). Her articulations of care within the movement points not just to the practices of care that comes through a recognition of the ‘work’ of social reproduction, but also points towards a redefining of the political that this recognition and praxis initiates. As the movement grappled with issues of domestic violence, dowry, the interrogation of marriage and family also demanded a search for alternate care models and alternate support structures. The history of the autonomous women’s movement, therefore, can also be read as a history of care - of building makeshift homes, informal support systems, and ad hoc safe refuges that formed the primary building blocks for the movement.

As discussed in the previous chapters, oral narratives, testimonies of feminist activists involved with the autonomous women’s movement, and belonging to autonomous women’s collectives, bring to light how most of their houses had become open homes, where women leaving violent natal and marital families sought refuge. These ad hoc informal care structures built through personal friendships also posed serious questions on the sustainability of such solutions, and more importantly, the skewed power dynamics between the benefactor and beneficiary. Members of Saheli, while sharing their experience of running a shelter home for women in the 80s reflected,

We created a shelter home but we couldn’t sustain it... even when one is running a shelter home... issues of class come in... you need full time people, you need funds...

it was also becoming difficult to manage that shelter.... We had debated a lot but we need to rethink the idea of shelters – it should be places where women can go and stay... not just a place for victims... it was also asked why women would walk out of their homes... violence should stop at home... rights-based structure came in... we have not been able to find an alternative of family... We have mostly tried to fix families, democratize families... but we have not been able to make much changes in the family structure as well... (FGD, 2022)

Concerns that such ad hoc, informal arrangements could run the risk of absolving the state of its responsibilities of housing the homeless, and depoliticise the movement by merely becoming a ‘service providing centre’ led to the ‘casework’ debate in Saheli, forcing members to address the unequal beneficiary/ benefactor relationship. This necessitated the collective to think politically about care. As discussed in the previous chapter the practice of open homes while being premised on the liberal notion of personal friendships failed to bring about a radical reimagination of care.

Engagement with social reproduction in the autonomous women's collectives too happened very organically and therefore unconsciously. It is the urge to bring women out of their homes onto the streets and to create enabling spaces for them to be in the movement that building informal care structures became organisational tasks. As discussed in the previous chapter, several activists in FAOW shared how friends and comrades in the collective opened their houses for them and took it upon themselves to find proper housing for them when they came to the city as migrants (Personal Interviews, 2019). Learning the ins and outs of the movement then happened not just through meetings and campaigns, but also through conversations that flowed through these informal networks of care built outside familial structures. It is these networks that also became sites of learning about feminist

understandings of love, friendships and intimacies. An activist from Bombay formerly associated with FAOW and LABIA shared, “One thing I learnt about intimate relationships is that I have come away from [ruptures] not feeling a loss of intimacy as much as a loss of friendship... for me, that is where the ethics of friendship lies... I understand the emotional work needed, I understand the difficulties but... when an intimate relationship breaks up there are a number of reasons... but I think as queer feminists we need to respect friendship more... because it is something that is so integral to our political choices... there is something to be said about working through it...” (Personal Interview, 2019).

So, what did feminist care look like when organised through friendships? Many of the activists articulated how this care stemmed almost instinctively from a shared political understanding, a shared praxis. It could be reflected through preparing rosters to stay with a comrade who has been ill, or through as someone shared how her friends supported her financially during a vulnerable period so she may not have to compromise her politics and take up job in an NGO, or through friends and comrades all chipping in with their clothes to help someone look presentable at a family gathering when said person is broke, or through friends and comrades turning up in the hospital when one's daughter is ill only to give the mother a break, recognising the tiresome work that motherhood demands - that otherwise usually goes unnoticed. Feminist friendships thus stem not only from a recognition of the ‘work’ of social reproduction, from a recognition of the gendered nature of the burden of social reproduction, but also from recognising the task of sharing that burden, of organising that work differently as a political task. A former Saheli explained, “all that makes a feminist's life it was very natural in saheli... we might take a woman to the shelter home and realise she brought everything except baby powder, and she has a 6 month old baby, so then we would go out of our way to get some milk powder, request the shelter authorities to give it to her... those kinds of thing are forged in iron... we practised what female support meant to

each other.” (Personal Interview, 2024). Feminist care structures are also rooted from a common political ethics of striving to organise society differently, of battling against the heteropatriarchal norms despite perhaps not even needing to articulate it. Another member of Saheli reflected on two incidents where two of their sahelis lost their mother and father respectively:

...in both situations there was an understanding that the sons would do the rituals whereas in an unspoken move it was very clear... we all just moved in and helped facilitate them doing it... it's that kind of understanding that gets built... there is a way in which you understand each other, you help each other navigate the moment... I know if there were a bunch of old sahelis they would have the same... there are different ways you can actually talk/ connect about political vision about what you do and how you live as necessary conversations... there is a whole world of things that you can talk to other friends about... it's that sense of support where you can sense what somebody would want or not want... I think it came as a question of care... care at an emotional level... it can be taken care of in many ways... (FGD, 2022)

However, the informal networks of care that the movement built on ground despite its potential failed to develop into alternate structures that could destabilize the institutions of marriage and family, or challenge private property. While the movement struggled to build alternate institutions of care outside institutions of family, marriage, these on ground struggles informed theoretical debates on social reproduction and feminist organizing in the autonomous conferences, meetings. Debating the ‘wages for housework’ in India, where the income of families rarely covered subsistence requirements, women’s entry into production as plantation workers, and subsistence workers demanded that some of the reproductive labour be socialized (Rohini, 1987). Yet, despite plantation owners building creches and

canteens to enable women workers, its purpose remained solely to extend women's working hours and serve the interests of capital as it helped to employ women in even more strenuous jobs (Rohini, 1987). Drawing from histories of women's participation in land and labour struggles, some of these discussions noted how women's role as reproductive labourers, as subsistence workers helped shape their political consciousness. Some argued the involvement of housewives; in wage demands, their demand to be made part of the decision-making process of trade unions during strikes stemmed from their participation in socially necessary labour that played a key role in reproducing capitalist society. These debates, echoed Lisa Vogel's argument against wage labour being a pre-condition for development of women's political consciousness. Feminist organizing on ground laid bare the limitations of trade unions that confined labour struggles solely around the demands of wage labour, and compelled activists to look for other forms of organizations like soviets, councils, communes that they felt would be able to more comprehensively grasp the struggles of women in production and reproduction (Banerjee, 1987).

Liberalization and the adoption of the New Economic Policy in the 1990s brought about a turn in feminist organizing with the institutionalization of the women's movement through the 'service providing model' of NGOs on one hand, and, redistribution of care work through commercialization and globalization on the other which further widened the class gap in the movement. While women's participation in the workforce as wage workers increased in the Global North, reproductive labour came to be restructured through the expropriated labour of immigrant women from the Global South. In India, as the neoliberal policies pushed for the withdrawal of the welfare state, shifting the onus of social reproduction solely on the individual, it also brought about a shift in the everyday lifestyle. A former Saheli shared how the 'equal distribution' of work during meetings came to become a burden for many who had to do the same back at home, "so what would happen is I would be living alone, I was living

in Faridabad, so I would change rickshaw, bus and come there and over there you had to help your sisters in housework, and then go back and do housework... then I decided that I am not going to do that... if I am staying for longer time, I will do it... but in a collective when we are already living such unequal lives... some people had servants, some people had good houses, I could see those differences..." (Personal Interview, 2024).

Yet, it also provoked feminists living outside the institution of marriage, to rethink questions of autonomy and care as a political issue. As a member of FAOW reflected,

The thing with forum is it takes autonomy very seriously, so you don't find that many people asking for help... unless there's a big crisis like you are in hospital or something... but not in emotional crises in that case you reach out to a few people and those are usually the same people that are reached out to by everybody... So when I say I would reach out to Forum it isn't that emergency kind of situation that I am now stuck with somebody having a crisis and I want help... it is a confidence of feeling that I can call upon anytime... and that confidence has now borne out with many people... in the last few years we are not thinking together... a lot of us are doing care work but we are not thinking about it politically, we are not thinking together... We are all doing what we can at individual levels but we are not thinking politically about care... we are not talking about our own frailties... only two people have gone and lived in Pune that is one model... those who have fallen out we lose touch so it's not usually that the networks are surviving... a few people might be my cluster but there is no collective care model... we still do for people who demand it but we are not actively thinking about it...many of us are not living in families... living outside marriage... (Personal Interview, 2019).

The constant firefighting that the movement has had to do also meant that questions of building care networks kept getting pushed down the agenda. It is only with the ageing of the collectives that politicising care emerged to be a prime focus. Members of Saheli shared, “It’s not also a matter of choice, when are you free to make this choice... I am free to do it now because my parents have passed away... and all of us who have made different choices have had to bear the burden of care work... in Saheli once we did a survey on who is getting the inheritance and who is doing the care work... we have all been drafted into taking the care role, there is a disproportionate share specially with single friends, queer friends and those living unconventional arrangements...” (FGD, 2022). Thus, while several members of FAOW shared how they had imagined building communes or living together/ near each other in the future, the conversations never materialised into any concrete way of living.

Reorganising care outside familial networks also demands a rethinking of claims of affect. A queer feminist from Bombay notes, “There is an awareness as you grow older that you need to plan these things, plan care... tomorrow if I need care, there may be [family] people to do it but I do not want that default option... even within the groups we have had discussions about what we mean by friendship, community... we may have rejected [traditional] systems, but what do we have in place? Why is the family still the fallback option? Why is the first caretaker still blood kin” (Personal Interview, 2019). An elderly feminist activist from Delhi recalled how despite the intensity of friendship, despite the possibilities, the feminist collectives have not been able to establish claims of friendships politically, neither were they able to register affective pulls of friendship, leaving people with the only option of the familial care model:

There are very strong friendships... but during a crisis there are issues of who has the authority/ stake in taking decisions... Saheli has had a very core friendship... yet in

terms of critical things, caregiving, one cannot substitute the family... there are institutional options... but the depth of the political work that you do somehow doesn't translate into building these care structures... what is it in the biological family... feminist friendships have been good but the last stage... we are there for you till the end... woh nahin ho pata... either they think they do not have the authority like family to take charge... that last stage the depth of the friendship fails... we have not pushed autonomy enough... we have not suggested that the family ceases to exist at the affective level... our political understanding of power relationship in the family has not been able to translate to that... you make an adjustment with the system to find a more humane way of dealing with it than look at more political way of dealing with it... but the political way is the more humane way... we have politically thought about abolishing family, but not in praxis, in an affective way... and now that assisted living has come in you are thinking on those lines... (Personal Interview, 2020)

The discussion with members of Saheli too opened up some of the imaginings of care that living a feminist life propelled:

Institutionally caring or formalising these things have not happened... it's not that me and a friend can open a joint account if we are not sexual partners... because that is the primacy... but have we managed that, do we think about that enough? This is also how do we push the law... and people have done that when they had no option, but some of us have not because we had other options that seemed easier... but I may not want to do everything with our sexual partner, we may not want to make every living arrangement with them... being in some formal institutions I don't want that to be everything... I do not want it to be the care arrangement growing old... the possibility of growing old with my partner, or having my partner make my end-of-life decisions

is not something I want... I want to have that world that I have made, I want to grow old with my feminist friends... but then these are only personal solutions, not formal structures... we have not tried at a political level... these are just personal bubbles... these are things we have not fought for conceptually... we have not fought for multiple options... (FGD, 2022)

The need to think politically about care opens up newer avenues of feminist organizing. It destabilizes the monopoly of kinship-based care networks that are mostly built upon the backbreaking labour of women. Yet, while the autonomous women's movement has experimented with different care models, has questioned gendered division of labour and spoken about the drudgery and shackles of housework, the idea of collectivizing care seems to have been thought of mostly for those whom the movement 'sought to help' – the battered women who walked out of marriage, the poor single woman who was being thrown out of her home, the persecuted queer woman for whom home was never homely. Shelter in this context, was something to be built for the hapless, the 'victim', the 'beneficiary', while the ones 'giving', 'building' sought care through personal friendships, through ad hoc personalized solutions.

Interestingly though where the women's movement failed to concretize its imaginings of feminist care structures, the Queer movement, which is premised on challenging the social institutions of family and marriage succeeded. A member of Saheli shared,

But there were other spaces where one could find inspiration... if we look at how sex workers communities live and support each other, how hijra communities live...despite the tensions, we have never thought these could be alternatives... also the issue is tied up with property and finances... no one risked their individual security and committed to create a personal and political space... how one can leave

one's individual security and create a community space... finances have been a big hurdle... we have all thought about this but a lot of issues are tied up... I feel sad to see feminists who are privileged living in their 2-3 room houses but not thinking about building spaces together... we are more ready to compromise in families, in marriages, we are ready to go for joint accounts, ready to diminish our lives but somehow, we are not able to do it with friends, with comrades. But in sex workers communities, in hijra communities people are doing it... probably because the option of family is just not there... the back of family, legality is not there.... (FGD, 2022)

Being in the margins has helped the queer community reimagine care beyond family, marriage and blood kinship, thereby building their own 'chosen families', 'fictive kinships'⁸⁴ (Geetha, 2007). Furthermore, the vulnerability of queer-trans people in India living in a homophobic society which criminalised homosexuality till recently, makes the need for care and support structures an immediate imperative and not just something to be thought of in old age. In her book *Queer Activism in India: A story in the anthropology of ethics*, Naisargi Dave writes how any "ethnography of queer activism is necessarily an ethnography of friendship, and its troubles" (Dave, 2012, p. 26). Given the isolation and precarity of queer-trans lives in India, one of the primary tasks of queer activism/ queer collectives had been in building spaces for friendships, alternative kinships, and care. From the Friendship Walk in Kolkata in 1999 to spaces like *Sakhi*, *Bombay Dost* queer activism has flourished by battling loneliness through 'buddy systems', through establishing queer friendships as a way of life (Bakshi, 2024). Having been criminalised, erased, invisibilised, for many friendships became the only refuge, the only space of 'coming out', and being unapologetically themselves. In her conversation with Naisargi, Abha Bhaiya speaks of this politics of friendship that the

⁸⁴ In her book *Patriarchy*, V Geetha describes fictive kinship as "construction of filial relationships amongst strangers" (Geetha, 2007, p.85) to describe the building of alternate families in hijra communities.

women's movement nurtured that helped to handhold queer activism in its days of closetedness, “Abha speaks of lesbian relationships in the early days of the contemporary women’s movement as far richer because there was no compulsion to speak of them publicly. These were relationships that were more in keeping with the rhythms of the women’s movement at a seemingly more enchanted time—when friendships had no boundaries, when the spaces of work and home were one and the same”. (Dave, 2012, p. 104)

The hijra akharas, hijra pattis, collaborative living arrangements built through struggle shift the onus of care from an individual to the collective. However, while queer living bears the potential to challenge the organizing of social, and emotional reproduction, and obliterate the boundaries of public and private, it also runs the risk of being appropriated by capitalist relations and subsumed by heteropatriarchal practices. Thus, despite the potential queer politics holds in challenging gendered division of labour and offering a new vision of care and intimacy; narratives from hijra pattis, akhara⁸⁵, collaborative living arrangements also show how these alternate structures too sometimes become mere replicas of familial values and relationships, reinforcing caste, class, gendered hierarchies through marriage like, family like affective relationalities, where care is relegated to the privatized, informal form. While such developments clearly point out “reproductive labour is not automatically free when performed in queer relationships”, as Alva Gotby (2021) warns us, and shows how queer relationships can also carry coercive structures and forms of devaluation of labouring subjects. However, queer politics is founded on asserting outlawed pleasure, emotions, and power and as such carries within it the seeds of subverting the existing organization of production and reproduction (Gotby, 2021).

⁸⁵Collective living arrangements of hijra community. The akharas usually have a cult like organising with guru shishya (teacher-student) dynamics.

The recent debate on marriage equality through its demand for recognition of the claims of ‘chosen families’ articulates a different desire of care, that is decoupled from family and heterosexual cultural practices, as Vrinda Grover (2023) argued in courtroom, “What we are canvassing before the court is a new imagination of marriage and relationship, that places at its foundation love, care and respect that does not come from natal families”. Although the judgment refused to engage with these crucial questions of legal claims, and conveniently passed the responsibility to the parliament, what this petition once again brought to the fore is the need to challenge the primacy of marriage and family in organizing, providing, distributing care. In bringing into the public domain the violence of natal families, and challenging the socio-cultural notion of ‘family’ being the natural abode of care, through voices, testimonies from the ground, this debate makes a case for a politics of care that is rooted in claims of friendship, comradeship, solidarity.

Towards Building Barricades of Friendship

While these struggles have yet to build a new vision of collective care, in their explorations of alternate ad hoc and informal care and support systems, outside marriage and family, these practices of feminist friendships bear within them the seeds of redefining the political. As the Soviet and Chinese revolution sowed the dream that another world is possible, the vision of rebuilding the ‘polity’ by building barricades of comrades held the potential for building a politics of care that is rooted in the idea of social transformation. Taking a cue from the revolutionary models of collectivized care socialist feminists stressed the need to visibilise reproductive labour as socially necessary labour and question the organization of it on the basis of property relations. Feminist struggles and campaigns on the ground therefore while arguing against the devaluation of reproductive work, opens up possibilities for questioning the gendered division of labour and the public/ private divide it entails. As the naturalisation

of care work as ‘labour of love’ gets challenged, it breaks care out of the confines of bourgeois notions of love and privatized affect, and brings it to the political arena of struggle. Feminist organizing in India, further opens up the horizons of social reproduction, politicizing care also through struggles over food, land, resources, commons.

The cultures of friendship emerging from feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-caste struggles in India while being informal and ad hoc, can be seen as sites of resistance that have the potential to chip away at the feudal, capitalist structures and build a politics of care. One is reminded of the slogan often heard on the streets, ‘*Dike dike comrade, gore tolo barricade*’ (in every nook and corner comrade, raise barricades’). The idea of comrades building barricades to lean on each other and protect each other to fight for a different world have historically emerged as radical sites of care that defies norms of caste, class, and heteropatriarchal intimacy. Today, as the state lays down barricades against the people, as the neoliberal onslaught lays claim to our forests, our lands, our water and barricades them through armies, through state power, as care is commodified with capital determining who would be ‘cared for’, and who would ‘care’, it is the acts of comradeship that defies state surveillance and build bridges of care across caste, class, communities, it is the acts of solidarities honed out of coming together of anti-capitalist, anti-caste feminist struggles that have the potential to radically politicize care.

Recently, one of the posters from the Women’s Strike, 2017 in the US, reading ‘The Revolution starts with Care’, spoke to a new moment in feminist organizing, a moment that has been building worldwide as the neoliberal aggression intensifies with the rise of right-wing politics around the globe. Learning from the lessons of the ‘Ni Una Menos’⁸⁶ movement in Latin America, that saw scores of women taking to the streets against gender violence, not

⁸⁶ Ni Uno Menos, Spanish for ‘not one woman less’ was a grassroot feminist movement that spread across Latin American countries in 2016 and articulated a new language of feminist strike.

just about sexual or physical violence but also about the violence of casualisation, neoliberal policies, imperialism, racism, transphobia, and homophobia. The Women's Strike articulated a feminism for the 99 percent, putting on the map issues of women's work, informalization and social reproduction (Palmeiro, 2018). While the debates, discussions, discourses initiated by the feminist strikes did not cause much ripples in India, the rise of fascist forces and the onslaught of Hindutva aggression, goaded different kinds of anti-fascist feminist organizing. In 2019, when women marched out of the confines of their homes and took to the streets during the anti-NRC-CAA movement⁸⁷ challenging the diktats of citizenship laid down by the state, laying claim to the 'public' that was violently writing them out, building temporary 'homes' on the streets, the 'domestic' too began spilling into the public, etching possibilities for a new politics of care (Khan, 2020; Afroz, 2020). The possibilities, however, were rudely cut short as the onset of Covid and the nationwide lockdown shut everyone back in their houses. The covid lockdown muddled our private and public worlds, making 'workspaces' of our homes, and quarantine zones of public spaces. Yet, as the state declared war on the hearth through the passing of the three farm laws, the peasant community defied the codes of lockdown and occupied the borders of Delhi⁸⁸, it also brought the so far carefully tucked away workings of social reproduction to the streets. Women occupied a large part of the resistance, asserting themselves as peasants and as political subjects disregarding the court orders that asked them to return home. Images of collective kitchens run by both men and women, of collectivized laundry, stories of collective care made their way into scenographies of resistance. The peasant protest was soon followed by strikes of Anganwadi and Asha

⁸⁷ The anti-CAA protests in India against discriminatory citizenship were led by Muslim women who occupied streets all over India to protest the laws. With the women occupying the protests the site of protest also became sites of social reproduction, child care which at one time led the state to ask, why were children on the streets.

⁸⁸ Led by farmers against the neoliberal aggression of the 3 Farm Laws that were being passed in India, women played a key role in the movement asserting themselves as landless peasants. The then Chief Justice of India had ordered the elderly and women to go back home to which the women refused saying this was not a man's protest.

workers in 2021, further making visible social reproduction work and the question of its informalisation, and privatization (Bhaduri, 2021). The emergence of Asha workers, domestic workers unions in India has not only visibilised the caste-gendered aspect of housework, but has also articulated newer imaginations of organising this work through municipalisation (John, 2023). Shaheenbagh and the farmer's protest have showcased the spilling of the domestic and private onto the streets. Similarly, during the covid lockdown, people defied quarantine to build collective kitchens on the streets for fellow citizens who were abandoned by the state during covid lockdown. While the autonomous women's movement staggered at the face of neoliberalism, these new social movements carried the ethos of feminist politics. These new protest sites opened up opportunity for people from different struggles to exchanged their lived experiences ensuing journeys of learning and unlearnings, navigating differences to build a common struggle that comradeship will make way for a new proletarian morality⁸⁹.

It is in these contexts that this thesis argues for a politics of friendship born out of struggle that can destabilize the current organization of waged and unwaged care work, and work to remodel society. Building on Kollontai's idea of 'love-comradeship' (Kollontai, 1920) that opened up possibilities for more expansive forms of intimacy and emotional bonding founded on solidarity, revolutionary potential of feminist friendships not only helps build resistance against privatised care by offering a new imagination of radically reorganising the current modes of sociality. The project of feminist worldbuilding therefore necessitates the building of an ethics of feminist friendship.

⁸⁹ Kollontai envisions that in the absence of private property, in a context where family has withered away and reproductive labour has been socialized, emotions will free itself from the cages of the private and spill into the public, and care will emerge from the suffocating 'all for the loved ones' fetters to expand its horizons for the collective.

Conclusion

Towards an Ethics of Friendship

From fields and factories, mines and offices

We have come together, from villages and cities

To create a new era, a new world... (Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan, 1988)

The slogan adopted in the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan, 1988 alludes to the imagination of feminist worldbuilding that the making of the collective ‘we’ strives for through the politics of care and resilient struggles. A politics that necessitates care even for the person one has differences with a politics that is hinged on working through disagreements, on listening to each other and on allowing space for vulnerabilities, faltering and even falling with the knowledge that one’s friends are there to break the fall and to give care. As discussed in the previous chapters, the collective ‘we’ is born out of shared struggles. Through collective ideations of care and queer kinships, this ‘we’ bears the potential to strike at the current social dispensation, and sow the seed for a different kind of worldbuilding. Yet, this collective ‘we’ so forged was never any fixed given in the autonomous women’s movement. It was a ‘we’ that has been constantly been made, unmade, remade through struggle. The history of this ‘we’ is therefore also a history of the contradiction between the liberal idea of friendship and the revolutionary idea of friendship as discussed in the previous chapters. It is in this contradiction of the making, unmaking, and remaking, that the politics of friendship also gives shape to an ethics.

This chapter will explore the politics and ethics of ‘*dosti nibhaana*’ (performing/ living friendship) and the making and remaking of ideas of solidarity to unpack how we think of

forging bonds of resilient comradeships as we wage collective struggles in neoliberal times of cancel culture and notions of ‘allyship’.

Neoliberalism, Identity Politics and the Collective ‘We’

As discussed in Chapter 3 the ‘newness’ of the moment in the 1980s, formulated the idea of a collective ‘we’ following its lineage from the Western radical feminist women's liberation movement, premised on the idea of universal sisterhood and the romance of the ‘naturalness’ of women’s empathies and solidarities (Phadke and Kanagasabai b, 2023). It was a ‘we’ that is both forged through struggles and sharpened through the warmth of collective politics. But it was also shored up through the narrative set by the ‘International Decade on Women’ that framed the Indian autonomous women's movement with a primacy on the issue of gender violence which was used as the basic unifying experience of “all” women. This idea of a commonality of oppression easily glossed over the question of class that had been a defining character of the Indian women's movement of the past. The Marxist feminist attempts to build a pan Indian women’s movement failed because it could not connect middle class women escaping abusive marriages with students fighting sexism on campus, or working class women fighting unequal pay in factories with ‘saathins’⁹⁰ combating regressive rituals and witch hunting in villages, or Muslim women facing the raw end of family laws and peasant women fighting alcoholism and domestic violence at home - with an imagined community of horizontal comradeships.⁹¹ Swearing by the laws of feminist arithmetic of ‘ek aur ek gyarah’ (one plus one is eleven) as coined by Kamla Bhasin, the collective ‘we’ built a pan Indian movement by glossing over very different subjectivities through friendships. The

⁹⁰Grassroot village level workers of government run women’s development programmes

⁹¹ In his notion of ‘imagined communities, Anderson envisions citizenship as ‘horizontal comradeships’

common idea of *saheli* therefore captured the imagination of a large number of women across class, caste, religious locations in a way that the idea of the comrade could not. It also slowly began to build cracks on the walls of nationalism,⁹² transgressing barbed wires to build a ‘we’ that articulated in a new language of South Asian feminism, a solidarity born out of ‘oppositional politics’ of the ‘third world’ (Mohanty, 2003), of a shared history culture, and a common imagination of a borderless South Asia (Chakravarti, 2024).

This new language also took into cognizance the importance of defining women’s friendship as a political relation as discussed in the previous chapters. While the 19th C *Sakhi Samitis* were still exploring the social dimensions of women’s friendships they remained within a largely private domain of elite women’s philanthropic efforts for poorer women. The Marxist feminist comrade brought out the implications of women’s friendship into the public domain of barricades and factories. But this happened at immense private affective cost. The *saheli* managed to blur the distinctions of the private and public as it used female friendships forged through public, political, movement work to redefine private lives—enter domains of social reproduction and care. While the ‘comrade’ often chose to keep emotions, affect at bay, feminist friendships, with all its messiness, volatility, and complications, sought to redefine the political. Thus, while anyone could be a ‘*saheli*’, being a ‘*saheli*’, as Chapter 3 posits, also demanded a certain commitment and responsibility to the cause of working towards building a feminist egalitarian world. As the declaration of the autonomous women’s conferences states,

We are women from different women’s groups, organizations, from academia, or individual women. We come from different states, cities or villages, having political

⁹² ‘We are not the walls that you built up, we are the cracks in those worlds’ a slogan by Kamla Bhasin that had captured the essence of South Asian feminist movement in those times.

persuasions, belonging to various cultures, and religions, from different caste and class backgrounds, and speaking diverse languages. But we all work to challenge oppressive structures in society. We feel the need to link up with each other, share our struggles and express our solidarity... Some of us use the term feminism and others do not. We seem to have a broad understanding but with differing emphases in our practice. Our beliefs and ideology have not only provided us with a structural critique of society and of patriarchy, class, caste, etc. it has also evolved into a way of life, another way of looking at the world, another mode of weaving theory with praxis. Therefore, in strategizing for change, we have attempted to personalize politics and politicize the personal. This has meant confronting patriarchy within the family, social institutions, religion and the State as well as challenging core values like authoritarianism, aggression, competition, hierarchy and centralization. This redefining of power structures was also extended to our own organizations and an attempt to work out a more participatory and democratic functioning and decision making. (National Coordination Committee, 5th National Conference of Women's Movement of India, 1994⁹³).

Unequivocally laying down what one stood for, and what one stood against, this declaration can be read as a note on the politics of feminist friendship.

It is important to note that the ad hoc-ism and the porosity of the autonomous women's movement ensured the openness of the 'we', but also made it nebulous and fragile. The political inchoateness of this 'we' therefore also meant that it carried seeds of discontent, and fault lines that were somehow held together by the force of the political will of those who

⁹³ Pamphlet issued by National Coordination Committee right before the Fifth National Conference on Women's Movement in India to be held in Tirupathi, Andhra Pradesh in 1994.

threw themselves so passionately into the cause (Phadke and Kanagasabai b, 2023). The collective ‘we’, therefore, was susceptible to conflict, contestations, and tussles. Being ‘saheli’ meant claiming space and laying down stakes in the movement so committedly that minor differences could not threaten it. It thus entailed taking pains to acknowledge dissent and work through it. Minutes of meetings, daily diaries of Saheli, oral narratives of members of FAOW and Saheli reveal the political ‘work’ that went into building these spaces to be ones that respected dissent and laboured to keep the spaces running despite it all (Saheli, 1984; 2002). Manjima Bhattacharjya (2021) charts the histories of dissent in the autonomous women’s movement through the conference proceedings and resolutions of autonomous women’s movement conferences. It is imperative to remember the history of the movement as also a history of conflicts and dissent. This helps us to historicise and understand the current fractures in the movement better. These disagreements are neither new nor without precedent—they derive from a longer history of negotiating differences in the movement where the ‘we’ was neither homogenous nor devoid of identity struggles or political dissent (Phadke and Kanagasabai b, 2023). This contentious ‘we’ was built through a liberal notion of personal friendships which were deployed to manage contestations within the movement.

The idea of universal sisterhood unmarked by caste; class identities was therefore completely blindsided by the neoliberal onslaught that could be felt in every aspect of Indian lives. The restructuring of the economy at the behest of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the rise of right-wing forces intensified the fissures of class, community and caste. As discussed in the previous chapters, while the middle-class lives benefitted from liberalisation, the assault on working class lives and livelihoods fractured the notion of common oppression that the idea of sisterhood promoted. The opening of markets facilitated the entry of foreign funds in the development sector and widespread NGOisation furthered changed the way of doing feminist politics. Only a few autonomous collectives like Saheli

and FAOW resisted and maintained a strong critique of the rapid NGOisation which created a new dynamic within the movement. Urban middle class women became NGO bosses, while working class areas became their ‘field’, and working-class women their grassroots employees. Furthermore, the gap between Women's Studies and the women's movement widened. Despite new knowledge being produced in Women's Studies departments that had great significance for the movement, there was a disconnect and a feeling that there was an epistemological imbalance in this scholarship where some women became “data” for others. (Kumar, 1993). As feminist activism became more deradicalised, and disconnected from working class women, the urban working-class population became the “raison de`tre of NGOs and electoral parties” (Padhi, 2007). It is therefore no surprise that the rise of right-wing Hindutva forces also found its ground in the rural and urban marginalised populace, further intensifying fissures of religion and caste. The differences came to be so profound that a liberal notion of personal friendship could no longer manage and hold the collective ‘we’ together. The contradictions around the idea of women’s emancipation intensified as the movement struggled to uphold a concrete vision of feminist liberation, while the business of constant firefighting to manage differences also meant that the task of feminist worldbuilding had to take a backseat.

The open homes discussed in chapters 3 and 4 that were once the site of a new politics of friendship and solidarity forged through women’s struggle, soon came to be replaced by service providing models of shelters. While the autonomous women’s conferences that housed dissent and passionate debates staggered, funded academic seminars flourished that performed solidarity superficially, reconfiguring the collective ‘we’. The communal pogroms further widened the fissures, and internal dialogues within the movement reached an impasse. A FAOW activist recalled how a Muslim comrade had completely shut herself up after the 1992-93 Bombay riots saying she did not feel her non-Muslim friends in the movement will

ever be able to understand what she went through. The activist also remembered a meeting with Dalit women after the Gujarat carnage which collapsed in disarray. In retrospect the activist felt it was wrong on their part to try to establish their first contact at a time like that. The sustaining of the collective 'we' was therefore done through using personal relationships to shove things under the carpet or just manage differences by reaching a compromise through friendship. But her question lingers, "do we just accept whatever compromises we have all done in our personal lives and don't question them... and still be friends?" (Personal Interview, 2019).

The release of *Fire* as towards the end of the 1990s and the backlash from Hindutva groups that followed the first screenings in Delhi and Bombay as discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of the fissures it created within the movement further put the collective 'we' to a test in a way that the gap could no longer be closed through friendships. When some women stood up to the right-wing brigade holding placards asserting 'Indian and lesbian', many in the autonomous women's movement refused to own them as part of the movement. Maya Sharma, a queer feminist activist who had worked in the Dakshinapuri slums in Delhi writes in her book *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (2006):

On December 7 we were breaking the social contract. Some of us were taking great personal risk in holding up those posters in the middle of a sea of candles, in the face of flashing cameras. Interestingly, some of the individuals and groups who had joined in to protest the attack on 'freedom of speech and expression' and 'democratic rights' were upset and vitriolic about the same freedoms being extended to a minority in a peaceful and democratic public protest. We were severely criticised before and after: why did we have to be visible, how did we dare to use the word 'lesbian', why were we insisting *Fire* had anything to do with lesbianism when the filmmaker herself was denying it, why were we breaking The Silence? Why were we talking about People

Like Us (emphasis author's), who should never be seen, even by candlelight? (Sharma 2006, p.15).

Maya Sharma (2006) goes on to write how as the preparatory meetings for the International Working Women's Day in 2000 began that year and CALERI called for inclusion of lesbian rights in the pamphlet, it was met with much resistance from a mass based left women's group who argued that the pamphlets would be distributed in working class neighbourhoods who were not 'ready' for this conversation.

The sexuality rights movement further sparked the debate on caste and gender as Dalit feminists questioned the obfuscation of the links between caste and profession in the sex work debate. A Dalit feminist activist in Bombay remarked:

There is a debate on sex work... because it is a caste-based oppression... all of it is dependent on your ideals... in Dalit movement calling prostitution as work, we don't see it as friendship... it is a business... and who are the women who have to sell their bodies... then what friendship? (Personal Interview, 2019)

The movement got further fragmented. The Seventh National Conference on Women's Movement in India, held in Calcutta in 2006 was marked by furore over the participation of trans people particularly transwomen. This debate brought focus on a larger question—who was a woman? Who was the subject of the movement? Was it merely a biological entity? Or is it a political identity? (Saheli, 2006). Yet, does identity itself presume a shared political vision? As a queer activist associated with FAOW and LABIA questions, “The fact that we are all queer and we are here but many of our ideologies are different, our trajectories are different... so there's got to be space for that...” (Personal Interview, 2019).

The neoliberal ideology reduced the notion of collective struggle to individual identity politics. The derailing of the movement from the collective dream of liberation, from the ‘collective we’ to the individual ‘I’ and the essentialisation of the ‘I’ through an ever narrowing and exclusionary notion of a identity depoliticised feminist politics. Two ideological perspectives challenged the movement offering irreconcilable visions of emancipation—the first, of neoliberal market feminism and the other, of Hindutva idea of empowerment. While the market feminism infiltrated the movement much more profoundly because of its secular credentials and its rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘agency’, it, despite being incompatible with the Hindutva ideation of women's empowerment, the divisive politics that the Hindutva ideation posited gelled well with the needs of imperialist capitalism (Raman, 2004). This unlikely coupling of neoliberal ideology with Hindutva patriarchy was vehemently contested by the uncompromising struggles for autonomy within the movement. Despite being pushed to the wall, autonomous groups kept asking the crucial question-- what entails the freedom for the ninety nine percent, of the collective ‘we’ (Raman, 2004). This resistance however was reduced to small pockets where personal spaces of feminist friendships became sites of these difficult questions that could neither direct nor influence the larger movement.

Interrogating ‘Intersectionality’: Remaking the collective ‘we’

As the collective ‘we’ so built fragmented, the marginalized voices that had so far been subsumed under sisterhood, began to assert themselves. The movement fumbled to find new language of belonging, grappling for newer modes of relationalities. Towards the 21st century, the collective ‘we’ finds a new quick fix through the concept of ‘intersectionality’, that Kimberle Crenshaw described as a crossroad (Crenshaw, 2001). The institutionalization of the movement through NGOisation, engagement with the state committees, and through

academic feminism (Katju, 2022; Marik, 2004; Chakravarti, 2005), enabled the term to swiftly enter our discourses in classrooms, conferences, gender sensitisation workshops, and the streets. Nivedita Menon (2015) tracks the journey of this word into the women's movement through global funding, particularly through the UN networks questioning the politics of funding and the 'imperialism of categories' that then begins to constitute and reconstitute the 'we' in feminist politics in India. Historicizing feminist politics as being shaped through struggles on the ground, she interrogates the claims of intersectionality of problematising 'single-axis framework' (Menon, 2015). She questions if intersectionality is an adequate framework for addressing internal heterogeneity in the global south. Taking cue from the ground struggles on Uniform Civil Code⁹⁴, she points out that the category of 'woman' had already been destabilised in the Indian context. The contestations within the women's movement regarding religious patriarchy and the cooption of this rhetoric by Hindutva politics looking to further marginalise minority religious communities, had already challenged any homogenisation of the category of 'woman'. It is much later, she argues that intersectionality becomes codified through governmentality, developmental projects wherein 'gender' is presumed to be an existing category and intersections often collapse into identity, thereby looking at feminist solidarities and disjunctions in solidarities as 'conjunctural, fluid and radically negotiable' (Menon, 2015).

Menon's concern with 'intersectionality' suddenly emerging as a fix all for the challenges being faced by the women's movement in its construction of the 'collective we' needs to be read with other concerns that were emerging from the women's movement itself regarding how autonomy was being compromised in favour of institutionalization of the movement

⁹⁴ The demand for a Uniform Civil Code had emerged from the Women's Movement as a call for gender just laws and in reaction against patriarchal personal laws. However, over the last three decades, the agenda has been coopted by the right-wing Hindutva groups who are clamouring for establishing the Hindu code bill as the UCC so as to further marginalize the minorities in the country.

(Chakravarti, 2005; Marik, 2004). Mary John (2015) contested Menon's complete disavowal of the category, calling instead for a critical engagement with the concept. Menon's concerns are further echoed by Social Reproduction Theorists (Bhattacharya, 2017), who have critiqued the framework of 'intersectionality' and found Kimberle's description of the term to be inadequate. They have argued that intersectionality, gets translated on the ground as a conglomeration of struggles of identities that are merely additive categories. Taking the social reproduction theory as a process of life-making, David McNally (2017) engages with Patricia Hill Collins' idea that 'interlocking systems of oppression' (Hill Collins, 1990) are historically developed. He further echoes Angela Davis's (1983) contestation that despite being 'differentiated relations, they constitute an integral system', to propose identity categories or rather, socio-political locations need are co-constitutive categories. These categories therefore need to be understood as historically developing systems that are dialectically constructed such that in overturning one, the other must be transformed. This critique of intersectionality enables a more nuanced understanding of the fissures and identitarian trends within the movement and its attempts to deal with neoliberal identity politics with a personalised liberal notion of friendship. The conceptual understanding of identities as being co-constitutive instead of additive further provides a push towards thinking of a revolutionary idea of friendship based on the idea that liberation of one is intrinsically linked to the other's liberation. The recognition and becoming intimates with the other would then not just be about accommodating the other, but about a more robust politics of social transformation.

The women's movement in India and Indian feminist scholarship (Geetha, 2018; Gopal, 2012; Chakravarti, 1993), however, have on its own demonstrated how Indian women's struggles against imperialism have necessitated them to recognise these contestations of identities and strive for a reconfiguration of the 'we'. Since the category 'woman' is

constituted mostly through communitarian identity, the battle for autonomy has also meant confronting the co-constitutive axes of oppression that mark and thereby make the 'we'. While the space of the women's movement laboured to contain these contesting lived experiences and build a politics of friendship through their interactions on ground, identity battles in neoliberal times have also manifested in becoming "reduced to self-referential, individualist ideas of the political (or feminist subject)" (Mohanty, 2003, p.77). It is in this context, when contestations of identities obfuscate inter-subjective practices and instead becomes couched on individualist authenticity of experiences, that the collective 'we' instead of being about the dialects of 'us' versus 'them' and the relationship between 'you and I' merely become fierce contestation of 'you' versus 'I' chipping away from our struggles.

Reimagining Friendships and Solidarities: Reconfiguring the 'we'

Scholarship on solidarity (Gilbert 2018; Littler & Rottenberg 2020) traces the emergence of the idea in 19th century socialist politics that spoke of relations of mutuality and interdependence as constituting the foundations of any collective 'we'. Deriving from the word '*solidaire*', the idea of solidarity emerged from the idea of commons, of goods, property, debts or risks being held in common. Solidarity thus has historically carried a shared sense of possibilities and of 'collective becoming'. While this 'we' so imagined through socialist ideation of solidarity has been ungendered, the fragile and difficult 'we' built through feminist politics of care can not only gender it but also draw from it to build a more radical understanding of 'we'. It is premised on a becoming of 'we' of all those isolated individual women who had been feeling unease in dominant norms and power structures, and desired to transform them. In this context, the collective 'we' so forged through solidarity is a

‘we’ that is not fixed, not a precondition born out of embodied experience, but one that is born out of ‘doing’, evolving constantly through struggle.

Analysing the deradicalisation of politics through neoliberal ideology intensified by today’s communicative capitalism, Jodi Dean argues how the politics of allyship works to make identities the very “site of struggle rather than grounds of struggle” (Dean, 2019, p. 21).

Analysing recent guidelines on how or how not be an ally, she asserts, “allyship is a matter of the self, of what the self acknowledges, of the individual who stands alone, and of this single individual taking on a struggle that properly belongs to another” (Dean, 2019, p. 23). As opposed to the Marxist idea of comradeship where the onus of politicization lies with the collective, where on ground struggles become spaces for politicization, instilling in all an ownership of the movement, allyship appears as “disposition, a confrontation not with state or capital power but with one’s own discomfort” (Dean, 2019, p. 23) wherein the “would-be ally can be scolded and shamed, even as the scolder is relieved of any responsibility to provide concrete guidance and training” (Dean, 2019, p. 24). Moreover, since allies “join under self-interested terms, they can withdraw, drop out, let us down” (Dean, 2019, p. 25) as their commitment mostly “hinges on their individual feelings and comfort” (Dean, 2019, p. 25). Furthermore, this politics of allyships requires identities to be clear, fixed, unchanging categories, where those sharing an identity are also presumed to share their politics. What gets obfuscated in the process is the movement’s stake to build the politics of engagement that is forged through struggles, and friendships and comradeships. The onus of engagement and commitment falls entirely on the individual ally as does the opprobrium of failing to support the movement or even for overstepping the limits of allyship and presuming a centrality of position. This idea becomes particularly interesting to understand the neoliberal onslaught in feminist politics where words ‘allyship’ and ‘intersectionality’ have begun gaining traction especially in social media feminism taking away the political work the

women's movement would earlier put in understanding and working through differences, and in retaining friendships without falling into the binary of easy solidarities and instant cancellations.

Recent debates triggered by the #metoo movement through the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoShA), a crowdsourced list compiled by Raya Sarkar that was published on Facebook in 2017, opened up debates on the necessity and limitations on due processes but that soon turned into ugly with some feminists stating that the process of naming and shaming initiated by the List would undo decades of feminist work of putting due processes in place, while the defenders of the List called the aforesaid feminists who issued the statement 'savarna feminists' who were refusing to listen to experiences of women whom the due process had failed (Kappal, 2017; Menon, 2017). This debate carried on social media not only exposed the glaring fissures in the contesting identities in the movement, but have also intensified inter-generational contradictions in the understanding 'solidarity'. While the movement raised critical questions on the limitations of due process and exposed the systemic power practices that enable sexual harassment and destabilize workplace democracy, the debate on calling out on social media provoked an intense scrutiny of another issue: -- who can speak for whom? who has the legitimate right to represent the movement and how much, who is at the heart of the movement and who is an ally? The call out culture while giving voice to women who have been silenced, who have been failed by the law, also ushered in a cancel culture—describe what it is and how it also leads to silencing and suppression of all dissenting voices. In this new ecosystem of the movement--easy allyships are forged virtually through a sharing of identities understood in a very limited and limiting ways, and experiences, instead of a shared politics. These alliances founded on the commonality of 'being' rather than 'doing' or collective 'becoming' often fail to build spaces for dialogue, for conversations, for a reflexive 'we'.

Problematising the naturalness of the ‘we’ formed through the sharing of identity, Dean (1996) questions the way solidarity and reflection is often posed as opposing categories. She calls instead for a ‘reflective solidarity’ that is premised neither on obfuscation of difference nor on the illusion of a presumed unity, but rather on recognition, affirmation and inclusion. Drawing examples from recent feminist struggles in America, she conceptualises solidarity as ways and signs of inclusion and affirmation, as a “way of reassuring another that we will stand with them, that we will not leave them abandoned and alone” (Dean, 1996, p. 15), developed through active struggle that operates within a dialectics of universality and particularity of contradictions. It is in this context, that the collective ‘we’ can be reconfigured into a communicative ‘we’, wherein, we can be understood and interrogated communicatively, such that difference is respected as necessary to solidarity. Dean’s idea of a universal communicative ‘we’ resonates Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s analysis of third world feminist solidarities that is born not on the basis of what Spivak called ‘strategic essentialism’ (Grosz, 1985) or being a ‘natural/ psychological commonality’, but rather as “something that has to be worked for, struggled toward - in history” (Mohanty 2003, p. 116). This is an imagination of a solidarity that is woven through “common ways of reading the world”, one that is not performative, but rather “grounded in history and social location rather than in an ahistorical notion of culture or experience” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 145).

Despite coming from a different feminist praxis, J. Devika (2018) resonates Mohanty's idea of building collectivities based on common ways of reading the world while reflecting on feminist politics or what she terms ‘political feminism’ in today’s Kerala. Drawing from the idea of maithri that V Geetha had also reflected on (discussed in depth in Chapter 1), J. Devika talks about building spaces of feminist friendships or what she identifies as *‘feminist maitre’* - spaces that would be conducive to politics of transformation. Arguing for Ambedkar’s notion of maitria (as discussed in Chapter 1) - friendship that can be extended

even to strangers, one that separates from faceless state power and embeds within it ideals of equality, justice. 'Feminist maitri' is, therefore, not only a political relation, but also an ethical one. She explains,

The spaces of feminist maitri call for a strong recognition of identities as political and even antagonistic, but never permanent and fixed; they are mutually shaped through constant engagement. The political engagement that such spaces allow is therefore rooted in discernment and awareness, rather than in the desire to protect central identities. If the spaces of liberal alliance-building require the temporary suspension of mutual differences and tactful exchanges which however leaves the different players as separated as they were, spaces animated by feminist maitri allows for strong exchanges but without either indifference or hostility, passive or active (Devika, 2018).

Devika's argument for 'feminist maitri' also builds on Sharmila Rege's understanding of Dalit feminist standpoint emerging out of struggles and practices of resistance, that carries with it the potential for transformation of subjectivities. As Rege notes, "adopting a Dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s" so as to embark on a journey of "transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects" (Rege, 1998, p. 45). It is this journey of constant engagement, of liberatory interrogations, of reflexive communication that makes feminist friendships a political project, an ethical commitment.

Towards an Ethics of Feminist Friendships in Neoliberal Times

While reminiscing about the many splits and mergers of the women's movement, an activist from Delhi shared how when some of them had broken away from Manushi in the 1980s as discussed in Chapter 3, they had consciously decided not to talk about the differences in public as they felt it would be disruptive of their feminist work and weaken the movement. The activist described it as, was a conscious political decision, but wondered if a similar decision and its implementations would be possible today. She referred to a letter that was written by feminists to a veteran feminist comrade criticising her statements on trans people. The letter was made public leading to strong debates. The Delhi activist, however reflected, that despite the distress it generated the letter was written by insiders and as comrades. Many did not sign the letter because they had strong personal bonds with the senior feminist and did not wish to call her out in public. What she stressed on was the said even though some of the close friends of the said activist chose not to sign the statement, they did not shirk away from the responsibility to talk to their comrade and advise her to apologise and revise her stance. “They played the role of friends... the letter is written from a point of empathy, it is written to a comrade, but it's also public...”, she noted (Personal interview, 2022).

So how does one imagine solidarity in today's neoliberal times? A member of Saheli reflected, “for people to forge these solidarities across caste lines, class lines one has to also begin from a place of positive faith... for any emotional labour to be put into any kind of movement building, solidarity building, definitely you have to prove yourself you are not bigoted, but sometimes you put people so much in the defensive that the emotional labour

goes all into working through that than being able to be there... it has been a complicated relationship for me...” (FGD, 2022). While another sahebi interjected, “There will be calling out and it is a problem because you feel where is the sisterhood, where is the faith and where does it go? But I think it is a question to be answered both ways... it is not just for the people calling out to answer... And this was there in times of communalism, there were these conversations... these are learning instances, you can't say we can't walk this difficult path... when people take to public spaces, there are a lot of dynamics, feelings of powerlessness at work... the labour of understanding...” (FGD, 2022).

The labour of understanding what the other is saying, where the other is coming from also demands a becoming of intimates, of creating space for vulnerability. A member of FAOW shared, “you have to become intimates... you have to give time, share a meal together... you have to know what her fears are, she has to know what my fears are, you have to be able to vulnerable around each other... those are recognized as feminist friendships where you can be vulnerable around each other... not afraid of being judged... and it happens almost in an invisible, unthought through kind of way... of course it's a good thing... but for that to happen the language the feminist vocabulary has to there...” (Personal Interview, 2019). While liberal understandings of friendship merely acknowledge this radical vulnerability as a way of accommodating differences, of making space for difference, a radical notion of friendship demands it to be political work. Revolutionary idea of friendship is then also about building an ethical relationship. One is reminded of a poignant moment of friendship put to an ethical test in Uma Chakravarti’s film *Darbar-e-Watan* [In the court of the people] (2019), that portrayed an image of Kashmir reeling under the lockdown enforced by the Indian state after the repeal of article 370 and its impact on women’s lives and friendships. In the film, Sahba Husain, an Indian feminist activist in Kashmir speaks of her friendship with Anjum Zamarood Habib, an activist from Kashmir, who was arrested and jailed by the Indian state

for being a part of the Kashmiri resistance against occupation. She confesses how the news of Anjum being dragged away by the Indian police impacted her and how her fear for herself for being associated with Anjum prevented her from visiting her in Tihar jail. She shares how when they met five years later after Anjum's release, the latter had asked, "*Kya dosti aisi nibhayi jaati hain?*" [Is this how friendships are to be lived?] (Darbar-e-Watan 2019).

What Anjum's question '*kya dosti aisi nibhayi jaati hain*⁹⁵' points towards is the ethics of friendship that feminist politics builds. Being a *saheli* or feminist comrade hinges not just on a political commitment but also an ethical one that creates space for holding each other accountable to certain principles. It is a space that while building an ownership of the 'we' also promises a politics of engagement, of not just questioning or dissenting, but also taking the trouble to fix, build and collectively grow. It is not a politics that is presumed to be based on a shared identity, but a politics that is built communicatively, through common struggles and shared lives. Furthermore, in a context where women's friendships are expected to occupy a secondary place to her heterosexual relationships, where emotions are circumscribed by romantic partnerships (Rich, 2003), Anjum's question unabashedly lays down the claims of friendship, and thereby the ethics and duties that the claim demands. This claim does not emanate from strategically formed alliances, but from a collective building of spaces and a shared vision of politics - spaces that are not just sites of reformist politics but rather spaces of trust and beliefs that can lead to the building of new worlds. An activist from Delhi reflected, "During the Sri Lankan war what was it that feminists brought was the politics of friendship... from what we heard from our friends, they said to enable women to be

⁹⁵ Anjum's usage of the word '*nibhana*' in the context of friendship, while talking about claims of friendship and calling for ethical responsibilities and duties of friendship is further significant as it is a term that is mostly used in the context of marriage, calling for the primacy of marriage over female friendships. While for men '*dosti nibhana*' is often glorified, women are encouraged to '*nibhao*' marriages often at the cost of friendships, comradeships and other relationships.

politically active they would look after each other's families, children... and that care comes from a shared history..." (Personal Interview, 2019). This ethics of friendship is also built on the foundations of a vision, a project of worldbuilding.

In her vision of new proletarian morality, Alexandra Kollontai spoke of love-solidarity and comradeships being the corner stone – remaking positions from which one could ‘see’ differently (Kollontai, 1923). Rooted firmly in liberatory collective struggle, comradeship in this context, rebuilds a new morality anchored on collective responsibility, accountability and commitment towards social change. The feminist friendships that fuelled the autonomous women's movement contained within it the potential for building a new feminist ethics anchored on liberatory struggle. However, the spontaneity that the structurelessness of the movement contained while making space for personal friendships failed to build a common liberatory vision that could resist neoliberal and state cooption. Where the politicisation of the personal failed, the personalisation of the political flourished weakening the movement by fragmenting it to individual struggles. The neoliberal ideology projected the utopian imagination of reconfiguring kinship structures, current organising of labour and the public/private that revolutionary feminism had sowed to be an impossibility. As the vision of feminist worldbuilding surrendered to the neoliberal forces, the autonomous women's movement too, fumbled, losing its touch with the working-class women, and surviving only in small urban middle class collectives. Yet, while the autonomous women's movement of the 1980s and 1990s became more and more fragmented, the cultures of feminist friendship made its mark into other social movements. Its resonance could be felt in the 2015 Pinjra Tod (Break the cages) movement in Delhi University hostels⁹⁶ who claimed the legacy of the

⁹⁶ Pinjra Tod movement was a campus based feminist student movement against patriarchal norms that dictated hostel curfews, moral policing and rents across Delhi University campuses. While being a campus-based movement Pinjra Tod also took a central role in building resistance against saffronisation of education. Some of the activists from the movement played a key role in organising during the anti-CAA protests in 2019.

autonomous women's movement. It could be felt again in the Anti-CAA movement in India in 2019⁹⁷ or the anti-Farm Bill protests in India in 2020⁹⁸ that had scores of women taking to the streets building spaces of care, solidarity, friendships. These movements while not articulating feminism as its primary politics carried within the potential for exploring political solidarity between women in the way that as bell hooks (1986) suggests, carries with it the responsibility to transform commonality of oppression to commonality of struggles. These new movements in creating the space for these difficult conversations, for commonality of struggles has opened up possibilities for newer ways of thinking and practising feminist friendships.

At a time when our democratic spaces keep shrinking, when hard won feminist battles are being undone, when an unrelenting state is erasing difference while a neoliberal polity is creating an illusion of diversity through identitarian politics which undermines solidarities and collectivities, when capital is appropriating care networks, this ethics of 'dosti nibhana' built from the revolutionary notion of friendship can perhaps initiate a new vision of feminist worldbuilding.

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⁹⁷ The anti-CAA protests in India against discriminatory citizenship laws while led by Muslim women saw different kinds of solidarity being forged between students, workers, queer trans people such that the protest sites became sites of vibrant care, friendship, comradeship, dialogue.

⁹⁸ While led by farmers against the neoliberal aggression of the 3 Farm Laws that were being passed in India, the protest sites soon became spaces for dialogue, and solidarity forged between people who would have perhaps otherwise not come together. These solidarities soon transformed the struggle into a strong anti-fascist resistance that had compelled the government to take back the laws.

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