

Synopsis

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. Friendship has historically been an entry point in western philosophy to 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. Women, being outliers to the idea of the '*polis*', have also been outliers to the androcentric ideas of political systems that this theorisation inspired. The women's movement through its politicisation of women's friendship has not only exposed the politics of this androcentrism, but also by writing an alternate historiography of women's friendships have gendered this theorisation and located it in specific regional contexts in order to see how politicisation of women's friendship 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. 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.

Research Question

The chief objective of this thesis is to construct a history of the autonomous women's movement through histories of friendship. So far, 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 been archived through memoirs, leaflets, posters, photographs, memories and oral narratives. 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.

Writing an alternative history also allows us to question and move away from the campaign-based framework of historicising the movement and bring to light other stories of contestations, of making and unmaking of a fragile collective 'we', of uneasy negotiations with power, institutionalisation and growing identitarianism that have been important markers in the journey of the movement and in shaping its politics. 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 contestations 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.

By revisiting the history of the autonomous women's movement in India through the journey of two autonomous women's collectives from 1980 to the contemporary times, this thesis intends 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.

Theoretical Framework

Reconstructing feminist herstories through 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. This thesis is both informed by and it builds on the groundwork laid so far by Marxist feminist explorations of

friendship, social reproduction and ideas of democracy, citizenship, worldbuilding. Any deliberation on feminist friendship not only begins from a location of critiquing family and marriage, but also through questioning the current organisation of labour and sexual, cultural norms. It is also through these engagements that feminist friendships get constructed as a vehicle of all that is considered to be unruly, dangerous emotions that can then build resistance against the current organisation of the world where emotion is privatised, individualised. This politicisation of feminist friendships in resistance to personalisation, privatisation and individualisation of emotions also places friendship from the personal to the political, from the home to the realm of the civic.

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 and yet stay away from personalising the political. It also opens up feminist herstories of care, of radical vulnerability, of intimacies that not only offers us the lens to question norms, to rage against the current organising of labour, but also allows us to peep into the dissonances, the fissures that also 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 played an important role in shaping, defining, moulding the movement.

One of the tasks of feminist historiography has been to not just 'add and stir women' into the larger historical narrative, but to also question the narrative itself, to question the process of historicisation itself. Historians like Joan Kelly, Uma Chakravarti, have questioned the very framework of determining 'transitional moments' in history. The 'retelling' of history that feminist historiography initiates then also involves dealing with the messiness of history, interrupting the master narrative by asking the unasked questions, and thereby bringing to the

fore the complexity of history writing by interrogating with both production relations as well as relations of social reproduction. 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.

Methodology and 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, its practice, its 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, discussed. While the existing many histories of the movement has focused more on the question of autonomy, on the campaigns initiated, 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 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.

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 very much present 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 every ups and downs of the movement, every curve taken by the movement, and still remain as critical actors of the movement bearing within them the characteristics and legacies of the movement.

Since much of this history remains undocumented, residing 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 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.

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 emotion away, songs and photographs brought in the passion thereby offering cues on how to read those histories. The daily diaries of Saheli, personal emails, songs 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.

It is through piecing together of this sources that this alternate historiography gets constructed opening up a new way of understanding the movement with all its contestations, personal and political contradictions, and liberal and radical tendencies that gave the movement its particular character.

Organisation of the Thesis

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 Aristotelian idea of friendship as explored in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004) and its connection to social justice and democracy has been so defining in terms of western theorisations of friendship. 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 chapter uses testimonies, stories, anecdotes, women's lived experiences 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. 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. It is this adhoc 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 the idea of joyful militancy, and the politics of care it builds and how it impacts the project of feminist worldbuilding.

Chapter 4: Reimagining Care Through Politics of Friendship in the Autonomous Women's Movement

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 argues the possibilities that a radical politics of friendship holds in building resistance to neoliberal defining and organizing of labour. Examining with the practices emerging from the autonomous women's movement, 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. It also engages 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 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 Feminist Friendships

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 neoliberalism and growing identitarianism within the movement. It 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. Finally, this chapter 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.