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‘Difference’ in Practice: Caste, Gender, and Sexuality in the Autonomous Women’s Movement in India

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Abstract

A common narrative about Indian feminism is that it has moved, over the years, from overlooking or eliding differences between women to recognising and celebrating them. This narrative equates seeing difference with successfully incorporating it within movement practice, and ignores how feminists, while acknowledging women's differing identities and backgrounds, have struggled both to include people from various marginalised social locations within movement organisations and to understand and act on their issues. In this paper, I use primary and secondary data on India's autonomous women's movement (AWM) to examine the variations in how it has engaged with the issues of sexuality, gender, and caste. I ask which issues and identities have been more successfully incorporated into movement organisations and onto movement agendas, and why. I argue that the variations in incorporating issues of caste, sexuality, and gender emerge from the convergence of two factors: the nature of autonomous women's organising, and the social backgrounds of AWM activists. These factors, together, have shaped whether and how specific differences become part of movement practice.

Keywords: feminism, difference, caste, gender, sexuality, autonomy

Introduction

How has Indian feminism engaged with difference? Literature on this subject posits a somewhat simple narrative: that Indian feminism had a universalised, undifferentiated idea of womanhood, which has been displaced by various political and social events that have forced feminists to see difference. Contemporary feminism and women's activism thus recognises and celebrates difference.

In this paper, I challenge this narrative of the trajectory of difference within Indian feminism by examining the engagement of the autonomous women's movement (AWM) with three important axes of difference: caste, gender (specifically, gender identity), and sexuality (specifically, sexual orientation). Caste, gender, and sexuality have been received in very divergent ways by the AWM. My examination of these axes is along three lines: how activists have analysed axes of difference, the issues they have raised, and how these axes of difference have impacted movement organising. These parameters have emerged from my research on the AWM: I find that critics assess the impact of difference on movement practice along these parameters, rather than on generalisations of whether difference has been 'visible/invisible' or 'seen/unseen.' Based on this examination of these axes of difference, I argue that while feminist *analysis* acknowledges difference, the incorporation of difference into the everyday practice of AWM activism is uneven and limited. I further argue that this uneven reception is because the incorporation of difference has been shaped by two aspects of the AWM: the social backgrounds of its activists, and the nature of autonomous women's organising. The combination of social background and movement organisation structure has made certain differences easier to incorporate into movement practice than others. These findings point to the impact that movement organisation forms can have on the nature of activism.

India's autonomous women's movement emerged in the 1970s and continues into the present (Arya, 2020). The movement has played a significant role in bringing women's issues onto wider political agendas, often collaborating with other organisations and movements on various campaigns such as those on rape, dowry, sati, and other forms of violence (Kumar, 1993; Arya, 2020). Though also including non-affiliated activists, the movement has largely organised through autonomous collectives: voluntary, non-hierarchical, non-funded groups. 'Autonomy' refers to the organising principle according to which collectives have maintained

a distance from governments, funders, and men, as entities that can dictate their agendas, priorities, and ways of working. Autonomy is seen as protecting organisations' agendas, and allowing women to take up leadership roles and develop their capabilities as activists (the latter not always being possible in mixed groups) (Gandhi & Shah, 1992). AWM activists have largely been non-dalit, middle-class, urban, educated women. Though other forms of women's organising and activism have lately been more amenable to identifying themselves as feminists (see for example Chakravartty & Chotani, 2015), it is the AWM which has historically been seen as the feminist strand of Indian women's activism.

The day-to-day activities of the AWM have included activities that are commonly associated with movements: founding and running collectives; organising and participating in protests, marches and similar public events; mobilising participants for its activities; petitioning state authorities; working with individual persons in need; raising funds for its activities, publishing and distributing newsletters, pamphlets, and other documents; liaising and collaborating with other movements, NGOs, organising conventions and conferences, and so on. Intellectual activity has been an equally significant dimension of the AWM, particularly the theorisation of issues pertaining to women and gender. Reflection on and analysis of issues has been a strong part of the movement's history, and activists often stress how their understandings of issues have changed in the course of the movement. Collectives also have a history of conducting and publishing research.

I base this paper on both primary and secondary data on the AWM. Primary data is in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted as part of my doctoral research on the AWM, conducted from 2015 to 2017. My doctoral research included participant observation in Mumbai, Delhi, and Hyderabad, and interviews and group discussions with movement activists, collectives, and feminist scholars. Respondents were selected through both snowball sampling and key informant interviewing. Names of some respondents have been changed

upon request. I also accessed interviews archived with the Indian Association of Women's Studies, at SNDT University, Mumbai, and the Sound and Picture Archives of Research on Women, Mumbai. Additionally, I draw on movement documents including reports, souvenirs, pamphlets, posters, etc. I also draw on the literature on Indian feminism and women's activism, in particular on the AWM. I engage specifically with English-language scholarship on the AWM. This paper does not engage with debates on difference which have taken place outside of the AWM, including in vernacular languages.

In the next section, I detail the standard narrative of this movement's engagement with difference.

Difference in Indian feminism

The standard narrative about the women's movement in India is that it began with a universalized, undifferentiated idea of Indian womanhood, but that various events pushed it to begin recognizing differences to the point where the idea of womanhood is now disaggregated along the lines of various identities. Caste, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on, are seen as identities which once were not recognized by activists but have now been incorporated into feminist politics.

In this line of argument, Indian feminist activism worked, in the 1970s and 1980s, with an idea of womanhood that was unmarked by other identities. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana argued that feminist activism in this period sought to "establish 'gender' as a category that had been rendered invisible in universalisms of various kinds (1994, p. 94)." In doing so, feminists created their own universal subject: in this case, a universal 'woman' (also see Banerjee, Sen & Dhawan, 2011).

Building the 'universal woman' required eliding the differences between women. Radha Kumar notes that within feminism, 'a certain commonality of women's experience was

stressed, as a point at which political differences could be transcended...' (1989, p. 26). Saheli, an autonomous women's group formed in 1981, also states that "[t]he women's movement began with a monolithic notion of universal sisterhood. … [Saheli's] initial years of work on communalism and Uniform Civil Code (UCC) were also based on this presumption. The movement asserted that women in all religious communities are similarly oppressed" (Saheli, 2006, p. 57). Ratna Kapur notes that "[w]hile the autonomous women's movement recognises religious difference, it does not see it as producing conflict between women. The focus remains on the commonality of women's experiences, especially of sexual exploitation and sexual violence" (Kapur, 2012, pp. 337-338).

In this narrative, the idea of a 'universal woman' was challenged by events of the 1980s and 1990s: the Shah Bano case in 1985; the demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent communal riots; the anti-Mandal agitations against caste-based reservations in educational institutions; debates over sati in 1987; and the increasing visibility of non-normative sexualities and genders, especially after the release of the film *Fire* in 1998. These events are credited with forcing feminists to recognise caste, gender, religious, and sexuality-based differences between women (Agnes, 1994; Chakravarti, 2003; Dave, 2012; Menon, 2009; Phadke, 2003; Sen & Dhawan 2011). Sen and Dhawan note that "[b]y the early 1990s, it was clear that one could no longer speak of 'women' without reference to class, caste and community" (2011, p. 25). According to Nivedita Menon, these events destabilised 'woman' as the subject of feminist politics, by throwing into question both the commonality of female experience and normative ideas of gender identity and sexual orientation (2015, p. 38). In this narrative of the journey of 'difference,' the lack of knowledge and acknowledgement of difference was thus supplanted within feminist consciousness by not just the recognition of, but the eventual foregrounding of difference.

These events, and the differences in women's experiences that they emphasised, are seen as splitting the 'mainstream' feminist movement. Feminist scholar and activist Sadhna Arya notes the active rejection of mainstream feminist politics by women who felt unrepresented within it:

> By the mid-1990s activists working with other marginalised communities and sexualities began questioning the dominant social notions that had created a uniform category of Woman, arguing that it did not represent the lived experiences of many women. (Arya, 2020, p. 14)

What has 'difference' contributed to feminist politics? For Nirmala Banerjee, Samita Sen, and Nandita Dhawan, this has led to better scholarship and been politically productive: "[r]esearch, which has taken into consideration the interplay of multiple categories of inequality, has not only been theoretically productive, but has also directed feminists towards new political alliances" (2011, pp. xxx-xxxi). Speaking of the 1990s, the authors write that "a more sophisticated understanding of the multiple axes of social inequality enriched gender politics by the inclusion of issues of community, class and caste" (2011, xxxiii).

The present AWM is seen as foregrounding and celebrating differences between women, with difference becoming part of how gender is understood by feminists. As Menon says, "feminism requires us to recognise that "women" is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category" (2015, p. 37). Difference has also become part of women's activism: by the Seventh National Conference of Women's Movements in India in 2006, according to scholar Meena Gopal, "diversities as a reflection of the trajectory of the women's movement(s) had been affirmed, emphasized, reiterated, and made an emblem of sorts" (2007). The declaration of the Conference acknowledged differences between women:

> We believe that as women, we share common interests and goals, and hence come together in our collective struggles. But caste, nation, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, ability or disability are deeply rooted social constructs which create multiple identities for many of us. ("Towards a Politics of Justice," 2006)

Current Indian feminist activism is seen as exemplary in its recognition of difference:

> I believe that feminism has broadened, evolved and deepened; it is the only one which engages and reflects when questioned; and has responded to the inherent intersectionality of class, caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and many other axes of oppression, as no other social movement has done so far. (Arya, 2020, p. 20)

Despite the enthusiasm with which difference is now seen in Indian feminism, questions can be raised of its place in feminist practice. Raka Ray (2012) states that gender studies in India has been "deeply and resolutely intersectional" (p. 3) and that feminist theory has been "willing to shift its understanding of its own foundational terms—such as women, gender, and liberation" (p. 2). Yet she notes that, faced with changed circumstances, the women's movement in India "has been able to rise to the occasion *analytically,* if not in practice" (2012, p. 6, emphasis in original). It is this gap, between analysis and practice, that I explore in this paper. While there is no doubt a greater recognition of differences between women, and between ciswomen and other genders, in feminist thinking, the incorporation of difference into movement practice has been difficult. The question before us then is, what has aided or prevented the incorporation of difference into the practice of women's activism?

The next three sections explore the impact of differences of caste, sexuality, and gender on the AWM in terms of theorising, the raising of issues, and organising. I then move on to

understanding how organisational and social factors ease or hinder the incorporation of difference in movement practice.

How has AWM theorising changed?

Since the 2000s, the term 'queer' has had a significant impact on feminist analysis. As a political perspective, 'queer' does not centre on 'alternate sexualities' but questions the assumptions that are built into understandings of all sexuality. Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narrain state that "the queer movement tries to challenge the idea of a 'normal' and 'different' sexuality in itself" (2005, p. 6). 'Queer' then indicates the constructed nature of not just 'alternate sexualities' but all sexual identities and practices. Heterosexuality loses its position of being 'natural' (Menon, 2005) and therefore requiring no other explanation. What might this mean for feminist politics? According to Menon, recognising that sexuality is constructed and controlled in the service of social structures would require us to "accept that all of us are—or have the potential to be—'queer'" (Menon, 2005, p. 39).[1]

This understanding of 'queer' expands what activism around sexuality can entail: not just a focus on issues of certain communities like gays or lesbians, but sexuality as an issue that impacts everyone. Queer politics, then, can speak to us all (Menon, 2022, p. 103).[2] For Menon, this understanding destabilises feminist politics (2007; 2022). Neither gender identity nor sexual orientation can be taken for granted, but must be seen as constructed and cultural. This impacts some of the fundamental aspects of feminist thought: definitions of sex and gender, and also the connections between sexual desire and gender identity.

[1] Although see *Apnon Ka Bahut Lagta Hai*, 2023. This report of a closed-door meeting on familial violence on queer and trans persons defines 'queer' as 'an umbrella term used to refer to diverse sex characteristics, genders and sexualities that are not cisgender and/or heterosexual.' ('Apnon Ka Bahut Lagta Hai,' 2023, p. 192).
[2] Jaya Sharma notes how the women's movement's critique of what is deemed 'natural' for women could be extended to 'challenge naturalness accorded to homosexuality' (Sharma, 2018, p. 218).

Menon notes that the incorporation of what she terms counter-heteronormative politics (2007, p. 3) into the women's movement has been difficult (2022, p. 101-102). On sexual preference, she says, "[i]f not being actively homophobic, our movement's best response tends to be along the lines of 'not now, this is not the time" (2005, p. 34). She notes that "its best response to the question of sexuality has been in the form of 'respecting choice'" (2005, p. 39).

Menon's later work, however, describes a shift in feminists' engagement with sexuality. In an essay published in 2007, Menon notes that "[o]penly homophobic arguments are almost never made (publicly) any more within the women's movement." And while some may "suggest that sexuality is less urgent than bigger issues facing the women's movement" (p. 23), Menon holds that "[n]evertheless today it is clear that challenges to heteronormativity are an unshakeable part of the agenda of feminist politics in India, however internally contested it may be" (p. 24). She notes a resolution passed at the annual conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS) in 2005, which "acknowledged that 'deviations from the normal' enrich the perspective of the women's movement" (p. 24).[3]

More recent accounts of sexuality and feminism indicate a deeper relationship than such grudging acceptance. For example, Niharika Banerjea states that

> Despite its contentious history, challenges to heteronormativity are part of feminist politics today, as evidenced by their support to challenge Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, and feminist scholarship is unanimous in its view that queer and feminist causes must work together to respond to 'compulsory heterosexuality.' (Banerjea, 2015, p. 1066)

[3] See also Biswas, Beethi and Ghosh (2019, p. 104), and Dave (2012, chapter 3). Dave describes how autonomous groups began to question what was termed the 'paradigm of heterosexuality.'

The integration of feminism and sexuality politics is also evidenced through the coming together of the terms 'feminism' and 'queer.' Meena Gopal's term 'queer/feminist'

> indicates a politics that embraces both those within what is popularly known as the LGBTKHQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, kothi, hijra, queer, intersex) or the queer movement who adopt a conscious feminist perspective, as well as those within the women's movement who are consciously feminist and intersectional. (Gopal, 2019, p. 1n1)

This suggests that a queer/feminist subject holds the perspectives offered by the terms queer, feminist, and intersectionality, simultaneously. Gopal also places gender and sexuality at the centre of feminism, saying that "the politics of gender and sexuality form the core of the resistance politics of the women's movement" (Gopal, 2019, p. 2).

Writing on the Kolkata-based organisations Sappho and Sappho for Equality, Ranjita Biswas, Sumita Beethi and Subhagata Ghosh describe the development of a standpoint based on the coming together of feminism, lesbianism, and queer politics. The authors state that "[f]eminism has remained our primary touchstone for political mobilising and queer theory became a collaborator-in-arms." Feminism allowed them to develop a critique of patriarchy and an analysis based on gender, while queer theory allowed them to develop an understanding of heteronormativity (2019, pp. 111-112).

These articulations indicate the affinity and complementarity of 'queer' and 'feminist,' both as movement actors/activists and as perspectives. Menon (2005), Gopal (2019), and Banerjea (2019), taken together, show how feminists' initial hostility towards and distance from non-normative sexuality has shifted, and how feminism and critiques of normative sexuality can be and are aligned. Gopal (2019) and Biswas, Beethi and Ghosh (2019) show that rather than being separate movements, women's and queer movements can intersect and overlap.

A theoretical connection between 'feminist' and 'queer' lies in the relationship between normative sexuality and patriarchy. Normative sexuality, in particular heteronormativity, is seen as part of the reproduction of patriarchy. As Menon says, "…the normalisation of heterosexuality is at the heart of patriarchy. Patriarchy needs the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality to survive" (2005, p. 34). The key institution here is the "patriarchal heterosexual family," the "institution that manages this policing of sexuality" (2022, p. 4). Deepti, a feminist activist based in Delhi, shows how the critique of patriarchy and the critique of compulsory heterosexuality are connected:

> We were very clear that we have feminism first and then LGBT politics. … Feminism was the only other movement that challenged patriarchy as a system that fundamentally decides heterosexual normativity. So for any political understanding of our issues, we needed feminism. (Deepti, as cited in Arya, 2020, p. 202)

Deepti's remarks also show how the challenges to these systems are tied together. As the autonomous group Forum Against Oppression of Women noted in 1999, "[t]he very existence of lesbians is a challenge to patriarchy" (1999, p. 109). Yet these challenges are not left to lesbians, but are for all women to consider and adopt, since all sexuality is socially constructed and controlled.

AWM responses to sexuality have thus moved from incomprehension, to partnerships, accommodation, and integration. A theoretical and conceptual framework that allows issues of sexuality and patriarchy to come together has been developed.

Despite 'queer's' questioning of normative ideas of both sexual orientation and gender identity, some argue that understanding transgender issues has been particularly difficult. For example, Shals Mahajan recounts an instance where a gender-nonconforming woman was assaulted by the passengers of a ladies' compartment of a train. Though ze and others took

this issue to Forum, ze says, all members did not understand it equally well. For many, the ladies' compartment was a safe space, but those who downplayed their feminine features and did not look 'womanly' did not see it as secure and free of violence.[4]

Shals mentions, during hir early years as an activist, not talking of transgender issues because ze (and the members of the collective ze helped form) did not have the term. In the 2000s, ze says, they started meeting more hijras and trans persons. This made a certain language and understanding available to them, including the ability to "formulate the discomforts that [they] had with gender."[5]

Arya notes feminists' lack of critique of the gender binary itself (2020, p. 194). She quotes Chayanika Shah as saying that "[w]hat we've achieved as feminists is to question and broaden 'gender' and to allow multiple ways of being masculine and feminine, but all of us still register people as male or female" (Shah, as cited in Arya, 2020, p. 194).

One attempt to develop a greater understanding of non-binary gender is the Mumbai-based autonomous group Lesbian and Bisexuals in Action's (LABIA's) 2013 study, *Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities*. The study explored the lives of people who were assigned the female gender at birth, but who expressed a 'tension' with binary gender and/or normative sexuality. LABIA stated that the study "aim[ed] to fill the gaps in our understanding, our politics, and our interventions" and would also serve as a resource for women's and queer movements (LABIA, 2013, p. 17).

Compared to sexuality, the available theoretical and conceptual frameworks on caste and women have not been meaningfully incorporated into AWM activism. In his 1917 essay 'Castes in India,' B. R. Ambedkar (1979 (1917)) described caste as an endogamous system,

[4] Shals Mahajan, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[5] Shals Mahajan, interview, Mumbai, 2016

whose units reproduced themselves though the practices of 'girl marriage,' sati, and enforced widowhood. His essay indicates how the control of women's bodies and sexuality is needed to perpetuate the caste system. Uma Chakravarti's term 'brahmanical patriarchy' denotes the same; she adds that such control is also needed to ensure patrilineal descent and inheritance (Chakravarti, 1993). 'Brahmanical patriarchy' thus expresses the connections between caste, class, and gender. Like the term queer's expansive denotation of all sexuality as constructed, brahmanical patriarchy also helps us locate caste amongst all women, rather than marking a specific set of people as impacted by caste and others as exempt. The term focuses on the control over the sexuality of women who have high ritual status within the logic of the caste system.

Despite these available frameworks, the AWM has a history of not understanding caste as a feminist issue. Rege (2018) notes that while the women's movement did take up issues impacting dalit, tribal, and minority communities, "a feminist politics centring around the women of the most marginalised communities could not emerge" (2005, 93). Referring to the campaigns taken up by the AWM, she says that "[t]he absence of an analytic frame, which in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar viewed caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked, is apparent in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the women's movement" (2018).

Some AWM activists note feminists' lack of awareness of caste. Deepti Priya Mehrotra, speaking of her experience as an activist in Delhi in the 1980s, says that "caste was absolutely missing from our consciousness even, it was hardly there." Caste, she says, was subsumed under the issues of poorer women, and did not emerge as an issue in its own right.[6] Achala, a Hyderabad-based activist who was part of the Stree Shakti Sanghathana, notes that feminists were sensitive to issues of poverty, but not to caste. She states that "caste is

[6] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, interview, Delhi, 2015

something you don't see…I would say the feminists haven't struggled enough on understanding caste." [7]

Dalit women too have noted feminists' lack of caste consciousness. The Alisamma Women's Collective in the University of Hyderabad appealed to non-dalit women in its 2002 manifesto to recognise the place of caste in various aspects of society: as caste differences between women and through the casteist nature of patriarchy (Alisamma Women's Collective, 2002).

Another set of questions pertains to who 'has' caste: i.e. who is marked by caste? who possesses a caste identity? who impacted by caste issues? For some, dalit women are "the most obvious group to have experienced caste- and gender-based oppression" (Pan, 2021, p. 6). However, all women in a caste society have a caste identity and location, even if it is not that of 'dalit.' Despite this, non-dalit women's claiming of a caste identity has not always been particularly productive. For example, Uma Chakravarti has noted "[the] distinctive experience [of dalit women] being ignored through absurd formulations such as 'All women are Dalits because all women clean their children!'" (Chakravarti, 2017, p. 345).

Activists occasionally refer to caste being associated with dalits, i.e. articulated as if only dalits have caste identities. Vani, speaking on behalf of the autonomous group Saheli, discusses the group's attempt to talk of caste structures during a session it conducted at the 7th National Conference of Women's Movements in 2006, in Kolkata. Vani noted that they attempted to look at caste as impacting all women: "how caste creates boundaries and moralities around each caste, and how caste then creates hierarchies between women." However, when I asked her if this understanding had been absorbed by the women's movement by and large, she replied that it was something that the movement was working

[7]Achala, interview, Hyderabad, 2015

on, but that caste had become "identified with dalits.' She commented that their session was a step in the right direction but that much more had to be done.[8]

The dalit feminist standpoint provides a lens that challenges the association of caste only with dalits. As formulated by Sharmila Rege (1998, p. WS-45), it responds to the need to understand how "race, class, gender, caste, sexuality - all construct each other." The dalit feminist standpoint emerges from the "practices and struggles of dalit women … [and the] work of dalit feminist intellectuals." However, as a perspective, it allows non-dalit feminists to "'reinvent themselves as dalit feminists'." I.e., it allows non-dalit feminists to adopt the perspectives and insights that dalit feminists have obtained through their struggles against the caste system. For Rege, "a transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed." How far has this transformation been achieved, or a dalit feminist standpoint adopted?

Recent texts on dalit feminism are striking in how they distinguish dalit feminism and 'non-dalit' or 'mainstream' feminism, positing them as distinct from (and sometimes in conflict with) each other, rather than as a single framework. For example, Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore (2020, pp. 1-2) distinguish between Indian feminism, which "caste-privileged feminists have been at the forefront of," and dalit feminist perspectives. They argue that "Indian feminists have a widespread inclination towards taking the feminist thesis as their premise and abandoning women's relation to caste" and that the 'lacuna' in Indian feminism needs to be filled by dalit feminism. Chakravarti (2017) also distinguishes between the mainstream, non-dalit women's movement, and dalit feminists, pointing to non-dalit feminists' lack of understanding of dalit women's issues.

Anandita Pan's (2021) theorisation of the 'dalit feminist standpoint' frames it as "a mode of analysis from a caste-gender angle" (p. 15). Here, "Dalit Feminism emerges as a useful

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

method to analyse how caste and gender simultaneously influence not just dalit women but also upper-caste men and women and dalit men (p. 6).” Pan argues that a dalit feminist standpoint prompts reconsiderations of mainstream feminism’s understandings of concepts like agency, sexuality, sexism, and the public and private. Again, dalit feminism is presented as a critique of mainstream feminism, the latter needing rethinking and revision in light of the former. Taking caste seriously, then, would require revising some fundamental aspects of feminist thought.

More recently, there have been attempts to integrate understandings of caste and patriarchy in autonomous activist spaces. One example of disassociating caste from only dalits emerged through the Delhi-based autonomous group Pinjra Tod (literally, ‘break the cage’). Pinjra Tod campaigned on the issue of women’s hostels in universities. The group argued that by imposing curfews on women hostel residents, hostels function as ‘pinjras’ or cages for women. This ‘caging’ controls women’s mobility and thus their sexuality, thereby furthering class and caste endogamy by preventing them from having relationships outside of their castes. In this understanding, caste shifts from being about ‘dalits’ to being a structuring principle in society in general; the reproduction of patriarchy and caste are simultaneous. Pinjra Tod activist Charu noted that “it’s reflecting the Brahmanical society…it is a particular kind of caste endogamy which you have to maintain.”[9]

A report by the national women’s network Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS), on the rapes of Dalit girls in Haryana, theorised those rapes through the connections between caste, political economy, and gender (Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, 2014). In 2015, the network organised a National Seminar on Caste and Patriarchy, looking to “create a space to explore and discuss questions around re-framing our perspectives on the intersections of caste and patriarchy with structural inequalities so as to

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

take on the challenge of annihilation of caste (Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, 2015)."

Yet the literature on dalit standpoint feminism, quoted above, indicates that these understanding have not yet permeated 'mainstream' feminism.

Caste, gender, and sexuality have therefore had varied theoretical reactions within Indian feminism. Feminists have been more receptive to sexuality and the theoretical reformulations it offers. It has been easier to claim sexuality as 'our' issue. Caste, on the other hand, is more likely to be relegated to 'them' – in this case, to dalits.

What issues have AWM activists raised?

A second impact of 'difference' has been on issues: those the AWM has raised or failed to raise.

Chayanika Shah describes how the Forum Against Oppression of Women first took on an issue faced by lesbian women in 1987, when "two women got married and were thrown out of their jobs" (Mathew, 2017). (Shah refers to the case of Leela and Urmila, two policewomen who were fired when they got married.) Previously, while Forum was aware of lesbian women within the group and even held meetings in the home of two activists known to be a couple, the group didn't recognise the relevance of sexuality issues to their politics (Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1999, p. 109). The case of Leela and Urmila was the first issue of lesbian sexuality on which Forum took a public stand; lesbian rights have since then been on their agenda (Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1999, p. 111). Forum also included provisions for both what were termed 'homo-relational realities' and 'hetero-relational realities' in its vision of a gender-just personal law (Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1999).

A long-standing issue pertaining to sexuality in India has been the eradication of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised sexual activity in forms 'against the order of nature.' Saheli became part of Voices Against 377, a coalition which worked on the eradication of 377. Saheli didn't argue that it was lending its support for an issue that was the concern of gay men and lesbian women. Rather they connected Section 377 to issues feminists had been raising: the patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexuality in India, a control reproduced by the state and its agencies (2004, p. 26). Section 377 was seen as upholding the institutions of the family and marriage, which feminists had a history of critiquing. Saheli also raised the question of consent, arguing that it was not particular sexual acts per se, but non-consensual, forced sex that should be criminalised (2004, p. 29). Thus, Section 377 was framed not as a 'lesbian issue' so to speak, but as one which reflected structures and practices that oppressed all women. For the longstanding feminist activist Jaya Sharma, the groups that were part of Voices Against 377 were "not merely…allies supporting another's cause, but…squarely locat[ed] queer issues as part of their mandate and ideology, thereby claiming the issues as their own" (Sharma, 2018, p. 205). Similarly, Banerjea states that feminist support for the eradication of Section 377 shows that "challenges to heteronormativity are part of feminist politics today" (Banerjea, 2015, p. 1066).

However, for some, movement activists have not in fact engaged with the primary issues facing gender-nonconforming persons. Gee Imaan Semmalar argues that the focus on Section 377 as the prime legal challenge for gender-nonconforming persons is misplaced:

> In reality, the Indian penal code's Section 268, which deals with public nuisance; Section 320, which deals with grievous hurt (used falsely against hijras for voluntarily undergoing sex change); and the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act are used most commonly against hijras. (Semmalar, 2014, p. 289)

Some note that the need to incorporate activism around caste also emerged later in the movement. K Lalitha, an activist based in Hyderabad, states that

> In Stree Shakti Sanghatana our focus was on women's issues and we were involved only in campaigns related to women's concerns. We did not look at questions related to caste or community. In fact, in Anveshi though there were earlier discussions around Karamchedu and Chunduru massacres, only from the beginning of the 1990s with the impact of the Mandal-Mandir churning in the country, a new understanding emerged reconfiguring our perspectives on women's question from caste and community angles. And of course importantly [our] engage[ment] in these political struggles.[10]

Indeed, feminists have been criticised for not raising dalit women's concerns, and not understanding how issues impact women of varied caste locations. For example, Rajni Tilak describes how issues that Dalit women prioritised (like access to water, employment, sanitation etc.) were not raised by the women's movement (Navarro-Tejero, 2005, pp. 102-103). Arya (2020, p. 87) notes that, in 1987, dalit women were not permitted to place the demand for the abolition of manual scavenging on the Women's Day pamphlet being prepared by women's groups. She notes two other occasions when women's groups "failed to make effective interventions" due to their lack of understanding of caste realities (pp. 91-92). One is during the anti-Mandal agitations, and the second was during the campaign to support Bhanwari Devi, a dalit woman who was gangraped during the commission of her duties as a *saathin* in the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan. Jenny Rowena (2017) poses a further critique of the anti-sexual harassment judgement, *Vishaka and Ors vs State of Rajasthan*, which emerged from the feminist response to the incident. She argues that the judgement is geared to elite workspaces and the forms of harassment that take place therein.

[10] K Lalitha, interview, Hyderabad, 2015

It does not engage with the work and experiences of non-elite women and women in the informal sector and therefore offers them no respite from the kinds of violence they face. Arya also notes Dalit women's criticism of mainstream women's groups for their failure to adequately support the campaign around the rape and murder of four members of a dalit family in Khairlanji, Maharashtra, in 2006 (2020, pp. 108-9).

A major point of contention, however, emerged in 2005, when the Maharashtra government banned bar dancing, on grounds of protecting young men's morals. For mainstream feminists, the ban was an instance of moral policing and impacted the dancers' livelihoods, and therefore had to be struck down. However Dalit women's groups saw bar-dancing as part of a history of the sexual exploitation of women of particular communities, welcomed the ban, and demanded that the dancers be rehabilitated (Sonalkar, 2008, pp. 16-18; see also Stephen, 2011). For dalit women, the issue displayed how non-dalit feminists failed to consider the caste dimensions of sexual labour. Meena Gopal describes this incident as creating "fault-lines between feminists and women's rights activists," with feminists "divided [and] unable to reach a rapprochement" (2019, p. 399). Gopal also notes how the attempts have been made for dialogue between mainstream feminists and dalit feminists, following the divisions created by the bar-dancing debates.

Thus, while gay men and lesbian women have been subjects of feminist politics, such politics has been less able to place dalit actors in that position. Discussions of AWM history are replete with instances where activists failed to act, or failed to understand the caste dimensions of the issues under consideration.

How has AWM organising changed?

Women who have raised the issues of lesbianism and bisexuality have found support, and in some cases, empathy, within autonomous groups. For example, Shals Mahajan talks of how ze and other lesbian activists found support from the Forum Against Oppression of Women, when they began their own collective in Mumbai in 1995. Shals and Chayanika Shah both speak of the overlaps between lesbian feminist politics and the mainstream women's movement, both of membership and of the claiming of feminist politics. Shals notes that Stree Sangam, the lesbian women's group that ze was part of forming in 1995, had members from amongst the Forum Against Oppression of Women, who themselves were longstanding AWM activists. Thus Shals says that "we saw ourselves as a women's group very much part of the women's movement."[11]

Chayanika Shah makes a similar point, noting that as members of both Forum and Stree Sangam, she and other activists extended the politics of the feminist movement to include queer issues:

> … the whole stance that we took was that we are feminists, we are part of the women's movements, if we think this is part of the women's movement's agenda, this is the women's movement agenda. If you don't think so it's your problem.[12]

Some queer groups thus place themselves within the AWM itself: for instance, LABIA, a queer feminist LBT collective, situates itself within the autonomous women's movements (LABIA, 2013, p. 114).

Other organisational connections also exist. We saw above how Voices Against 377, the coalition that developed to challenge section 377 of the Indian Penal code, also included women's organisations and collectives. Jaya Sharma says that:

[11] Shals Mahajan, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[12] Chayanika Shah, interview, Mumbai, 2016

> … for long the women's movement has been challenging ideas about what is 'natural' – for example how natural is it for a woman to feel maternal, how natural is the sexual division of labour. It is therefore 'but natural' that the women's movement should join hands with the queer movement to challenge naturalness accorded to homosexuality. (Sharma, 2018, 218)

Meena Gopal's formulation of the 'queer/feminist' also indicates the ability of queer/feminists to locate themselves within the queer movement and the feminist movement, simultaneously. As Gopal says, "[a] queer/feminist … occupies both what is known as the queer movement and the women's movement" (Gopal, 2019, p. 1n1).

A mainstream autonomous movement that accommodates transgender issues and persons has been slower to develop. Shals Mahajan talks of the difficulty in engaging with autonomous groups that restrict membership to women, or which admit genderqueer persons but not trans men. Ze argues that groups make a distinction between these persons on various grounds: due to "peoples' own resistance to things," but also on grounds that people who pass as men have male privilege. However, ze holds that these assumptions are not true. This lack of understanding has impacted hir participation in certain groups.[13] Chayanika also states that the idea of the male privilege of trans men is a reason for their exclusion from mainstream autonomous spaces.[14]

Dalit women have also found it difficult to be part of mainstream autonomous feminist organisations. Wandana Sonalkar (2008) argues that dalit feminists assert their right to self-representation; they do not wish to have savarna women speak on their behalf and have, since the 1990s, been organising independently (pp. 10-11; see also Guru, 1995). Arya (2020, pp. 92-93) notes the range of dalit women's organisations (party-affiliated, autonomous, and

[13] Shals Mahajan, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[14] Chayanika Shah, interview, Mumbai, 2016

NGOs) that have formed in various parts of India since the 1980s. In 2019, nine women who identified themselves as being from “marginalised race, religion and caste [sic]” described how they left the feminist group Pinjra Tod due to the upper-caste nature of the collective and its tokenism towards marginalised women and their issues (Maharaj et al., 2019; see also Pinjra Tod, 2019).

Purvi Mehta notes how the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) marks a critique of Indian feminism (Mehta, 2017, p. 232). A separate organisation for Dalit women was needed because the lives and experiences of dalit women were different from non-dalit women, who had not been represented by mainstream feminism and had not been given leadership roles within the feminist movement (pp. 232-233). The existence of a dalit women's organisation also challenged the "representative capacity of other Indian feminist organizations at both the national and international levels” (p. 233).

Public events have also occasionally been contentious. We saw above that women's groups prevented a March 8th pamphlet from mentioning the abolition of manual scavenging. The 'disillusionment' following this episode, Arya notes, led to dalit activists organising a separate March 8th rally. According to Arya, such groups “made an open declaration: if women's groups were unwilling to take up Dalit women's issues then, in protest, Dalit women would create their own platforms to do so” (Arya, 2020, p. 87). Arya (2020, p. 178) also notes how the lesbian rights group CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) was prevented from both carrying its banners in the 2000 Women's Day rally and placing its name on the pamphlet being circulated on the occasion. Several women's groups boycotted the event in the face of the opposition to CALERI, and organised a separate Women's Day event. Lesbian women’s groups were later included in other programmes: Chayanika Shah describes her “elation” at hearing the name of the group Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA) read out as amongst the organisers of a Women's Day event in 2004 (2005, p. 143).

LABIA (2013, p. 13) notes that it began as Stree Sangam, a collective of lesbian and bisexual women in 1995, however gender was a point of discussion in various ways, and 'battles' were not always confined to sexuality. The 2000s, the group says, saw great activism around non-binary gender and also saw more transgender persons as part of LBT organisations.

As we examine the reception of caste, gender, and sexuality in the AWM, we note that sexuality has, on all accounts, been the easier pill to swallow. While lesbianism initially met with hostility and incomprehension, there has over time been a greater receptivity to issues of non-normative sexuality, and to lesbian women activists within the movement. Lesbian women have been able to sustain their participation in collectives and the AWM in general; this has not often been the case for dalit or gender non-conforming persons, who have often placed themselves outside this movement, and whose issues continue to be met with less understanding and urgency.

Why is this the case? What has made the AWM more receptive to non-normative sexuality? These questions lead us to consider the nature of the AWM itself: about the organisation of this movement and the activists who make it up.

Activists and autonomy

Asking activists for reasons behind the differing receptions of caste, gender and sexuality yield two interconnected answers: one, the social backgrounds of AWM activists, and two, the nature of AWM organising.

AWM activists have tended to be urban, educated, middle-class, and Hindu (Calman, 1992, p. 14; Sen, 1990, pp. 1-2), "with little connect with the lives of a large number of poor, rural and Dalit women" (Arya, 2020, p. 83). A history of activists from such backgrounds is seen as having led to specific blind spots. Meena Gopal states that "[f]or those (of us) located within

the upper castes, a real understanding of caste does not happen as part of (our) life experience (2012, p. 226). Thus there is a "blindness around caste," to remedy which "savarna women have to learn to see their experiences through the lens of caste."[15]

Uma Chakravarti also argues that caste as an issue has not arisen within autonomous women's politics due to the social backgrounds of autonomous feminists. These she describes as urban and university-educated, often with at least two generations of English education behind them. "These are urban women who have not experienced caste, caste oppression, or there's no single friend, there's no single person who will be able to talk about caste oppression experienced as caste oppression.[16] Shals Mahajan too draws on hir various social locations, individual and political, to explain hir lack of familiarity with the work of anti-caste intellectuals like Ambedkar and Periyar.[17]

On the other hand, sexuality politics aligns with the backgrounds of AWM activists. For scholar and activist Varsha, "queer politics is entirely compatible with a certain upper caste and upper-class identity."[18] And the upper-caste and upper-class character of progressive spaces "has not been eroded"; activists can belong to these spaces and also be queer.[19]

Certain aspects of sexuality are seen as fashionable and can be articulated as matters of personal liberation and choice. The overt structural nature caste, however, does not lend itself to this attitude. As Chayanika Shah says, there is an individualistic view of sexuality which has currency, a currency which does not extend to more structural notions of social reality.

[15] Meena, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[16] Uma Chakravarti, interview, Delhi, 2016

[17] Shals Mahajan, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[18] Varsha, interview, Delhi, 2015
[19] Varsha, interview, Delhi, 2015

> Sexuality is very easy… There's a sense of coolness about who I sleep with, what I do, this kind of individualistic understanding of sexual preference is an easy thing to do. … [T]his kind of, 'okay anybody can do what they want,' is a very dangerous understanding of sexuality. … So how can I do that for caste, I can't do it, I can't do it for religion and because it's so structural and it's so established structurally, all I can say is that I don't believe in caste, and that everybody is willing to say.[20]

This ease does not extend to gender: Shah speaks of the difficulty in developing a gender politics outside of a framework of personal liberation and choice, in a context where trans persons wish to dissociate from the stigma associated with hijras.

> Gender in that sense is much more difficult…outside of a very, 'I choose to be who I am and do what I am,' that frame, and transgender will become more difficult in India because of the presence of the Hijra community. Which is very marginalised, which is very stigmatised, which is like the Dalit community, like the Muslim community it is absolutely in the margins, so people will hesitate to say 'I'm transgender.' They can't say it with the same ease. Partly it is your own phobias of being associated with those people.[21]

Backgrounds, some argue, get channelled into autonomous politics through the experiences that motivate activism. Here, autonomy itself comes into play. Autonomy as an organising principle means a distance from any agency that might impinge on a group's capacity to set its own agenda. This has meant a distance from funders, governments, and other individuals and agencies that might erode the independence of the collective and by extension the movement. This gives collectives the freedom to set their own agendas and raise issues of

[20] Chayanika Shah, interview, Mumbai, 2016.

[21] Chayanika Shah, interview, Mumbai, 2016. See Mount (2020) for an account of how working-class transgender women distinguish themselves from hijras due to the stigma faced by the latter.

their own choosing. However, for some, groups then become inward-looking in terms of the issues they raise. According to Sandhya, they take up issues that reflect their own experiences. Experiences that are unfamiliar are taken up with greater difficulty and less understanding. As Sandhya says,

> … ultimately that is the shortcoming of any autonomous group, that your group's politics and understanding gets formed and informed by the people who participate in that group. So we had people participating from Christian or other religions so we could learn from each other and our experiences, people with queer identities, we could learn. We had one or two people coming in from the caste background, but you know that is the specificity of caste in India, because the caste background also determines your articulation. … Forum was very, to a large extent continues to be upper-caste, upper-class, so people from other religions who have grown up with certain privileges can become part of it but it's not very easy for a Dalit activist to get the same amount of space, and that definitely somewhere hampered our understanding of caste, because of the very autonomous nature. In a way in a political party you will have various sections being represented, I don't mean meaningfully they interact and inform each other but there is a scope. That is not necessarily true in autonomous groups.[22]

Autonomous groups could work more closely with dalit group or include more dalit members.[23] It should be noted, though, that members of both Forum and Saheli mention that some activists have left these collectives due to their failure to understand and take up caste issues. Thus, the presence of members from certain backgrounds has not always been enough to push an agenda.

[22] Sandhya Gokhale, interview, Mumbai, 2016
[23] Meena, interview, Mumbai, 2016

At the same time, we have seen that all autonomous women's organisations have not responded identically to the issues of caste and gender. We have seen above that organisations like Pinjra Tod and WSS have been better able to engage with the caste and gender connection, drawing it into their activism in more concrete ways.[24] WSS is a network of activists and organisations; Pinjra Tod has had chapters in various colleges in Delhi rather than being a single, unified collective. Perhaps these organisations' structures and modes of working have allowed them to be more amenable to the changed discourses of difference that they have been surrounded by. Lalitha noted that the organisation to which she belonged, Anveshi, responded to the caste politics of the Mandal period. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a definitive explanation of why some groups are better able to accommodate difference than others, some avenues to explore would be the organisation structure, and also the times in which these groups have emerged.

Conclusion

Why has the AWM reacted in the way it has to caste, sexuality, and gender? This paper argues that the unevenness of its response to these axes of difference results from the coming together of the backgrounds of its activists and the nature of the movement organisations within which these activists operate and through which their activism is then both operationalised and filtered.

What might this argument offer as a way towards another kind of relationship with difference? One argument that is for the movement to be more inclusive – to bring in people from a variety of backgrounds, and thereby also bring their varied experiences and

[24] Although see Maharaj et al., 2019

perspectives into the its activism. This would allow for a different set of issues to be raised and analysis to emerge.

However, the material presented here also indicates a need examine movement organisations themselves. The nature of organisations, as we have seen, also impacts the everyday of a movement's political practice. Autonomy has allowed the AWM to not be subject to an external agenda, but this freedom has not precluded other constraints on activism. Understanding how movement organisations shape activism can help activists make choices about how to reorient and reform organisations such that they become more open to the experiences of people from different backgrounds. A more productive engagement with difference might also require a rethinking of the ways in which movements organise: who forms the movements within which feminists act? With whom do they ally? How are movement organisations structured internally? How do activists' knowledge, experiences, biases, priorities, and limitations, become part of collective politics? How might autonomy not just serve but also limit the movement?

Meena Gopal (2019) writes of discussions on caste and sexuality that took place between Dalit and non-Dalit feminists in 2009. What emerged from the discussions, Gopal says, was the alienation experienced by dalit feminists due to non-dalit feminists' ignorance of issues like the Khairlanji rapes and killings in 2006. Gopal writes that "[i]t was now incumbent on non-Dalit feminist organisations to address their failing through intentional efforts to further solidarity by extending support, hosting meetings and workshops, following up on incidents of such violence, and participating in investigations" (Gopal, 2019, 400). What is striking about this statement is the list of actions that are associated with the demonstration of solidarity. Clearly a theoretical awareness of caste issues was not enough: what was required was for non-dalit feminists to show their commitment through their activities. This might

give a sense of how movements might more fruitfully engage with difference: not only through ideas, but through everyday practice.

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