

## Forging Fraught Solidarities: Friendship and Feminist Activism in South Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Friendship has been central to the forging of feminist solidarities. Cross-border friendships and feminist activism in South Asia have disrupted narratives of violence and hostility between countries. Friendship then is deeply political for multiple reasons, often facilitating a powerful critique and unsettling hegemonic, heteropatriarchal narratives of affective relationships. Drawing on the narratives of feminist activists in South Asia, we explore the nuances of 'doing activism' with friends as well as how friendship itself inflects activism and the interrogations that these might bring to the fore. We reflect on the ways in which feminist activism has engaged with fun arguing that joy is intrinsic to feminist organising. We also examine feminist fractures and how these might impact our activism, our friendships, and what they reveal about structural inequalities. As we reflect on the transformative potential of feminist activism within the South Asian region over the last four decades and the friendships it has nurtured, we ask if friendship has fulfilled the promise of challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships, concluding that the answer must be yes and no.

**Keywords:** South Asia, feminist activism, friendship, feminism, fun

### INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the two of us were interviewing feminist activists in India and Pakistan who had been involved in movements claiming public space. During these interviews, the subject of friendship came up several times. In the course of their activism, the activists forged deep and meaningful friendships and also invited their friends to join them in their activism. That article (Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021) on online collectivising did not have the space for us to discuss these friendships, but it was something that we found deeply relevant to a politics of both feminism and activism. Friendship has been central to the forging of feminist solidarities as feminist activists describe their engagements with the political. While there has been scholarship that focuses on friendship in South Asia (Ali, 2019; Kamal, 2019; Banerjea *et al.*, 2018), this article seeks to locate friendships as relevant to the doing of feminist activism.

Feminist scholarship in South Asia has focused significantly on kinship, locating women within the institutions of marriage, family and community drawing our attention to the ways in which patriarchal discourses are played out on the bodies of women. This article is situated in the context of friendships forged in feminist activism that offer possibilities of decentring kinship embedded in the institutions of marriage and family. Anthropologists and sociologists studying South Asia have for long focussed on the 'intimate association' (Dube, 2001) kinship structures have with women's lives (Karve, 1953; Uberoi, 1993). South Asian feminist scholarship has also focussed on the ways in which cross-border friendships and feminist activism have disrupted narratives of violence and hostility between countries (Chhachhi and Abeysekera, 2015; Phadke, 2020; Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021; Wijesiriwardena, forthcoming). Friendship then is deeply political for multiple reasons, often facilitating a powerful critique and unsettling hegemonic heteropatriarchal narratives of affective relationships. Despite this, even as the heteronormative universe seems to dominate conversations on both love and violence, there is writing and reflection on friendship in and as activism (Banerjea *et al.*, 2018), friendship, feminism, and academic collaboration (Kaplan and Rose, 1993; Maina and Missero, 2021), and feminism and friendship (Roseneil, 2006; Winch, 2013; Chowdhury and Philipose, 2016).

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In this article, we examine the ways in which feminist activists find both feminism and friendship, and explore the nuances of ‘doing activism’ with friends. We also think through how friendship itself inflects activism and the kinds of dialogues and interrogations that these might bring to the fore. We reflect on the ways in which feminist activism has engaged with fun, arguing that joy is intrinsic to feminist organising. We also examine feminist fractures, the frictions, the silences, and the choices of whether and how to disagree and how these might impact both our activism and our friendships. Reflecting on the transformative potential of feminist activism within the South Asian region over the last four decades and the friendships it has nurtured, we ask if friendship has fulfilled the promise of challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships.

In the introduction to their anthology *Friendship as Social Justice Activism: Critical Solidarities in a Global Perspective*, Niharika Banerjea *et al.* argue that ‘friendship as social activism is about the renewal of our imagination about who we are and who we wish to become’ (2018: 2). Though the anthology encompasses diverse kinds of writing, the editors point out that they all attempt to ‘find ways of being together that is *within and outside* the heteropatriarchal ordering of things’ (3). This generative anthology makes a strong case for friendship not simply within activism, but *as* social justice activism. Focusing on the minutiae of everyday interpersonal relationships, the essays in this volume stitch together a narrative of solidarity, love, and a collective quest for change. Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose (2016) also reiterate the centrality of friendship in solidarity efforts. They draw on Leela Gandhi’s (2006: 10) formulation of dissident friendships as ‘all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment’ to suggest that ‘friendship is significant to collective life’ (2016: 2-3). They focus on emotions and lived experience which they argue are fundamental to community building. For them, friendship allows for surprising connections and the possibility of contesting power hierarchies.

Gender activism has organically grown many friendships, and in fact, in some cases, friendships facilitated the beginnings of feminist organisations. These collectives have fostered a sense of community both on the streets and online, allowing for a multivocality of feminist imaginations even within a single organisation. For this article, we draw on the eight interviews we had done for our earlier article, titled ‘Doing Feminist Community Media: Collectivising in Online Spaces’ (Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021), in which we examined the online presence and creation of feminist communities engendered by four organisations: *Blank Noise*, *Girls at Dhabas*, *Parvham Collective* and *Pinjra Tod*. Both *Parvham* and *Blank Noise* are registered non-profit trusts in India. *Pinjra Tod* started as a largely Delhi-centric collective to make hostel regulations less restrictive for women students but is now known nationally and has gone beyond this mandate to respond to emerging crises. *Girls at Dhabas* began in Karachi and spread to other cities. They also had a large reach online with conversations that were often South Asia centric. In our interviews for this article, the subject of friendship came up again and again convincing us that it deserved an engagement of its own. Specifically, we cite here our interviews with Sadia Khatri, co-founder of *Girls at Dhabas*, and Salma Ansari, co-founder of *Parvham*. Additionally, in 2021, we edited an anthology of essays, poems, and artwork on friendship by South Asian women and genderqueer people, and this process also informs our engagement with this article.

Taking off from these, we circulated a short questionnaire on an online Indian feminist listserv where we asked for stories of peoples’ friendships, the joys, the frictions, and the solidarities. We invited feminist activists, broadly defined to include feminist academics, journalists, social workers, health professionals, lawyers, and people in allied fields, to respond to this questionnaire. We felt that additional narratives, even if brief, would allow us to layer our observations on friendship in relation to feminist activism. Nineteen feminist activists filled the short questionnaire, and we followed this up with semi-structured interviews with four of them – scholar activist Vibhuti Patel, theatre director and writer A. Mangai, theatre writer and activist Neha Singh, and queer feminist activist Pramada Menon. These interviews enabled a more focused engagement with friendship that allowed us to arrive at generational understanding of how friendships have historically shaped feminist activism in the subcontinent.

All of the participants in the study are educated and nearly all of them have post-graduate degrees including some doctorates. They are largely middle and upper class and many are well known in feminist circles in South Asia which implies access to both networks and cultural capital. Participants come from different religious backgrounds Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist though some are non-practising. All but one identify as cis-gender women. This description is true of us, the authors, as well. This homogeneity of location then is a limitation of the study.

We use our interlocutors’ names with their permission. On the survey too we explicitly asked those who filled it whether they would like us to use their names and if not whether there was a specific pseudonym that they would prefer us to use. We even had an option for them to have their names against some responses and not against others. We wanted to both recognise the contribution of individual narratives as well as allow for anonymity where preferred. Every single person chose to have their names mentioned and only one chose to anonymise the friend she spoke about. The choice to use their names then is one that explicitly acknowledges that the process of knowledge creation is a collaborative one, especially in the context of the subject we have chosen here, where the feminists we interview are as much experts as they might be interlocutors.

Our effort has been to illuminate some of the nuances of the connections between friendship and activism. We sought to understand how friendships are implicated in and impact the collective stance of an organisation or movement, how friendship and activism interact to produce messy, but often generative, ideas of gender activism even as there is an ever-increasing fear that any arguments within the group might undermine feminist politics within populist regimes.

## FINDING FRIENDS, FINDING FEMINISM

Despite a growing body of scholarship within what could be called Friendship Studies (Coates, 1996; Devere, 2013; Ali and Flatt, 2017) friendship is notoriously difficult to define. A large and diverse set of relationships that are often characterised by mutual care, reciprocity, and trust get referred to as friendships. Some friendships last, others are fleeting; some are based on having a shared past, while others are all about becoming together with; some start out as colleagues and find friendship along the way, others who are friends find opportunities to work together; some friendships are built on a sense of shared politics - a common purpose, some others are founded on the ability to disagree without malice, and these are not mutually exclusive. Feminism, too, is difficult to define and is really feminisms in the plural rather than any one thing. While broadly, feminism seeks the social, political and economic equality for all persons regardless of sex or gender, and is necessarily intersectional, or at least aspires to be, feminist theory and ideologies encompass many different positions and often competing perspectives - with a number of them having branched out of and in response to other theories, including feminist theories.

Feminist activism has often begun in people's homes, as everyday pushbacks, minor disobediences, as tactics to navigate heteropatriarchal family structures; sometimes literally the first meetings of feminist organisations are held in people's homes over cups of tea and often involve the provision of hospitality to those who have come from elsewhere. Vibhuti Patel, who has been part of the women's movement in India since the 1970s and has played a pivotal role in documenting it, in our interview with her, gestures to the lack of resources within the movement which meant that their own resources had to be mobilised. She talks of the reciprocity implicit in early activist meetings and the ways in which activism then translated into friendships.

If you come to Mumbai, you stay in my house. If I go to Chennai, I stay in her house. ... We also felt like we were being disowned by our families – one, for becoming feminist, two for not getting married or marrying a person not of their choice. So the only thing we could fall back on were our friends.

She talked about the ways in which activist connections provided both a home in strange cities as well as mitigated the possibilities of loneliness. Her narrative suggests that arriving in a new city already connected to feminist networks cushioned one from possible alienation. She speaks of finding friendship with Sonal Shukla, who founded the Vacha Charitable Trust and was a founding member of the Forum Against Oppression of Women, when she relocated from Baroda to Bombay (now Mumbai), 'I never felt lonely because we had our own feminist socialist women's group. We also started a feminist network and newsletter in English'. Flavia Agnes (2021) in an obituary for a few feminists who had passed writes that in 1981 when there was an initiative to start a drop-in centre for women survivors of domestic violence, Sonal Shuka offered a room in her home and the centre functioned from her home for two years. Agnes acknowledges her own debt to Sonal Shukla who she writes, 'hand-held me while I transitioned from a middle class Christian battered housewife to a feminist lawyer. She was the driving force for me to resume my education and complete my graduation'.

Salma Ansari, the co-founder of *Parcham*, who began her activist journey in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 40 years after Vibhuti Patel began hers, told us that the first meeting of the organisation happened at her home in 2012, she reflects on how her sisters' friendship with Sabah (Khan) and Aquila (Khan), both feminist activists and co-founders of *Parcham*, led her to become a part of the group and eventually to the formation of the football team in Mumbra. Many of our interlocutors marked finding feminisms and finding friends as concurrent processes. While some of them formed deep friendships with those they initially met as colleagues, fellow activists, or professional collaborators; for some others, it was the friendships that drew them into activism and allowed them space to continually re-evaluate their politics and their praxis. Reminiscing about her initial forays into the world of feminism through her association with an independent left-oriented women's organisation, A. Mangai, founding member of theatre groups, Voicing Silence and Marappachi, both committed to increasing the participation of women in theatre and director of over 30 plays, says,

When I was in my 20s there was a lot happening politically, but it was also a personally challenging time for me. I was grappling with my own family's opinions on caste, and my own inner questions about the choice of a partner, I also had my kids quite early. Therefore, it was very reassuring to find this women's

organisation. I was taken under the wings of Mythili Sivaraman who was extremely active at that point... I would literally run to the organisation's office two streets away from my residence at that time.

Speaking about the joys of ever-evolving friendships and how integral fun has been to them, co-founder of CREA, a feminist human rights organisation, Pramada Menon notes,

I think that one of the things that really has started striking me, especially now that I'm in my late 50s, is that some of my close friendships have been formed through work. Often we say that friendships at work don't happen because there's competition. So if I look at one set of us who have been friends from the time that I started working, when I was 22... Knowing that you've spent a lot of your youth together, and you have had formative conversations, and all of us have arrived in whatever form or shape. We're not competing with each other. We can still go out and then dance in public because that's how we remember each other at that point in our lives. And it's not as though we don't have professional disagreements, which we do; but there is a huge level of commitment to being there for each other.

However, friendships are not merely built within supportive workplaces and activist organisations; they are forged in moments of crises and amid frustrations. Vibhuti Patel marks a moment in the socio-political history of the South Asian subcontinent as fermenting feminist collaborations,

In the post-emergency period in India, there was tremendous anger against the gross violation of human rights. All of us who were active in various movements came together – whether it was a youth movement or student movement or the Sampoorna Kranti movement in Bihar or tribal movement, or the then newly emerging Dalit movement – to raise our voices against this. However, there was a sense of suffocation among the women who were seen as subsidiary or just playing a supportive role – you only cook for your comrades, you do the fundraising, you translate pamphlets. There was this famous joke in those times that encapsulated how the women felt – The man is an article, the woman is a footnote.

Neha Singh, who went on to initiate the *Why Loiter* movement which exhorts women to reclaim public space marks herself as one of the thousands of young feminists galvanised in the aftermath of the horrific 2012 gang rape and murder of a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern in New Delhi. She says,

My first feminist collaboration was with Rasika Agashe, an actor-director who wanted to make a protest play in response to the Jyoti Singh rape and murder in 2013. I wrote and acted in her play. We still have a wonderful relationship and support, co-create and cheer each other's work.

For the activists we spoke to, engaging with other feminists, working with them, and consciously building a relationship with them then allowed for their feminisms to evolve. Feminist researcher and activist Vimala Ramachandran recounts in response to our survey questions:

Being a part of a women's empowerment programme in the late 1980s, I met young rural and urban women who were involved in building women's collectives. They questioned me all the time, forced me to think – at the same time they showered so much love and care. They reached out when I went through any personal or professional crisis, bouts of burnout and depression. It is over 30 years now – and these bonds continue to be strong, loving and as always argumentative.

Many of our interlocutors marked the collaborations and friendships engendered by feminist activism. These collaborations produced academic work, policy documents, plays, books, songs, organisations, publications houses, legal services, support groups which have contributed to transforming gendered ideologies, legal frameworks, and state policies. Academic and activist Usha Raman, in her engagement with our survey questions, notes,

What I gain most from my feminist friends—the permission to mix spheres, to easily move from the professional to the personal to the emotional to the political, without explanation and without signposting. The group of women in the Network of Women in Media, India, for instance, is a wonderful, fierce collective that I constantly draw inspiration from through the daily act of texting and reading others' texts on a WhatsApp group. One is seen and acknowledged.

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) that Usha Raman refers to is a voluntary, informal collective that serves as a forum for women in media professions. In the twenty years since its founding in the early 2000s, the network has consistently taken public positions on issues of journalists' rights and media ethics addressing among other things workplace harassment, press freedom and portrayal of women in media.

Finding friends and finding feminisms are processes that are ongoing and dynamic. Our interviews and survey responses suggest that feminist activism has created spaces for friendships to grow. Friendships are forged in spaces of belonging but also in moments of crises and from the frustrations of not belonging in other spaces. As many of the narratives suggest, these friendships offer solace, support, and the structures that might facilitate the possibilities of taking risks.

What our narratives suggest is that these friendships were joyous, exciting and deeply transformative. They facilitated choices for women, offered ways in which women might resist their natal and marital families. Friendships then provide alternate ways of belonging and of building solidarity against the patriarchy. But beyond creating both security and the possibility of resistance, these friendships are deeply relevant for themselves, as relationships that are central to peoples' lives, outside of kinship, offering new ways to think about and imagine human connections.

## FUN *IN* AND *AS* FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Writer and activist, Shals Mahajan in an email tribute to Sonal Shukla and Kamla Bhasin, founder of Sangat (South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers), after their passing, recounts a moment from the Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference in 1995 in Jaipur,

We had practised a song that Sonal had written and wanted to sing to Kamla. I had begun to know Sonal that year and had heard of Kamla and was totally intrigued by this older and absolutely riveting and charming feminist, not only writing a new song for the conference but preparing us to sing it to Kamla by way of greeting as soon as we met. Who meets like this, right? Apparently feminists do! ...

And then there was this woman, wearing her gorgeous hair cut short, bristling with energy and with laughter and joy in every line of her face, marching towards us. And as soon as she met Sonal, she burst into song – *Amma dekh, Amma dekh tera movement bigda jaaye! Amma dekh, O behna dekh!* (Mom watch/look, mom watch your movement is getting corrupted! Mom watch, O my sister watch!) When she was done, she said, *Sonal, yeh maine tere liye likha hai*, (I wrote this for you) and Sonal said, *maine bhi tere liye likha hai* (I've also written something for you)! And she sang her song.

It was magic. In my mind the image of these two fun loving powerful and absolutely *zindadil* (exuberant) feminists walking up to not only hug each other but writing and singing for each other, and with each other, this has been the image I have carried with me since. If I was not in love with feminists and feminisms till then, I would've been so then.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on the work of Gould (2009) and Howe (2013), Kareem Khubchandani (2019) writes 'activism develops and is sustained by erotics and intimacy. The intensities of being in collective space with others – laughter, flirtations, and silent sadness evidence how politics land on/impact the body, and how bodies shape and make themselves in relation to political structures' (2). Mangai in speaking about her friendship with feminist activist, writer and historian V. Geetha draws attention to the embodied nature of friendship,

Most of my friendships are formed in spaces where we loosen up our body and voice. The key friendship I can recall is my friendship with V. Geetha. Even though Geetha and I knew each other, we waited 10 years to become friends. We were in Sri Lanka together and on one van ride from Trincomalee to Colombo around 1998-99 I invited her to come see one of my rehearsals. She gifted me a book. I think that's the first gift I have received when somebody came to see a play. I treasure that copy of the book. From 2007, we worked on plays together - burning the midnight oil, editing, reading... They nicknamed us Hyper One and Hyper Two because of our energies! Geetha wrote close to five plays and I directed them. We have both written about the take-backs from these collaborations. I mean, we had our own shared vision, but we had different platforms, we still have different platforms...

In the same vein, academic and filmmaker Anjali Monteiro in her response to our survey speaks fondly of her friendship with N, whom she does not name,

I worked with N in the late 1970s, on a series of media materials on women's reproductive health. She was over 13 years older than me but we developed a very strong bond. I spent hours and hours with her, scriptwriting. She was also a singer and musician and the work we did was full of poetry and music.

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<sup>1</sup> Shals Mahajan, Extract from email post titled, 'Sonal Shukla and Kamla Bhasin - A Memory' to listserv feministsindia on 25 September 2021. Translations in this narrative are ours.

Working with her opened me up to a new world and new cultural influences. I learnt to sing from her and 44 years later I still hum those tunes and sing to myself. Her mother was a very strong and supportive person, with whom she lived and I began to realise that being a feminist meant seeing feminism in unlikely locations and that it is important to recognise our debt to the generations before us.

Speaking about the possibilities of intergenerational friendship made possible because of the movement, Neha Singh of the Why Loiter movement muses,

I think the oldest loiterer who has ever joined us is Pradnya Bhatawadekar who is around 70 years old. She was also in the play that Sachit (Puranik) directed called *Loitering*. I am also friends with my co-actors who are much older or much younger than me. The people that I'm friends with, even if they belong to a different generation and have different life experiences, constantly question the norms. That is what attracts me to people.

If movements and activist workplaces were places where feminists nurtured deep and lasting friendships, friendships, in turn, became places to springboard into the world of activism. *Girls at Dhabas* is an initiative by young Pakistani women that began in Karachi in 2015. Sadia Khatri, one of the founders, posted a photograph of herself at a *dhaba*, a roadside food stall, a space that is often considered masculine, and soon her friends joined her. *Girls at Dhabas* went on to organise street cricket, cycling rallies, and hangout sessions at *dhabas*. If fun is an essential part of these women's claim to public space, so is friendship. Sadia articulates not just the pleasures of doing activism with friends, but also why disagreeing with fellow activists might be easier if one shared a friendship:

In any sort of political movement or organising that I have been a part of, the foundations of one's politics are so much stronger when there is actual friendship and love and care between the individuals. This does not mean you have to reach a political consensus or agree on everything. It just means genuine interest in knowing how the other person arrives at their politics. Within *Girls at Dhabas* it was a symbiotic relationship – talking about public space, sharing the pleasure and leisure in our lives – that enabled us to trust each other.

These bonds did not preclude stepping out of the comfort of established friendships and creating space to build relationships of mutual trust, support and love with a wider group of people.

Friendships were fostered across organisations and even across national borders. Feminist activists who had never met in person became friends. Neha Singh speaks about her friendship with the authors of the book *Why Loiter* (2011) that launched the movement,

My second and most life-changing relationship has been with Shilpa (Phadke), Sameera, and Shilpa (Ranade). First, because I read their book *Why Loiter* in 2014, and six months later by actually meeting them, sharing the photos and stories from all our loitering sessions, and then with them taking part in our loitering sessions. The relationship solidified over the years with our constant support for each other in professional and personal ways, and I cherish the amazing bond we have.

Manahil, an undergrad student from Pakistan, underscores how even chance encounters in online spaces with fellow feminists that sometimes allow for both a fleeting sense of connection as well as a more lasting sense of having found a space in which one belongs. In her answer to our survey, she writes,

In Pakistan, we have this all-female Facebook group called 'Soul Bitches,' and it's basically just an online community where women have the freedom to just... be. It's a place where women share their problems, their fears, their aspirations, and just their life in general with hundreds of other women that they have. It's so fascinating how – because of our collective lived experiences and even trauma – women are able to come together and offer support and friendship to people they have never even met.

The *Parcham Collective* is a local organisation based out of Mumbra, a predominantly Muslim locality in Thane district in Maharashtra, India. The suburb of Mumbra was where a large number of Muslims from the city of Mumbai were pushed to after the horrific communal violence in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992<sup>2</sup>. In the decade since its inception in 2012, *Parcham* has engaged with women and youth in Mumbra through a variety of initiatives from football training for girls to a mobile suitcase library. And even as they strive to organically address issues within the neighbourhood, they are equally focussed on reaching out to those outside in order to transform the stereotypical understanding of Mumbra as a Muslim ghetto. In fact, Salma Ansari views

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<sup>2</sup> On December 6, 1992, Hindu fundamentalists demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India. In the aftermath of this event, there was communal violence in many parts of the country, including Mumbai.

friendship as being central to the kind of activism that the organisation engages in: '*Parcham* is an organisation that attempts to build friendships. It tries to overcome narrow-mindedness and build a society of equity' (quoted from Phadke and Kanagasabai 2021).

If friendship is central to *Parcham's* activism, so is fun. The organisation began with a girls' football initiative to encourage girls to lay claims to public space for leisure. Similarly the *Why Loiter* movement and the *Girls at Dhabas* also advocate for women's access to both pleasure and leisure, by loitering in public spaces and hanging out at *dhabas* traditionally the preserve of men. Public space in the South Asian context is carefully surveilled and so such claims to public space for fun are inherently political claims. Fun as something that is relevant to feminist politics in ways that transcend class is an argument that is increasingly being heard in relation to feminist activism in South Asia (Kirmani, 2020; Phadke, 2020). The claiming of public space for fun has been read as collective acts of citizenship rather than as individualised actions of middle- and upper-class women that might be seen within the frames of neoliberal consumption (Phadke, 2020). For instance, Kirmani's (2020) research engages with claims to fun in Lyari, a working-class neighbourhood in Karachi. While feminism and feminist politics have, at times, acquired the 'reputation' of being austere or joyless, the experience of anyone who has been part of feminist activism knows that fun is intrinsic to it and always has been. In the narratives, in our interviews, we hear just how much feminist activists enjoyed the spaces they enabled, the camaraderie, the singing and dancing, and the sheer joy of being part of a transformative politics. It reminds us of the slogan used by the suffragette movement that claimed 'bread for all, and roses too' making it clear that the desire for beauty, for joy, for poetry, music, song, and dance have always been part of feminist activism.

## FEMINISM, FRICTIONS, AND FRACTURES

Because feminist spaces are spaces of joy, fun, and even euphoria, one tends to elide the reality that they are also spaces of frictions, disagreements, judgment, and sometimes fractures, both those that might be mended and those that might be irretrievable. This is true of both individual friendships, relationships within organisations, and between organisations. As feminist spaces grow and expand new challenges come up. Sadia speaks about how when *Girls at Dhabas* grew in scale and began including members who were not friends or acquaintances, the group had to find new ways of building trust and confidence in one another and the collective. She spoke of a three-day workshop that they organised to discuss their ideas about the collective as also 'to speak about who each of us was, where we were from and what mattered to us as individuals'.

Individual relationships with and within organisations are attended by not just solidarity but also frictions. We argue that there are frictions generated by differences in location as well as those along the axes of class, caste, religion that produce power differentials and circumscribe friendship and feminist activism. Along with this are the anxieties that attend being seen as good or bad feminists and being judged for acting or not acting in particular situations, for speaking up or not speaking up in particular situations.

In recent years, the divisive conversations around #MeToo have challenged friendships amongst feminist activists. Mangai reflects on one such case, that took place in an institute where she was teaching and the brief period of uneasiness in her friendship with V. Geetha.

The person accused was our common friend. Geetha took the lead and drafted an open column and signed a letter for action against him. I did not sign that letter. As a response, many friends got together and published a statement defending him. I remember getting a call asking me 'Why are you not signing it?' I said, because I don't feel it's right. I couldn't sign that either. There were a few months of silence between Geetha and me and a few other Comrades. Later, I met Geetha at a memorial meeting. We couldn't talk, but we could hug. That embarrassed, hesitant moment was quite intense for me - and I am sure for Geetha too. And then I think after almost six months, Geetha and I made a date and we sat down and shared. We knew that we didn't want to lose each other. We have witnessed many such instances. I think it is one of the most beautiful moments that we shared.

Mangai reflects on the capacity to talk across very charged and also very public differences in a friendship and what they have meant. She does not suggest that there was a resolution, but rather that the friendship survived their different positions.

Mangai acknowledges that it is difficult to rebuild broken bridges, but one could find pathways that allow people to co-exist without having to work together again. She says, 'It's okay to wash dirty linen in public, but can we do it with a pinch of compassion?'. Mangai suggests that rather than friendship, 'I keep going back to Richa Nagar's formulation of radical vulnerability. I find it effective in building solidarity'. Richa Nagar *et al.* (2016) place the notion of 'radical vulnerability' at the heart of feminist friendships and collaborations. Collective commitment to

continually acknowledge one's complicity in the very structures that one seeks to dismantle, Nagar *et al.* argue, allows for a politics that is alert to inequities, and consequently is ever-willing to evolve. She writes,

In common usage, the idea of accountability often implies responsibility toward those people or issues that we feel some kind of ethical commitment to. Radical vulnerability builds upon that sense of responsibility by requiring deep relationality—that is, sustained entanglements defined by trust and friendships that make sharing of authority both necessary and organic (512).

Responses to frictions might be seen in silences and erasures, in pushing things under the proverbial carpet and not discussing them. But also in confrontations, in discussions that move forward, even if differences are not resolved.

While feminists have tended to centre friendship, social movement scholars have often expressed reservations about friendship. Jo Freeman (1972-73) has, in the context of the American women's movement, pointed out that in the absence of formal structures informal cliques govern organisations and most often in an inequitable fashion. She insists that it is the structurelessness of a group allows for informal hierarchies to thrive without being recognised as such. She goes on to argue that while informal networks are neither new nor specific to the women's movement in the 1960s, it might augur well to remember that it was these informal structures – like the locker room – that disallowed women and some men from accessing power and social reward. In fact, the women's movement has fought to have structures formalised in order to confront the exclusion of women.

A statement written by women from marginalised castes and communities to explain why they were leaving the *Pinjra Tod* movement, an informal collective in Delhi, India that challenges curfews in women's hostels, questioned the assumption of sisterhood in the group and said that the movement had failed them (Lama and Maharaj, 2019). The argument that networks create elites even within feminist spaces finds resonance in Rupali Bansode's (2013) article, where she writes,

The academic discipline of Women's Studies where sisterhood is celebrated has faced many accusations from Dalit women activists and writers, for serving only the 'upper-caste/class feminists' needs and 'not doing justice to Dalit women's perspectives'. The silence from non-Dalit practitioners on the rape cases in Haryana and Bihar outraged many Dalit women's groups.

Yogesh Maitreya (2014) speaks directly to the divides that preclude friendship across caste, arguing that casual interactions between Savarna students and Dalit students within university setting rarely evolve into deeper friendships where one feels comfortable enough to share what he calls a 'personal epistemology of caste'. Christina Dhanaraj (2016) adds to this critique,

To view us as fascinating subjects for learning and use our extension of friendship as an opportunity to gain access into our narratives and worldviews, only to *other* us later; to promise unfaltering allyship but buckle at the slightest calling-out; ... to rub shoulders with us at rallies and protests, but celebrate festivals that are inherently oppressive to our communities; to not question your family's privileged position and continue to reap the benefits it gives you – none of these is solidarity. And more importantly, to not stand up for us when we really need you to and fail us when push comes to shove – that is ally-theatre at its best.

Asha Achuthan (forthcoming) also writes about the connections between friendship and allyship and what happens when the links break.

'Women looking out for each other' was the latest description thrown at me in some anger by a friend of 17 years, as a reproach aimed at how I had moved away from her. I had moved cities, but was not expected to have moved away. I had enacted my version of 'coming out', but it had been received grammatically, albeit enthusiastically, and sisterhood was re-asserted as binding glue, also grammatically, emphatically. And because I did not really have a spouse or children—those stable assets/ burdens—to show, my share of sisterhood burdens was of course larger. The anger at my inability to fulfil them was proportionately more. And so I ask my easily feminist friend (not so easy for me), in reciprocal anger—does sisterhood stand in for allyship? Do your milestones, and your precarities, look like mine? Are mine visible to you? ... Can we, really, be friends?

Achuthan's words invoke the tropes of sisterhood and what they might mean in relation to differences, of sexualities, of families, of households. Such expressions of feminist anger compel us to examine our claims to allyship in turn creating a space to interrogate existing hierarchies and reflect on possibilities for an inclusive feminist politics.

Not just caste and sexuality, but religion too has been the basis of hierarchies and discrimination as well. Vibhuti Patel speaks of a heart-breaking fracture premised on communalism,

My boyfriend and fellow political activist, whom I married in course of 5 years of working together, was a Muslim. I went to London for a postdoctoral fellowship in 1992. My colleagues were jubilant and said it brought great prestige. This was in 1992-93 when the Babri Masjid was destroyed. When I came back in 1993, I got distant looks from everyone, the atmosphere was very difficult and I felt very lonely. It was communalism. Perhaps they did not know before that I had an inter-religious marriage. They knew me as a fearless feminist who participated in demonstrations and rallies, went to jail, or actively intervened for support to women in distress. And the first time I myself was facing trauma, I did not have agency and I resigned from my job.

The foregoing narratives focus on questions of hurt, of betrayal within what were seen to be feminist spaces, but also point to embedded structural hierarchies. Acknowledging these fractures allows space for us to name the 'inequalities within our feminisms' (Phadke, 2022: 190). Feminism might then be seen as providing 'the space for a productive exploration of conflict' (Winch, 2013: 198). In fact, Winch (2013), cites Perrier (2012) who sees antagonism as critically productive, not as something to be 'overcome in order to enable kinder feelings, but rather as a permanent condition' (198). Winch reads Perrier as suggesting that for feminism, the goal is not friendship between women but rather the struggle for justice and liberation and that antagonism is central to 'sustaining political movements' (198). Sara Ahmed (2014) reflecting on feminist hurt and the ways in which feminism hurts, and notes that

We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them, but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as a political as well as life resource... Bad feelings are creative responses to histories that are unfinished. They are not the only responses. And we are not finished.

Friendship among feminist activists is not immune to disagreement, distance and disenchantment but holds within it the possibility of reparation. Even where fractures are unable to be healed the articulation of dissent, of contestation, is important to a dynamic feminist politics.

Feminist relationships, including friendships, are situated within socio-political hierarchies. Even as we recognise the strides that have been made possible by feminist activism not just along axes of gender but in other structures as well, and the individual transformations and sheer joy that have been engendered by friendships in these spaces; we must acknowledge that friendships by themselves have often been circumscribed by same kinds of caste, class and community hierarchies that attend other institutions. While friendship has the potential to challenge the hierarchies embedded in kinship, it has not always been successful in doing so. And so feminist spaces need to consciously challenge the ways in which friendships might replicate kinship structures premised on inclusion and exclusion. This is something that we need to strive to work on as a movement that aims at justice. The constant questioning and challenges are generative for not just feminist activism but also for friendship.

## FEMINIST SOLIDARITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asian feminisms have had to grapple with the use of the term South Asia itself with all its geopolitical implications. The space of South Asia has been deeply contested and fraught politically, and this is something that feminists of the region have had to contend with. One of us, Shilpa, was at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) conference in Bangkok in 2005, where she also participated in the South Asia Caucus where there were about 300 participants of which over 200 were Indians. It was a stark visual reminder of that the shadow of a dominant 'big brother' India played out in feminist spaces as well. Even while recognising these imbalances, feminists in the region have forged deep bonds with each other in ways that allow them to grapple with the politics of their own countries and the region.

Chhachhi and Abeysekera (2015) quote Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan's lyrical description of a workshop held in a village in Bangladesh in 1986, which they mark as one of the first spaces where South Asian feminists spent time with other women from the region creating the possibilities for a 'new Southasian feminist consciousness' to emerge (557). Chhachhi and Abeysekera also point out that it was the first time that Bangladesh and Pakistani feminists were meeting after the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971. They recount the discovery of cultural similarities as well as those in their own life histories creating a sense of recognition and personal connections. Chhachhi and Abeysekera write that women from countries with active hostility (India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and Bangladesh) 'tied *rakhis* on each other's wrists, sealing a pact of sisterhood' (557). They

lovingly recount subsequent workshops with South Asian feminists that built and cemented lifelong friendships creating ‘chosen affective kin relationships’ (559).

The South Asian vision of sisterhood seen in Chhachhi and Abeysekera’s narrative of tying *rakhis*, a North Indian Hindu ritual that invokes the ‘protection’ of brothers for sisters, must be read against their articulated desire to create chosen kin relationships. On the one hand, the enactment of such a ritual when performed between women from warring countries can be read as an act of solidarity that subverts the intentions of the patriarchal ritual by suggesting that women can be each other’s security. However, viewed from the perspective of 2022 and the events that have transpired in the foregoing decades when right wing fundamentalisms in the region have further imposed the upholding of familial ties, the marking friendship as being *like family*, as opposed to challenging the primacy of familial affiliations might be seen as short sighted and eventually perhaps even counter-productive. There have been feminist and queer efforts at reflecting on the idea of kinship as not ‘always already heterosexual’ (Butler, 2002) challenging heteropatriarchal narratives and notions of belonging.<sup>3</sup> What we might suggest, of course with the benefit of hindsight, is to assert more radically, friendship as a vector of affective relations.

Subha Wijesiriwardena’s narrative furthers imaginations of South Asian feminist relationships. She writes:

There is a photograph, from 1984. It is a group of smiling, beautiful, young South Asian women. If you look closely, you may recognize some icons, as they were in their 20s and 30s: Kamla Bhasin, Amrita Chhachhi, Khushi Kabir, Nighat Said Khan, Sunila Abeysekera. In this photograph, I used to see our feminist leaders, the feminists who shaped our South Asian feminist identities—or some versions of it—for many of us, in many ways. Now, I also see some young women, like myself, alive with the idea of friendship. Friendship, which gives courage to the idea of possibility. ... When friendship between nations and peoples seemed impossible, these women forged unimaginably everlasting bonds and commitments to each others’ work—through wars, peace processes and regime changes. They forged transnational feminisms and networks of solidarity underpinned by material, real-life commitments; they cared for each others’ children, they took each other into their homes, they were there whenever personal tragedy, or indeed political tragedy, struck in the lives of one another. (forthcoming)

Chhachhi and Abeysekera also talked about interventions in knowledge production which not only brought in regional analysis but also challenged academic hegemony by producing output in multiple forms including songs. Mangai also discusses cultural work that creates connections,

The most enduring, creative friendship for me is the one we evolved over almost 30 years in Sri Lanka. Suriya Women’s Group in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka and Sitralekha Maunaguru in particular has been special to me. Over these years of consistent cultural work with the group, we have created many works. In the course of such work, newer friendships and bondings with younger women, artists and scholars have evolved. Vasuki Jeyasankar, Sarala Emmanuel, Vijayalakshmi Sekar, Amara, Kumari and other members of the cultural troupe have become my close-knit circle of friends.

More recently movements that claim public space have also built cross border connections and collaborations via digital spaces. Sadia Khatri says,

Loitering on the internet, one ends up talking to people whom you would never have talked to in real life... Someone from India messages or someone from Nepal. Even though I don’t know what that person looks like, there is a moment of being seen, of mutual recognition. Jasmeen is someone I met online. Knowing that *Blank Noise* has been around for so much longer one could ask questions like how do you sustain a collective?

The Jasmeen she refers to is Jasmeen Patheja who started the *Blank Noise* initiative, against street sexual harassment in Bangalore, India. One of us, Shilpa, has also collaborated with the *Girls at Dhabas* on loitering initiatives. In 2015 and 2016, we ran online and street campaigns asking women across the world to loiter and share photographs of themselves having fun in public space. This collaboration enabled a conversation across our fraught borders. Neha Singh also speaks warmly about her friendship with Sadia Khatri from *Girls at Dhabas*, also a group that has taken a lot of inspiration from the book, *Why Loiter* (Phadke *et al.*, 2011)

Sadia and I have been friends online only. But we’ve also become friends through all those singing videos and all that I put up – she’s like, Oh my God, I love this song, because she also loves Bollywood songs. We’ve had a lot of discussions about how we negotiate and navigate with our parents, relatives and

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<sup>3</sup> A deeper engagement with work around the idea of chosen family (Weston, 1991) is beyond the scope of this article.

neighbours when we go out loitering. Asking is this gonna really change anything? But then constantly doing it and then engaging with more and more people.

bell hooks (1986) talks about the difference between support and solidarity arguing that support could well be occasional but solidarity requires a sustained ongoing commitment. Chhachhi and Abeysekera's (2015) essay traces the radical shifts that South Asian feminists made to challenging geo-political truisms in the region. They recount the ways in which feminists from the region made statements and overtures that contradicted those of their governments. In 1996, a Pakistani women's organisation, the *Women's Action Forum* (WAF) came out with a statement of public apology for war crimes of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh in 1971. The regional feminists came out with a South Asian Feminist Declaration in 1989 at a meeting in Bangalore, India 'campaigning for a joint charter of women's rights, sharing visions and developing alternatives to existing development models at the South Asian level from a feminist perspective' (SACW, 1989). This was revised and updated at a meeting in Negombo, Sri Lanka, in 2006. In 2010, ahead of an official South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting in Delhi, South Asian feminists came out with a booklet *A Feminist Vision of a People's Union of South Asia* (FVPUSA) that endorsed the idea of a peaceful South Asian region. More recently, and as indicated in our interviews, we have seen collaborations and the articulations of friendship across borders around feminist activists claims to public space. Digital spaces have also contributed to making possible some of these connections and the building of a robust dialogue even as governments of South Asian countries turn increasingly hostile to one another. The collaborations and connections we have engaged with above, some of them built over decades, reflect the earnest desire, the willingness to take risks to build solidarities across different kinds of borders and boundaries.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When women find feminist spaces, whether in the 1970s when funds were hard to come by and food came from your kitchen and one slept on mattresses on the floor, or in the 2010s and 2020s where strategising, conversations and connections are made via digital devices and social media, there is a recognition, a liberation even and the joy of having one's voice be heard. Our interviews suggest that for individuals these spaces were transformative, affording new chosen connections through friendship and creating structures of support separate from those tied to families. Friendship as the basis of social connections offered an opportunity to reimagine and restructure our relationships with each other and the world.

The pressing question that arises then is: have we in fact made inroads into challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships? The answer must be yes and no. Because families have been central to the ways in which we think about closeness, the language that feminist activists have used to note the value and importance of their friends in their lives, was sisterhood - the creation of chosen bonds the relevance of which was emphasised by describing them in the language of kin relations. For individuals these chosen bonds were deeply transformative providing as they did spaces to belong and the possibilities of becoming. However, even as friendship, given the element of choice, offered the possibility of radical transformation, access to these spaces and structures continued to be circumscribed by class, caste and community. Even as some found a form of freedom and liberation in these spaces, structurally little changed. As the decades have rolled by, there is greater recognition of these limitations. The language of sisterhood has been challenged in various spaces and has been replaced in some ways by the newer term allyship. Allyship continues to be fraught, but it is a term that offers distance from the language of kinship. There is recognition that friendships within feminism are not just embedded in the same structures of power that they challenge but that they may contribute to their continued existence. However, the frictions and fractures that are very much part of the terrain of feminist activism and friendships enable the challenging of these structures of power.

It is important to recognise both the value of striving to dialogue across difference but also that sometimes antagonisms are productive in the challenges they issue, demanding that we look anew at our ways of imagining a more just world. The experience of forging South Asian solidarities since the 1980s onwards yield heart-warming stories of friendship and narratives of the ways in which feminists in the region sought to counter the hostile geopolitical formations engendered by their states. Their collaborations allowed them to take risks in challenging their states openly and publicly. The 2000s have brought new collaborations not despite, but because, feminist activists are learning to be attentive to an ever more shifting terrain and confrontational politics, even as they recognise the need to unite against the authoritarianism that looms large over the South Asian region.

Feminist scholarship has tended to interrogate the neoliberal aspects of individuation that underlies an uncritical celebration of friendship. While it is important to recognise the pitfalls of romanticising friendships, it is equally important to recognise that deep, enduring friendships underlie feminist activism and these have made possible social change. To acknowledge the potential of friendship to build communities and enact a transnational analytic

of care is to be conscious of the ways in which friendships have been deeply transformative, not just at an individual level, but for feminist activism within countries, in the region, and even globally.

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