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The past in the present: memory and Indian women's politics

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Abstract

The usual interpretation among non-Indian historians has been that the high visibility of women in the 1930 Gandhian-led Salt Marches marked the beginning of women's activism. Yet, although usually very supportive of an end to colonialism, the women's movements had lent their involvement to the Gandhian campaign often only conditionally and with much caution. The value for women appeared to have been assured soon after in the Karachi Resolutions of Congress in 1931 and then in the later Indian Constitution of 1949. This Constitution was regarded by feminists in other countries as a model to be followed for future equality. Yet in India, the disappointments of such promises to recognize the needs and rights of women had become visible very soon after Independence. The women who came together to form the National Federation of Indian Women in preparatory meetings across India in 1953 were facing the frustrations of this disappointment. They were grappling with difficult strategic and political questions around class, caste, gender, and language. Their deliberations about the form of the new organization, its priorities, and its relation to existing women's organizations and to the Nehruvian Government were all informed by their memories of the long and active campaigns for women's rights, which had taken place long before 1930. This chapter will first outline those movements and then suggest how the memories of them contributed to the preparatory meetings for the NFIW in

1953, leading to the inaugural meeting in Calcutta in June 1954 and then the meetings over the next year as the questions around structure and relationships were still being thrashed out.

Memory and women's politics in India

Political narratives in South Asia in the twentieth century have been shaped by memory: the heroes of the past and the narratives of struggles, historic or mythic, have been invoked to bolster the promises of a modern, democratic, equal future. This uneasy entwining of a future modernist goal and a traditionalist and heroic past has characterized much Indian political rhetoric. Yet historians have been less interested in how memory has crafted this rhetoric than have ethnographers and scholars of literature.

In *The Nation and its Fragments*¹ (2009), Partha Chatterjee presents 'community' and 'women' as two fragments of the nation. At the moment of the birth of two nation states out of one colonial state, the bodies of numberless women were brought under the control of their respective communities in an act of disciplinary power that marked the idea of a community. Like other social and political movements, women's movements in this context faced the challenges of building both alliances and autonomy.² This entailed the construction of strong women's movements internally while forging international and transnational relationships with other civil society groups. Gandhi and Shah, for example, describe how the various women's movements in India used diverse strategies, including consciousness raising, pressuring public officials, and boycotting those who committed violence against women, to address a wide range of issues including violence, health, work, and law.³ Memories were crucial building blocks of

community and national identities. How women in these struggles remembered their pasts remade their conceptions of the present and demands from the future.

Many dominant Indian narratives of Independence assume that women became visible through Gandhian movements, such as the Salt March in 1930. Early Indian nationalists like Tilak argued that the traditionally subservient role of women in many Indian cultures had to change if India were to achieve independent modernity.⁴ More recent works⁵ have highlighted the limitations of such accounts, drawing attention to women's writing from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in, *inter alia*, Tamil, Marathi, and Bengali, in which there was energetic discussion about emancipation and modernity, though the strategies advocated were those of negotiation and conciliation rather than overt challenges to either Indian or British patriarchy.

In India, colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of an awakening among women; there were, however, differing views on the role and status of women within the anti-imperialist anti-feudal struggle.⁶ The visibility of women in the Gandhian movement from 1930 emerged from an alliance between a network of women activists and the Gandhian movement of *satyagraha*. The impact of this alliance was demonstrated in the Karachi Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931, which brought together the views expressed by women in their writing (as above) and those of liberal reformers. The Resolution demanded freedom, justice, dignity, and equality for women, seeing these as essential for nation-building. The national constitution of independent India reiterated these principles. Women involved in the Gandhian struggle based their politics on clear memories of previous attempts at changing the status and role of women in India.

The support of women for the Nehruvian socialist government after 1947 was by no means homogeneous nor unconditional. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was a broad

organization, many of whose members were middle-class and higher-caste Hindu women. The AIWC identified itself substantially with the Gandhian Independence movement and later the Nehruvian government, focusing on 'service' as its strategy for supporting newly independent India.⁷ In southern India, the Women's Indian League and the Self-Respect Movement,⁸ among other organizations, explored avenues for socio-economic and political mobility against the limitations of a low-income ex-colonial state which promised emancipation but failed to deliver, riven by the conflicts between women's rights and a longstanding patriarchal social hierarchy. Historians like Mazumdar and John argue that the decades after Independence were a loss for women, in contrast to the 1931 Karachi Resolution and the National Constitution in 1950.⁹ In this article, we explore two sites of memory which bring together repertoires of contention in the context of historical events, inter-generational connections, collective identities, and affective links or emotions. As Wydra contends, collective memory has been seen as a product of social frames that enable individuals to remember by means of language, symbols, and spatial-temporal markers. He quotes Pierre Nora as describing generations as communities of remembrance that perpetuate a foundational event, which created a self-conscious generation in the first place.¹⁰ Both of our sites involve the memories and activism involved in the establishment of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) and are excellent examples of these contentions, connections, and conflicts.

An increasing number of women were unhappy with the class and cultural limitations of the AIWC. Many of those had been involved in the Independence movement and their memories of resistance to British rule did not resonate with the 'service' ethos of the AIWC. Within five years of Independence, in 1953, these women met in Delhi to discuss the formation of an alternative national structure, which would include rural and urban female workers and those from different

religions and social groups. These women participated in regional meetings in India and the left-wing Women's International Democratic Federation in Copenhagen in October 1953 before establishing the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in Calcutta in August 1954. This meeting called on the memories of women's activism and desires for change in the decades before Independence and evoked the courage of the women who had fought for Independence. These activists' repertoire or frame for the break from the AIWC was the inclusion of all women (such as those in agriculture) rather than only the elite class.¹¹

By the 1970s, it became clear that Independence had fulfilled few, if any, of the promises of the Karachi Resolution or the Constitution. In 1975, *Towards Equality*, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women, showed a deterioration in all indices concerning women since Independence. Across India, disillusioned and disappointed women set about building new organizations, linked to the global rise of women's liberation movements. By the 1980s, there was a new body of vital and activist women's organizations across India, much of it critical of the Eurocentrism of the Northern liberation movements.¹² In this period, memory again became vitally important. One of the many activities which these new women's movements undertook via publishing houses such as Kali for Women, founded in 1984 by Urvashi Butalia, and S.P.A.R.R.O.W., led by C.S. Lakshmi in Mumbai, was the publication of the autobiographies and memoirs of women who had founded the NFIW in 1954 as well as those active in the Independence movement. The repertoire of activism in this period drew heavily on the memories and narratives of older women activists, celebrated in publication and in person as heroes of the Independence and women's emancipation movements.

We therefore analyze, first, the complex and conflicted memories of former struggles which were mobilized in the formation of the NFIW in 1953–4. Second, we consider the ways in which

the formation of the NFIW was remembered and how those memories influenced the current activism of the founders. As mentioned above, the NFIW arose from political disagreements within the AIWC and the different ways in which some members remembered their previous activism. We interviewed three veterans of the movement: Sarla Sharma, from Delhi, Primla Loomba, originally from Lahore and resident in Delhi after Partition, and Rajni Kumar, originally from England, who lived first in Shimla and later Delhi. Their memories influenced their later political activism as well as comprising part of a set of collective memories constituting the radical pasts that inspire current women activists.

Many authors have recognized the role of generations as carriers of memorial activity, traveling across spatial and temporal distances in time and space to shape narrative commitments.¹³ These generational memories are not ruptures with the past, according to Reinhard Koselleck, but ‘thresholds of experience,’ or hinges which allow doors to open for the transmissions of stories. Koselleck contends that thresholds mediate and connect across differences in biological age, fractures in historical time, and aspirations to future life and it is this fluidity that accomplishes changes of consciousness.¹⁴ Our research shows that many women were frustrated by the marginalizing of women’s rights after Independence. Women, including those in the regions, attempted as early as the 1950s to reset the political agenda and fulfill the promises for economic and political justice of the Independence campaign. These promises were remembered in the contexts of the long histories of women’s struggle for their rights before and alongside the nationalist campaigns.

Shaping the regional fields

Raka Ray argues that in the mid- to late twentieth century, the strategies and outcomes of women's movements are best understood by analyzing political power in their regions – that is, by the nature of the 'political field' within which organizations develop. She contrasts the 'dispersed' or 'fragmented' political field of Bombay with the 'concentrated' political field of Calcutta.¹⁵ Beyond such regional differences, however, there were significant tensions within these women's movements between those who fought within the existing social structures and those who challenged them.¹⁶ These tensions, reflecting class, status and cultural or religious affiliation, became apparent in the debates around the formation of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in 1953–4. In later memories, however, the political fields and regional contexts of women's activism became more prominent. Among the women we interviewed, it was their own personal experiences and contexts that imbued their memories of these events in the early years of the twenty-first century. For example, women's activism in Bombay and Calcutta took different routes. Bombay had been a cosmopolitan city for centuries, with populations from neighboring states as well as from West Asia and North Africa. After 1534, the Portuguese, then the British ruled the city and reshaped its land and society, while the Portuguese remained in Goa until 1961.

Padma Anagol demonstrates that, in Bombay, elite women from Hindu, Parsi, or Christian religions mobilized collectively from the early nineteenth century to achieve greater social and political independence.¹⁷ They drew on European ideas of women's rights but deliberately chose strategies of negotiation and compromise so as to not challenge established power. Anagol's analysis, covering the period till 1920, shows that the female editors of the active women's press in Bombay prioritized assertive political agendas while encouraging negotiation and conciliation.

It is no surprise then that the All India Women's Conference was established in Bombay in 1927 as an umbrella organization for women's voices.

Southern India's diverse cultures were connected through common Dravidian roots and shared Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic religious practices. Women in Madras built collective bonds through the Theosophical Society, which recognized the commonalities of all great religions in order to establish a 'brotherhood of man.' Theosophy was associated with progressive social and artistic modernism and attractive to many who opposed European colonialism, though it became closely aligned to Tamil Brahmin groups, mostly enmeshed in caste privilege. Theosophy's emphasis on the equality of women attracted many adherents in England and Ireland, such as Margaret Cousins, who had been involved in the struggle for Irish independence. She was a driving force in the 1917 establishment of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and contributed to its newsletter, *Stri Dharma*, published from 1918.¹⁸

At the same time, the Self-Respect Movement, formally established in 1921 by E.V. Ramasamy (or Periyar), in Madras and southern India, had enormous support. It called for universal equality, an end to Brahminical domination and the oppression of women and 'untouchables.' This movement's radical critique put it at odds with many northern Indian progressive movements, including the nationalists and Congress (which Periyar left in 1925). It was also out of step with the women's movements composed predominantly of elite Hindu, Parsi, or Theosophist women.¹⁹

Calcutta, the capital of the Empire under the East India Company and later the Raj till 1911, produced numerous activists prominent in cultural movements. Sarojini Naidu, a poet, was a stalwart opponent of the British regime and became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in 1926. The Communist Party of India (CPI), led by the Bengali Muslim

Muzaffar Ahmed, had a strong anti-caste position but was less focused on gender.²⁰ Bengali women in the CPI were active in a number of campaigns for civil and women's rights in the interwar decades. They became prominent during World War II when Bengal was threatened by the Japanese invasion of Burma and a severe famine in 1943–4. Several women's self-defense organizations, whose core members were from the CPI, formed the local Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti in 1942 to support neighborhood women against the upheavals caused by these threats.²¹ All of this activist work became part of a repertoire of memories that made possible the idea of future political work that would be dynamic and potent, based on recollections of unfulfilled promises as well as transformative interventions.

Women's movements and nationalism

The 1931 Karachi Resolution of Fundamental Rights and Duties, adopted by the Indian National Congress in March, was criticized by some Congress members as an awkward compromise between social conservatives and the left. Many saw it as the blueprint for a future independent India since it called for the removal of all legal, economic, and political discriminations against women, including unequal pay and was remarkable for its explicit inclusion of women in each category of equality.²² There is a passage in the May 1937 issue of *Stri Dharma* expressing its support for the decision by women's movements to abandon their campaigns for reservations or other preferential treatment.

Consequent on the magnificent terms of the Declaration of Rights in the Karachi Conference and the promise given by Gandhiji to a deputation of the South Indian women who brought the Madras Memorandum to him that he would secure adult franchise for women even if he failed to get it at once for men, all alternative proposals re franchise were dropped. These

Declarations have shown Indian women that equality of citizenship is assured to them in the new Constitution. In such circumstances and having realized and demonstrated their power as nationalist citizens during the past year women have risen above all temptations to write themselves down as needing protection or reservation or preferential treatment.²³

Gandhi believed that women could indeed be *satyagrahis* – and were in fact particularly suited to this role. His approach was reformist; he argued that Hinduism had an honored role for women who were fundamental to the new nation. Their role, however, was still to be defined by their family – they should become stronger wives and mothers. A subsequent meeting in Bombay of the AIWC agreed that they would campaign only for full Adult Franchise. The 1931 Resolution – backed by Gandhi's personal promise – was seen as a real commitment that women would be recognized as equal citizens in the new nation.

After Independence, the AIWC endorsed the new government. Many prominent members, like Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta, were active in the state or diplomatic bureaucracies set up by the new Prime Minister, Nehru. Most women's rights activists welcomed the departure of the British but only some fully supported the directions of the new Government. In the Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, the distinction between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles meant that many goals for achieving women's emancipation remained in the amorphous 'Directive Principles' category rather than actionable 'Fundamental Rights.' The women activists who were unhappy with the passive response of bodies like the AIWC sought organizational models elsewhere, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) conference in 1953.

The AIWC had refused to affiliate with the WIDF when it was established in 1945. Over the following years, Cold War anti-communism found an ambivalent response in India. The CPI was

banned from 1948 to 1952, with many members forced to go 'underground' or jailed. India developed strong political and cultural ties with the USSR, which were strengthened through the Non-Aligned Movement and because of the conflict with China in 1962. Yet there remained many elites in India who were reluctant to have connections with international organizations labeled as 'communist fronts.' The AIWC took this more conservative position, and argued against affiliation with the WIDF because of its association with the USSR. The memory of the AIWF's cautious and negative response to overtly socialist organizations was important in the later foundation of the NFIW.

Forming the NFIW, 1953-4

There were two major meetings attended by the women challenging the marginalizing of their sisters in independent India. Those wishing to participate in the WIDF Copenhagen Conference attended the Planning Meeting in Delhi on 9 May 1953. In addition, the inaugural meeting of the NFIW was held in Calcutta in June 1954.

The Delhi meeting was described by the WIDF as 'A Great Event! The first National Conference of the women of India.' There were meetings across India in the months before this event, including, according to the newsletter compiled by the WIDF from Indian reports, many 'in the working class areas' of Bombay; in Calcutta, meetings were held daily with 'great enthusiasm'; in Delhi, 'more than 30 meetings of Mohammedan and Hindu women' had been held in April alone.²⁴ There were 315 delegates who attended the Delhi conference, which then elected a group of 30 women to go to Copenhagen. This group represented many different Indian women's organizations and was led by Annie Mascarene, Member of Parliament for Travancore.²⁵

There were important discussions at these meetings about common goals among left-wing delegates from regional women's organizations. Hajrah Begum's 1973 summary of the key issues discussed is consistent with the memories of Primla Loomba. Generally, the Delhi participants believed that Independence had not fulfilled its promises and that the AIWC no longer represented their goals of equality and justice for women. Many attendees, like Kapila Khandvala and Sarla Sharma, had been active in the AIWC but were now frustrated about specific issues. They had lost confidence that the AIWC would argue for complete economic independence for women, for example, in night shift work. The majority of the AIWC membership was concerned that night shifts were not 'respectable' and should be banned for the protection of women. Left-wing AIWC members, like Primla Loomba, Sarla Sharma, and Kapila Khandvala, argued that women would lose their jobs and become dependent on their husbands or families and that the AIWC should demand crèches and other amenities to enable women with children to work at night in safety and security. They lost this vote.²⁶ Sarla, Primla, and Rajni retained strong memories of these debates and their failure to convince the AIWC that family ties and marital status should not define and entrap women. These memories became important triggers for their later break with the AIWC.

Another issue that these women remembered was the exorbitant fees for AIWC membership, which excluded working-class and peasant women. Hajrah Begum said:

Our slogan was '4 anna membership, mass membership of women.' They could not afford more. We wanted all women to come.²⁷

This vote, too, was lost. Only a few AIWC members, like Rameshwari Nehru and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, supported this fee reduction. Again, this demand recalled past struggles in the

campaigns for wider membership and the recognition of working women, which had been crucial to the rural literacy work of many educators in the interwar years.

The third problem was thorny. The AIWC refused to affiliate with the WIDF. Many of the women at the May 1953 Delhi meeting were members of or closely associated with the CPI and reluctant to break with the AIWC. The memories of the contributions they had made to the Independence struggle increased their frustration with the AIWC's decision. Their dilemma was resolved only after the formal inauguration of the NFIW in June 1954.

The delegation of 30 Indian women attended the World Congress of Women in Copenhagen, with an enthusiasm which Anasuya Gyan Chand described with amusement and affection in her recollections in 1973.²⁸ All the delegates returned with new ideas and the Bombay women's organization with the impetus to establish a separate organization.²⁹ The inaugural NFIW Congress Report optimistically records a diverse attendance, including women from the industrial working-class and agricultural laborers, although in subsequent decades support came predominantly from lower-middle-class professional women, like teachers. The theme of remembrance was strong in the warm wishes sent to the new organization. Smt Sharadaben Mehta, a patron of the AIWC, wrote:

I am in full sympathy with the objects of the Congress. Women of India enjoy equal rights with men only on paper. For full seven years, our legislators have failed to give us just laws in respect to marriage, special marriage or divorce. The provision of midwives and nurses in the village is extremely slow... Education of girls in the villages is extremely inefficient...the Government of India has done nothing to minimize prostitution by providing work for all women.³⁰

Sarla, Primla, and Rajni, particularly the latter, have vivid memories of their participation in the meetings and the conference and these pasts were seminal to the way in which they conceptualized their future activism and involvement in the young Indian nation.

The past in the present

How do the surviving veterans remember these events, which can be identified from historical research? Memory is more than a floating signifier; rather it is constructed, renovated, and subjectively negotiated; retellings of memory tell us more about those processes of subjective renovation than they necessarily do about the events of the past. Memory is elusive, neither the past nor the present. The rich textured ephemeral quality of memory means that, in daily life, it is always being negotiated with the present.³¹

The potent force of memory endures, not because it is ahistorical or apolitical but because it is politically, discursively, and historically constructed.³² Memories of the past are constituted of a continuous and dialectical process of the transmission of knowledge, information, beliefs and practices and the trajectory of customs and values proceeding from one generation to another. The memories of activism retold by Sarla Sharma, Primla Loomba, and Rajni Kumar were vulnerably linked to an entire network of personal, national, social, and cultural identifications. Their views of past radical movements were not static, mired in unchanging tradition; rather they resembled the artistic device of *pentimento*, a thinking and re-thinking of historical and contemporary political and social experiences. They were located in an unstable present between a past history of meaningful struggle, their current opposition to the oppression and marginalization of Indian women, and an unpredictable future where the rights they thought they had gained retreated like a mirage. Their present acquired its meaning within these disjointed and

conflicted temporalities. Gramsci refers to the ‘strangely composite’ nature of identity ‘which contains prejudices from all past phases of history’ and ‘deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory.’³³ These three activist women were therefore constantly involved in different forms of negotiation, between the memories of past activism and current regressive political discourses, between their families and communities and the Indian state. Their memories mediated the past and present, the local and the national. They were aware that the role and status of Indian women was a specter that haunted the national imaginary as anomaly, threat and the object of uneasy reflections about the nature of tradition and progress.

The women we interviewed each undertook different forms of negotiation between memory and forgetting. They had to travel the spaces opened up by changing notions of tradition and cultural change, the associations and inter-meshings of family, community, and politics and the individual and the ongoing mediations on silence and speaking.³⁴ The twentieth century promoted the cause of gender justice by internationalizing struggles for the equality of women and other oppressed people. Women’s struggles against their subordination were intertwined in varying degrees with ideologies and movements based on the values of freedom, self-determination, equality, democracy, and justice. No longer confined by region or means of communication, these now found expression through movements against imperialism, for national liberation and social transformation. The defeat of fascism and the forced retreat of imperialism around the mid-century paved the way for social advances of which gender relations were a key component, along with the other broad objectives of human rights and the end of iniquitous social orders. The revolutionary changes which followed the two world wars also created fora and structures that promoted debates on women’s rights. The International Women’s Decade was initiated in 1976 during this period of hope, but by the end of the decade these

aspirations were already shaky. By the time we interviewed our narrators, the context in which the international struggle for the advance of women's rights was waged had been transformed.³⁵

In this section, we consider the memories of Sarla Sharma, Primla Loomba, and Rajni Kumar about the formation of the organization to which they all belonged, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). These women had been active in progressive movements from the 1930s onwards and they continued to be involved in anti-colonial and left-wing struggles for all their lives. All were in their nineties when we interviewed them, each on several occasions between 2012 and 2015.

Primla was born in 1924, in Lahore in present-day Pakistan, to a well-off Hindu family. Her father was a High Court judge and she spent the academic year at school in Lahore, and summer vacations at the family home in Simla. She gained her BA from Kinnaird College and graduated from Government College, Lahore in 1946. Primla had been active during her undergraduate years in the students' movement in Lahore and its vigorous Independence campaigns had left her strongly committed to public activism. In June of 1947, Primla left her parents' house to visit her sister in Ferozepur in Punjab. In August, partition happened, and Primla never returned home again. She left India in January of 1948 to study for an MA program in political science at Radcliffe College, Harvard University.

Primla married a trade union organizer, Satish Loomba, and both decided to dedicate their lives to the work of rebuilding their new country. They believed in Nehru's idea of India, a nation which would transcend class, caste, religion, and gender, and they were appalled by the violence and hatred unleashed by Partition. Both joined the Communist Party of India, for which Satish worked full-time, and Primla threw herself into organizing the National Federation for Indian Women. She also started teaching full-time at Delhi Public School. In the late 1960s, Primla

received a Fulbright Scholarship to teach in Florida for a year, at a time when those schools were de-segregating. Primla became the first (and possibly only) female Indian teacher in the USA who, wearing a sari, held the hands of black children and escorted them into previously white-only classrooms. She sat with the black students through their classes to ensure they weren't mistreated and escorted them back onto the buses that took them home. In her conversations with us, she recounts how these memories of inequality in one of the most powerful and wealthy nations of the world spurred her into her fight against caste and gender oppression in India.

Sarla Sharma was born in 1921 into an enlightened and progressive upper-class family of Theosophists. Her grandfather had been one of the founders of the first girls' school in India, Indraprastha Hindu Kanya Vidyalaya, and had employed an Australian theosophist, Leonora Gmeiner, as its principal. Sarla attended this school and her activism began early. She led a movement among the school's students against singing the British national anthem or saluting the British flag. She was involved from the time she was a schoolgirl in the nationalist struggle in Delhi and was injured in a baton charge by the police at a demonstration. Later, between completing her BA and a degree in Economics, she became a member of the Communist Party of India and was imprisoned for a year for her anti-colonial activities. As a CPI delegate, Sarla visited many countries, including the Soviet Union, Yemen, Switzerland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, and China. After a long period of membership of the AIWC, she was one of the founder members of the National Federation of Indian Women.

As women who had grown up in India, Sarla and Primla shared many concerns in common, although the differences in their early lives made their memories of the women's movement distinct in some aspects and similar in others. Rajni Kumar, however, had a different background. Born in 1923, she grew up in a middle-class family in England as Nancie Jones and

met Yudhishter Kumar when he was studying in England. In 1944, Yudhishter returned to India to take part in the Independence struggle. Nancie followed him soon after, in circumstances we will discuss below. Committing herself to India, Rajni changed her name and married Yudhishter on Independence Day in 1947. The memories which Rajni recounted about the formation of the NFIW are shaped by her different background, but they explain most clearly of all three narratives the ties that bound these activists together.

Each of these women were from affluent and high-status families, but their political and personal choices shaped their lives. From the late 1940s, each of them faced poverty and some form of social exclusion because of their political affiliation with the Communist Party or with left-wing activism. They saw themselves as aligned with working women – mostly urban women in professions like nursing and teaching rather than rural agricultural labor, and they were committed to the economic and legal independence of all women. Each of these women took an active role in the formation of the NFIW, yet each remembered that process in different ways. The themes that emerge from their memories are three-fold: first, the issues faced by women in India and how to ameliorate them; second, internationalism and solidarity between the women of the world and how to achieve these aims and third, the affective relationships between the women themselves, where their political differences were subsumed by their personal experiences as comrades in the struggle.

Women's issues in India

Many women from overseas attended the founding meeting of the National Federation of Indian Women in 1954 in Calcutta. Betty Riley, from Australia, and Dora Russell, from the British National Assembly of Women, were two of the speakers. Sarla remembered Dora's visit

particularly well. She accompanied Dora on a study trip to rural India after the Calcutta conference, and Dora produced a report which she presented to the WIDF. Sarla herself was a visual artist – she supported her family by selling her paintings when her fellow-Communist husband could not find work – and she went with Dora on this trip as photographer:

I went along with them with my camera not big cameras like you have. Kodak camera costing 5 rupees at that time, that was 1954. I'm only acting as the photographer.

Dora, however, took this project seriously, as Sarla explained:

She went into the interior of the villages, into the huts of the women. How they were working, what they were doing, their occupations. Because, generally, the women in the countryside, they do not go out for jobs. But whatever they can get near their houses or near their huts, they are all employed and they earn something for the family. So that [was what] Dora Russell studied very hard.

Sarla remembers this incident as instrumental in her later focus on the necessity of eyewitness testimony and serious research for the support of causes through the rest of her activist life.

Primla had been active in the women's movement as an undergraduate in Lahore. Despite Sarla's activism at her secondary school, she spoke less about university students' activism than Primla.

Sarla's work as an artist, an actor in the Indian Peoples Theatre Association, and her later election to the Municipal Council in Chandni Chowk in 1954 replaced her student activity.

Primla's memories of university activism were stronger but they led her into the Communist Party where the powerful tool of class analysis better illuminated the problems of women. She recalled that her primary interest remained the nationalist movement led by Gandhi. As a

resident of Lahore, Primla was fascinated by Gandhi's disagreements with Jinnah. The AIWC, however, wasn't very well known in Lahore and, unlike Sarla, Primla was never a member.

So, you know, ... it wasn't a women's question at that time ... we never talked about women, about their oppression, but a little later – when we became closer to the Communist Party, most of us were either working on the cultural front or on the student front ... they said that you should really go and meet with the men and organize them and educate them about, you know, women and politics.

Primla's initial memories of the NFIW were related to the issues of Indian working women. She recalled many debates about the form and role the NFIW, including its links with the AIWC. She believed, like those on the left in the AIWC, that the new body should be open to all women, whether political or non-political, who 'put in their energy – in positions and without any positions, if they were only housewives – they all came together and joined the NFIW.'³⁶ Primla also remembers the major controversies within the AIWC about women doing shift work at night and high fees for membership, as mentioned above. The general consensus among the AIWC was that women shouldn't be working at night.

[They said] there's far too much you have to do to keep the safety for women. So they (the AIWC) said, 'Don't employ them.' So we said, 'You cannot leave them, give them alternatives.' And that was one controversy with the AIWC. They were stopping this night work. And the second one was about the membership. See, we said there should be an open membership and ... the mass of women should be able to come. And we said there should be just a four anna (1/4 of a rupee) membership, you know ... And they said, 'Well, you know, YOU can work for them' and there was a much more sort of welfarist attitude of the AIWC.'³⁷

Sarla recalled being actively involved with Kapila Khandvala in the struggle for the rights of women nurses and mine workers to night shift work and sick and recreation pay. She explained that the AIWC was reluctant to support these causes as they seemed too political and divisive.

The All India Women's Conference took up this position that they should not be allowed to work for the nightshift ... they were turned out of the [mines]. That was no solution. So we protested against it. So then they [AIWC] said, 'Oh protesting and demanding something, that means political action. We are not going to do politics.' I said, 'That is human action, not political action!'³⁸

Primla recalled that another major focus of activism by was the question of dowry, and the property rights of women.

And we wanted to activate women to make these women think about themselves. So the first activity that people indulged in, was the Hindu Code Bill and of course [that] bill never became a reality. They passed only two, different married laws ... But property rights were given, you know, that is the father's self-earned property ... but at the same time, the issue was dowry. And dowry wasn't really initiated by the NFIW. It was an issue taken by the AWC also and women's education, that was there.³⁹

Primla found it hard to get a job because her husband was a known communist and trade union activist. Without the artistic skills which had helped Sarla to support her family, Primla used her tertiary education to teach in a coaching college. There, however, she experienced sexual harassment first-hand and realized that, as well as poverty and economic discrimination, this was another issue that women had to battle.

[I]t was a horrible experience, very horrible. They wouldn't pay and there was so much sexual harassment and I wasn't conscious, can you imagine? ... You know, I mean the fellow, he would sort of go and touch – I used to have a lot of hair, a lot of hair ... and he would ... do this and do that ... you know, we were not conscious that all these things, you see at that time there was no such thing, you know? As a matter of fact, women's issues were mainly that our understanding was, arising out of poverty, you see. And we said that the main discrimination that women face and the oppression, comes from poverty, and it is true also in a way. But there is the other side of this, you know, that harassment.

It is important to emphasize that, for Primla and Sarla, the early memories of their student activism were crucial in the break from the AIWC. They were convinced that being passive and domesticated in the political arena would not advance the cause of women's rights. The remembrances of the failed promises of the Karachi Resolution and the Indian Constitution were essential to the future activism of these women and their commitment to a more dynamic form of politics. Their political ideals contained mnemonics of failure, on shift work, dowry and the property rights of women, which spurred them on in their future activism.

Internationalism and solidarity

Raza, Roy, and Zachariah call the interwar period (1917–39) the 'internationalist moment,' when attempts were made to create platforms, movements, and political networks that transcended state and national boundaries.⁴⁰ Then World War II intensified the international connections of many activists, through education overseas or interactions with servicemen from abroad. Such networks continued to be important after the war, particularly for decolonizing independence and women's movements, offering support for emerging socialist countries. The AIWC had been

active in making international contacts but balked at interacting with the socialist world. The Charter of Women's Rights was adopted at the AIWC Congress in January 1946 before being taken to the United Nations by Hajrah Begum that same year. Socialist organizations took part in events in India, including the meeting in February 1948 of the World Federation of Democratic Youth Congress in Calcutta, after which a WIDF team of inquiry traveled through northern India. The All India Peace and Solidarity Congress in Madras in December 1954 had delegates from all over the world. The left-wing members of the AIWC who eventually formed the NFIW fostered international alliances with the socialist and the non-socialist world: its members Malabika Chattopadhyay and Primla Loomba both worked at the WIDF in Berlin in the 1980s. Sarla considered that international networks were crucial to the formation of the NFIW. She thought, for example, that memories of the Women's Declaration of Rights passed at the World Congress of Women at Copenhagen in June 1953 had inspired the formal establishment of the NFIW. In particular, the remembering of a moving episode at that Congress where a document with 17,000 signatures by Bengali women in support of the declaration was presented to Dora Russell, was inspirational for the founders of the NFIW.

In her speech at the 1954 conference, Dora spoke of the need for women's emancipation and the role of women in preventing further world wars. 'Women's struggle for social rights, for peace, are not a separatist women's movement, nor can it be anti-man.'⁴¹ Sarla remembers that speech well, particularly because she wrote the Hindi language sections of the NFIW newsletters:

She spoke about that and how women need bread and peace for their children and not wars. That was the main strain of her speech, which was very much liked. And immediately an illiterate woman from the audience got up, got up came to the mike and said, 'Can I say something? ... We are all women, we all love our home and children and all ... We don't

want wars. We don't want bombs. We only want bread. Bread for our children so that they can feed.' It was clap – everyone.

Sarla also recalled the other international visitor, Betty Riley from Australia, who spoke eloquently about the horrors of the war and the hydrogen bomb, saying that women throughout the world must unite against them.

50% of the world's population are women. For whatever they unite and strive must have far-reaching and effective consequences.⁴²

Primla's narration of the inaugural meeting focused more on the Indian founders of the NFIW whom she saw as motivated by world peace. The NFIW was involved in most of the peace conferences held at that time in India and the world.⁴³ Both Primla and Sarla were in constant contact with the national liberation movements of Palestine, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the women's committee of the Soviet Union and the CND in England on issues of world peace. Primla later was specifically involved with international protests, like those against the Tomahawk missiles in the UK in the 1980s. After this, Primla spent a year at the WIDF in Berlin in 1986 where she cemented her international contacts. The memories of these international links and actions were instrumental in both Primla and Sarla retaining their sense of being 'citizens of the world,' concerned with injustice wherever it happened. Even at their advanced age, they were frequently called upon to speak at demonstrations in support of global liberation movements.

Affective relationships

It became clear through our interviews that the strongest memories held by these women which influenced their activist work were of the relationships they had built with their fellow activists.

They met women from other cultures, with different religious beliefs, ways of life, and political ideologies. The major factors that kept them active in various causes were memories and ties of personal affection. When we asked Primla about Freda Brown, she fondly remembered her personal qualities as well as her activism.

Oh Freda was really a lovely person ... and she just had a way of making a speech – she appealed to common people, otherwise you know we tend to talk so much in jargon ... or we feel that those high ideas must go to the common people. But she had such a knack of putting things and she was really a lovely person, lovely person ... She spent an evening here [at Primla's house] and she ate everything. Oh, she loved it ... we had a good evening, you know. But I remember Freda, you know when her first grandchild was born, she would bring all these photos ... and we all felt that we knew her.

One particular case demonstrates these affective ties clearly, that of Rajni Kumar. As Nancie Jones, she had met her Indian husband Yudhishter Kumar in London where he was studying during the war. In 1944, he decided he would return to India, to a turbulent life in the Freedom Movement and later the Communist Party. Nancie's mother and the colonial government discouraged her from following him as she wanted to do.

... when we went up to the ward office to get my permission to go, they also put my mother off and said that, 'How would you know this man is not married with a family? We find so many Indians who come here and when they go back there, we find that they're already married with a family and you knew nothing about him. We know nothing about his family so you're taking a big risk.'

Kumar, however, contracted tuberculosis and wrote to Nancie, telling her not to come as his condition was dire. Nancie continues:

When the letter came and I read it out to my mother, I said, 'Mum, what would you do?' She said, 'You must go, dear. He needs you.' ... They were very supportive, no doubt about it. I think when you're very sick, you have somebody you love by your side. It certainly helps them. It gives you that desire to live, yeah. So I think I did do the right thing and of course I was very much in love with India.

Rajni Kumar became active in working among the left in India. She considers herself as a founding member of the NFIW though she was not able to attend the 1953 Delhi meeting because her only child was gravely ill. He died in the coming months, leaving Rajni devastated. Her fellow activists decided that Rajni should go to the Copenhagen conference in October, even though she was not originally chosen to go, because she urgently needed a change of scene:

I was very, very broken. [He was] just four and a quarter, four years and actually I was out for a few months.... So I was recovering from my shock and the [ladies] said, 'Rajni should join the delegation. It'll be a therapy for her to go.' So normally I think I would not have been added, frankly. They did this for me because I was in a state of suffering and it did help me a lot because I went there and seeing all of that makes you realize other people's sorrows are much more than your own.⁴⁴

Remembering is the means through which individuals bring their past to bear on the present and connect old and new spaces. Rajni's remembering practice coexists with both the present moment and her memories of affective relationships. The memories of these women demonstrate that people, places, and memories are too expansive for the national borders that attempt to contain them. Rajni's memories are rooted in her body and geography, the physical loss of her son and the geography of exile. They locate similarities among women from a variety of backgrounds, troubling the binary oppositions between the foreign and the familiar, safe and

dangerous, acceptable and unacceptable, and home and away. They enact what Zadie Smith calls ‘a mockery of that idea, a neutral place.’⁴⁵

For Sarla, Primla, and Rajni, memories of affective and emotional ties were an intrinsic part of their politics. The narratives of their activist lives were filled with remembrances of other activist lives, where the ties of affection mitigated against premises not necessarily held in common.

Whether we’re communist, Congress, Theosophist, or of other political persuasion, these activists could work together on common goals and maintain personal relationships that transcended their differences. These memories were important in shaping their present politics which was about finding common ground on which to work, rather than highlighting differences.

The memories of Sarla, Primla, and Rajni are active practices, producing analogies among locations and people and enabling them to move fluidly between the present moment and stories of the past. Our narrators experienced and remembered their activism, in the women’s movements, the nationalist struggles, and current battles for female rights, in different ways and sought to remain both attuned to those divergences and communicate across them. For them memory is inclusive, not because every member of their communities remembers their activist experiences in the same ways, but rather because each is engaged in the practice of active remembering, which creates new spaces that incorporate disparate backgrounds and histories without flattening differences.⁴⁶

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³ Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992).

⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sanjay Seth, *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations (Interventions)* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Gail Pearson, 'Women in Public Life in Bombay City with Special Reference to the Civil Disobedience Movement' (PhD diss., JNU, New Delhi, 1979); Gail Pearson, 'Reserved Seats: Women and the Vote in Bombay,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 20, no. 1 (1983); Padma Anagol, 'Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India,' *Gender and History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 603–627; Padma Anagol, 'Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers: The Beginnings of Feminism in Modern India,' *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 523–546; Annie Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930–1960* (New Delhi and London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁶ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

⁷ Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship*.

⁸ Michelle E. Tusan, 'Writing Stri Dharma: International Feminism, Nationalist Politics, and Women's Press Advocacy in Late Colonial India,' *Women's History Review* 12, no. 4 (2003): 623–649; V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thas to Periyar* (Kolkata: Samya, 1998).

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¹¹ Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement 1940–1950* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980); Gargi Chakravartty and Supriya Chotani, *Charting a New Path: Early Years of National Federation of Indian Women* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 2018).

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¹³ Wydra, 'Generations of Memory.'

¹⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003) quoted in Wydra, 'Generations of Memory,'

¹⁵ Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press., 1999), 11.

¹⁶ Hajrah Begum, *Recalling Old Days: How the NFIW Was Formed* (NFIW Twenty Year Anniversary Special ed.) (Primla Loomba, 1973), 4–5; Geraldine Forbes, 'The Politics of Respectability: Indian Women and the National Congress,' in *The Indian National Congress: Centenary Highlights*, ed. D.A. Low (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1988), 54–97.

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²³ *Stri Dharma*, May 1937, 286.

²⁴ *WIDF Bulletin*, 1953 #10.

²⁵ Begum, *Recalling Old Days*, 4.

²⁶ Primla Loomba, interviewed by Devleena Ghosh and Heather Goodall, Delhi, January 2014.

²⁷ Hajrah Begum, NMML Oral History interview by S.L. Manchanda, 1994. NMML, 9 September 1994, quoted in Chakravartty and Chotani, *Charting a New Path*, 42.

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