A brief report
INTERSECTIONALITY: KNOWING AND DOING
A panel discussion hosted by Jagori and Sangat

2 - 5 p.m., 17th August 2015
Lecture Room 1 (Annexe), India International Centre, New Delhi

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Summary: While the concept of intersectionality continues to be widely talked about and deployed by a range of rights and development practitioners and academics in India, feminist scholars and practitioners have also interpreted, used, praised and criticized it to different degrees. This created the need for a deeper and collective engagement with the issue vis-à-vis women’s and feminist groups as well as other allied groups that represent and work on behalf of certain identities. Therefore, the entire discussion — led by panelists and followed by the audience — saw participation from a mix of academicians, activists, researchers and students. The result was a multi-faceted and thought-provoking session that brought up a range of views and experiences, led to clarity but also raised challenging questions about solidarity building. It was felt by many participants at the session that intersectionality requires a building of political imagination and consciousness-raising, so as to develop empathy and understanding within groups, campaigns and movements.

Introduction  Kamla Bhasin

Panelists*  Sumit Baudh
Jaya Sharma
Anita Ghai
Syeda Hameed
Nandita Gandhi
Nivedita Menon

Moderator  Pamela Philipose

* For brief bios of each of the panelists, turn to page number 11.
Major threads of discussion

Opening remarks

Kamla Bhasin introduced the team behind the conceptualization and organisation of the panel as well as the panelists and the moderator. She also shared her understanding of the term and expressed the opinion that while the term was well-known, it may not be that well-understood. Often defined and explained through jargon and theory, many people report grappling with its meaning and usage. Kamla reminded the panelists as well as members of the audience that since many present at the session were not academics, it would be preferable to articulate reflections in a manner that is simple, and therefore widely and commonly understood.

Sumit Baudh: As the first speaker, Sumit summarised Kimberle Crenshaw’s understanding of ‘intersectionality’, the term she had coined in the late eighties. He shared the backdrop that led Crenshaw to it: while working for the legal rights of blacks in the United States of America, Crenshaw found that within legal categories, black women’s cases were positioned neither as issues of race nor as that of gender. Besides, in the way that law is structured, all remedial measures require specific categories as bases to define individuals. This led her to argue how different axes of individual identity had to be taken into cognisance by law when examining cases in court.

Sumit’s presentation was hinged on his critique of the dominant subjectivity of law. He used Naz’s 2001 legal challenge to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (that criminalises
homosexuality) and his own experience with the anti-377 coalition ‘Voices against 377’ to build his case. He observed how despite fighting for the rights of queer people, the Coalition struggled with intersectionalities of the queer identity that it stood for and encountered difficulties with the non-intersectional vocabularies, processes and understanding of law and the courts. For example, he highlighted how affidavits of LGBT individuals had to be given to the court even though Voices was committed to the term and politics of “queer”. This underlined how law fails to comprehend intersectional subjectivities. He highlighted the absence of Dalits and working-class queer from the campaign and this meant that questions of caste and class got ignored. Not only did he share how ‘Voices against 377’ has failed at intersectionality, but also how he was unable to hold his own Dalit subjectivity for fear of rupturing the solidarity of the campaign.

**Jaya Sharma:** She started her presentation by marking out what intersectionality is not. Jaya disagreed with the commonly used analogy of “crossroads” to describe or visualise intersectionality. Instead she argued that as a queer feminist activist, her identity as a woman cannot be separated from her bisexual identity or vice versa. She does not see her gender and sexuality as two distinct axes that overlap or intersect, but those that co-constitute each other.

In highlighting how identity-based fissures surface during intersectional campaigns, Jaya recalled how in response to cases of lesbian suicides, women’s groups allied with PRISM, a LGBTQ group, but asked that PRISM lead and draft the response. Jaya saw this as an example of intersectionality
gone wrong because fundamentally, lesbian suicides should be seen as violence against women. Yet, in the Voices against 377 campaign, women’s groups played a central role not as allies but core members of the coalition.

Jaya suggested that intersectionality is about how we “slice it”. Explaining this through the example of sex work, she argued that if the sex work debate is sliced on the lines of sex workers versus non sex workers, the debate can only reach till the subject of rights of sex workers. On the other hand, if sex work is analysed along the lines of accepting sale of sex as “work”, this can lead to questions of sex versus love. Through another example of Dalit bar dancers, Jaya posited that Dalit feminists have seen the issue as exploitation and this led to an impasse. In this case too, if we sliced it along desires of Dalit women and the shrinking of space for Dalit women’s sexual expression, the matter would offer a different lens. For lesbian and bisexual women, evoking support from women’s groups could be done by raising heterosexual privileges and violations.

Jaya clarified that identities do matter for example when arguing for women’s rights, but a narrow focus on identities has its limitations in solidarity building across movements. Therefore, the need is to carefully use intersectionality in a way that helps us work together. The way out of the traps of identities and power is to engage on the basis of core interconnections. A “my issue, your issue” approach is false because regressive norms are all around us and in us. So, she said, “how can our responses be anything but intersectional?” Jaya ended her presentation by suggesting that intersectionality also has to be turned within so as to get self reflexive and know our own multiple privileges. While we need to assert some identities and struggle with others, the value of intersectionality lies in working together.

**Anita Ghai:** Anita brought to the table the neglect of disability by an otherwise and often intersectional women’s movement. Starting from a personal note, Anita described how her memory and subjectivity are of a disabled person but also of being a woman. Over the
years of her teaching and work within the women’s movement, she was drawn to a spectrum of issues such as secularism, feminism, among others and was physically present in solidarity and struggles for these concerns. A number of issues such as land, livelihoods, religion and so on became crucial for the feminist community but in that process identities got drowned. She asked whether others, specifically non-disabled individuals, understand the concerns and participate for the rights of disabled women with equal enthusiasm.

Anita expressed regret that disability became a token at times even at IAWS (Indian Association of Women’s Studies) events. She recalled how in the Wardha conference of IAWS, only three disabled women were present, including herself. Anita also stated that while she went along the intersections, that did not contribute much to the cause for which she stands for: disability.

She read out an excerpt from a newspaper report about the shocking Rohtak rape case whose victim was a mentally-challenged woman. The vivid details of the violations done to the woman proved how extremely gruesome the crime had been. Anita used it as an example to ask why despite the intellectual impairment of the raped woman, the case failed to evoke the same outrage as the December 16 gang rape in Delhi. Why were feminists silent about it? How do we contextualise the gory Rohtak case with intersectionality? Via another example, she mentioned how the Equal Opportunities Act was diluted in 2013 yet no feminists wrote about this. She highlighted how class can fall through the cracks in feminist analyses and such gaps should be brought into the politics of identity. Anita shared that she had studied the historical sketch of campaigns done by women’s movement for disability and found only two examples.

The point that Anita sought to emphasise was that disability was virtually absent from law and, sadly, even feminist politics. She concluded by stating that while intersectionality is certainly useful, we have to change our own view about disabilities. A better perspective to adopt would be to see disabilities as invisible and imminent for every individual.
Syeda Hameed: Syeda shared how in her own work and life’s experiences, her identity as a Muslim, a woman and a practising, devout Muslim who does not wear the hijab has come to overpower her identity in her public life as well as in her own consciousness. Thanks to rising Islamophobia, Islamic fundamentalism has become a taziana for her (a taziana is a whip). Within this context, Syeda recognised her own social, class and professional affiliations and the privileges these bestow on her. In the same context, she asked about the positioning of her neighbours from working class pockets such as Abu Fazl Enclave near her residence. Where does a poor, illiterate, differently-abled Muslim woman belong: in a woman’s organisation, or a differently-abled organisation or a livelihood organisation?

Syeda flagged these issues to problematise intersectionality. With all these multiple identities, how can individuals ever be slotted in identities, especially when each identity is specific to its context. Recalling her work at the Planning Commission, Syeda recalled how by including texts on women’s agency and enabling women’s voices to be articulated, she tried to be intersectional in her work. However, to make members of parliament understand it was an uphill task.

Nandita Gandhi: Her view was that intersectionality has been a rather valuable concept for the women’s movement in India. She recalled how in the Mathura rape case, her identity as poor and tribal were not taken into account in feminist debates. These were followed by dowry burnings and so the debates around dowry focused on inheritance. She recalled how Sharmila Rege had said that if we had Dalit accounts vis-à-vis dowry, it would have changed the complexion of those debates. The case that Nandita built was that those feminist debates were located where debaters were located and therefore lacked intersectionality.
When intersectionality came into feminist lives and work, it was highly seductive. Intersectionality may even have outshined patriarchy/patriarchies and all other such concepts. The effect of postmodernism was that there were no ‘categories’.

Nandita shared the example of their “experiment” with intersectionality in the World Social Forum’s 2004 edition in Mumbai. Many “women’s groups” were involved in it. As part of the organising team, Nandita and her colleagues invited LGBT, labour, women’s and Dalit groups on stage. They called this the Inter-movement Dialogues. The format was such that it required each of these identity-based groups to pose questions to the other group as also respond to their questions. So, for example, Dalits were asked why hijras were part of the LGBT movement but not the Dalit movement. The LGBT group was asked they sought marriage rights because the women’s movement had critiqued the institution of marriage, and so on.

In conclusion, Nandita argued that in her own work with the World Social Forum and other allied campaigns, her analysis was that all movements understood multiple identities but were not being intersectional in their respective work. Unfortunately, there is a hierarchy of issues, and each movement is defined on the basis of the category it represents.

Nivedita Menon: She started by stating that while the need for clear language and expression is important, we should not valourise simplicity at the cost of clarity. Since the term intersectionality comes from legal history, in a way we cannot avoid theory during discussions on it.

Speaking at the end of the panel discussion, Nivedita pointed to the varied ways in which panelists had related to intersectionality: from defence to dissent. Intersectionality does not capture the difficulties and the case of internal dissent that Syeda brought up. Nivedita questioned the value of intersectionality with the question of the imperialism of concepts/categories. To her, intersectionality is a pre-existing ‘non-western’ concept that
travelled widely because of funds from the UN and international NGOs. Its purchase is thanks to facilitated travel, such as in the case of gender. Therefore we need to ask if funding agendas depoliticise radical politics. For Nivedita, intersectionality is useful for governments but not in feminist spaces.

She stated that while Crenshaw used intersectionality to make law more sensitive and sharp, but a huge body of scholarship from UK has argued that the use of intersectionality concretizes categories. Besides, as we know from the Indian feminist experience of law, law is enmeshed in categories.

Another question she posed was if all identities are intersectional or only marginalised ones, since some identities empower you while others do not. To her, there are criss-crossing lines of dissent, disjunctures and solidarities and not one umbrella under which all axes of identity get subsumed. Intersectionality, as proposed by Crenshaw, however assumes many-layered oppression. She agreed with Jaya Sharma’s interpretation of intersectionality and warned against the conflation of “intersection” with “intersectionality”. She too sees the latter as “mutually-reinforcing vectors”. A better term, she suggested, that can capture universal conditions is “diversality”. She sees intersectionality as an empty place whereas its textbook definition freezes notions of pre-existing identities.

**Discussion**

The discussion that followed was moderated by Pamela Philipose. Prof. Mary John, in her response to the panelists, congratulated them for their excellent presentations. She also asked if our issue with intersectionality’s ‘western’ origins is new because many terms we deploy have also come from the global North. To her, the claimed universality of the term is not her biggest concern. She is intrigued by the concept because while its birth is from marginal black and gendered spaces, we now think of it as a solution, one that interlocks issues. Her argument was that
Intersectionality is most productive not when seen as a solution but as the naming of a problem.

Members of LGBT groups and Dalit communities, students and researchers posed many questions such as how do we ensure that while we raise one of our identities, the others are not reduced in comparison? When one identity disappears because the others have been flagged, is it right to assert the invisibilised identity? What about our fear of weakening solidarities of movements by raising our identities?

In response, the panelists suggested that with our understanding of intersectionality, we do not have to start doing something different because intersectionality is already happening. The women’s movement has been intersectional and continues to challenge itself internally. Intersectionality should begin with us and our own identities. “Knowing” and “doing” are inter-related, and so we need to embed intersectionality in our policy framework. When so-called non-disabled people speak on disabled issues, it is an example of true intersectionality. The absence of Bhanwari Devi from this moment or the exclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians from the definition of Scheduled Caste highlights why intersectionality is needed and important.

Concluding remarks

Suneeta Dhar thanked the panelists and the participative audience for a successful discussion. She hoped that this learning will not pause with the end of the session and that others would help carry this dialogue and practise. Jagori and Sangat have collected a dossier of reading material, including papers shared by some panelists; this will be shared with those who attended the session. She hoped that the dossier will grow with more contributions from others.
The panelists

Anita Ghai is an Associate Professor of Psychology, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi. Her interests lie in the intersection of disability, psychology and gender. As a Former Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum Library, Teen Murti Bhawan, Anita’s has researched on issues of care of disabled women recipients. She was the former President of the Indian Association for Women’s Studies and has authored ‘Rethinking disability in India’, (Dis)Embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women and co-authored The Mentally Handicapped - Prediction of the Work Performance.

Jaya Sharma is an independent researcher and trainer. A founder member of Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, she has also co-founded queer activist forums based in Delhi. For the past fifteen years she has been working on issues of sexuality, with a focus on building linkages between the queer movement and other movements such as the women’s movement. She has also been intensively involved in capacity building related to the sexuality of community-based NGOs working with women from marginalized communities.

Nandita Gandhi has been active in the contemporary Indian Women’s Movement since the 1980s. She was one of the founder members of the Forum against Oppression of Women and Akshara, a women’s resource centre. After a brief stint as a journalist, she turned to academics, collaborating with ISS, The Hague to write two books: ‘The Anti Price Rise Movement in Mumbai’, and ‘Contingent Workers: Women in Two Industries in Mumbai’, which was also her doctoral dissertation. She has also co-authored ‘Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India’.

Nivedita Menon is Professor at Centre for Comparative Politics and Political Theory, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, is the author most recently, of ‘Seeing like a Feminist’ (2012). She is an active commentator on contemporary issues on the collective blog kafila.org (of which she is one of the founders). She also has translated fiction and non-fiction from Hindi and Malayalam into English, and from Malayalam into Hindi, and received the A.K. Ramanujan Award for translation instituted by Katha.

Sumit Baudh is a consultant in the areas of law, human rights, caste, race, gender and sexuality. He has worked across different sectors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations and academia and has served as assistant professor/assistant director of the Centre
for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, National Law School of India University, Bangalore. He has served as legal advisor, researcher/consultant to the Arcus Foundation, UNDP, CHRI and Unilever. He is currently doing his Ph.D at the UCLA School of Law.

**Syeda Hameed** is a writer, activist and administrator. Over the years she has focused on Islam in the modern world with particular emphasis on Muslim women and Sufism. The books she has written encompass these themes as well as Modern Indian History and Development. She did her Masters and Ph.D in Canada. Back in India, she got involved in national concerns as part of the National Commission for Women and later the Planning Commission which has now transmogrified in the Niti Ayog.