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Toward a Feminism Without Scaffoldings: Mapping a Research Project, a Narrative from the Field, and a Draft Bill

By Debarun Sarkar¹

Abstract

The paper maps the site of a funded research project to understand how three knowledge articulations—harassment-knowledge, LGBTQ-knowledge, and intersectionality-knowledge—intersect in and around a research project and are produced, circulated, interrogated, and codified to note how intersectionality-knowledge effaces other possible articulations. The paper begins with an auto-ethnographic account of a Ford Foundation funded research project in India, led by key power-brokers of the LGBTQ+ movement, focusing on concerns of discrimination of non-normative genders and sexualities in India. The paper juxtaposes a Ford Foundation funded research project, a narrative from the fieldwork conducted for the project, and a draft of the *Equality Bill, 2020* drafted by an organization invested in legal advocacy. The paper highlights the depoliticization of intersectionality, arguing that necessary work must go into mapping the social and the political before intersectionality is deployed as a straight-jacketed methodology in research work, mobilization or advocacy. In doing so, the paper argues that intersectionality's overt focus on state-reform risks depoliticizing queer/feminist politics.

Keywords: Knowledge, LGBTQ+, Intersectionality, Harassment, Research project

Introduction

A funded research project is a flow of knowledges, bodies, data, and capital, which makes it worthwhile to investigate a research project as an assemblage². The following paper takes a research project as an object of inquiry to look into how three traveling knowledge (Salem 2018) articulations—harassment-knowledge (Brewis 2001), LGBTQ-knowledge, and intersectionality-knowledge—intersect in and around a research project, are produced, circulated, interrogated, and codified. By adding the suffix of 'knowledge'³ to 'intersectionality', 'LGBTQ+', and 'harassment', the intent is to highlight the codification and reification of these processes into translatable articulations which erase the messiness of the 'social' (Latour 2005b, 29). By using this suffix, the paper is marking out the processes by which the heterogeneous and contingent articulations vis-a-vis 'intersectionality', 'harassment', and 'LGBTQ+' are obfuscated to arrive at packageable knowledge claims which are indifferent to the contexts where these knowledge packages are delivered and made operable, to arrive at "happy points" of intersectionality celebrating 'diversity' (Ahmed 2012, 14). While the early proponents of intersectionality couldn't have foreseen its eventual canonization, reification and depoliticization (Bilge 2013; Ahmed 2012; Puar 2012), it is important to note its hegemonic status in feminist knowledge production and circulation today (Yuval-Davis 2006; Menon 2015) and how its reified solutionist articulation i.e., intersectionality-knowledge, has emerged as a liberal legal solution to address inequality.

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² By 'assemblage' I'm referring to a collection of ideas, discourses, bodies, institutions, and their coalescing. Assemblage here is borrowed from actor-network theory while being cognizant of its deficiencies (Buchanan 2015; Müller and Schurr 2016).

³ Following (Foucault 1977), knowledges here is used to refer to certain regimes of truth wherein certain articulations are raised to the status of truth that foreclose the possibility of other articulations.

The paper looks at a research project called “An Exploratory Study on Discrimination of Non-Normative Genders and Sexualities” funded by Ford Foundation⁴ which was housed at Advanced Centre for Women’s Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (henceforth, ACWS, TISS) that I was a part of with another fellow investigator in an extremely tangential manner (see Figure 1). As student researchers we were invited to pedagogic workshops which were not part of the larger project. A certain amount of fieldwork expenses, particularly for travel, were reimbursed, and a final amount of 5000 INR i.e., roughly 70 USD was released as payment for “services”. The project finds only a minor mention in the larger project report (ACWS, TISS 2019).

The larger research project was initially framed in 2014 following the Supreme Court of India ruling on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in December 2013 which re-criminalized sex acts, “against the order of nature” (Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation 2013) overturning the previous judgment passed in 2009 by the Delhi High Court (Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi 2009). The project began in 2016 and lasted until 2018, a little before the eventual overturning of the 2013 ruling in which Section 377 of IPC was declared unconstitutional “in so far as it criminalizes consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex” (Navtej Singh Johar vs Union Of India 2018). Around the same time, another judgment in 2014 by the Supreme Court of India recognized the right to self-identify one’s gender (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India 2014).

It is amidst this backdrop that the project aimed to mark new avenues for queer activism by involving its own set of power brokers, all key figures in the Indian queer movement for more than a decade. The project covered a range of issues from health, housing, education, public spaces, and political formations resulting in a wide range of outputs such as reports, posters, podcasts, exhibitions, publications, etc. which were directed towards “influencing policy, engaging in advocacy, and strengthening the work of organizing, supporting, and changing social attitudes” (ACWS, TISS 2019, 11). The final project report marked the shift in LGBTQ+ discourse from the debate on “de-criminalization to anti-discrimination,” (ACWS, TISS 2019, 9). Discrimination in the project was defined using varied approaches, sites, and methods that reflected the heterogeneous nature of the project. Our work was part of the sub-project, 'Gender and Sexual in Student Politics' which was housed in the 'Political Formations' team. Drawing from the experience of participating in the project, the paper maps and notes the divergent theoretical accents existing side by side in the project.

Within the larger research project, our work mapped various activist responses to the issue of sexual harassment and its effect on student politics in Jadavpur University, Kolkata⁵ (Arora and Sarkar 2022). It was this initial fieldwork experience that acted a catalyst for us to reflect on the manifestation of intersectionality knowledge in everyday life particularly in the case of left student activism. This narrative, which is provided in the sixth section, highlights the limitations of intersectionality knowledge to address asymmetrical power relations. The narrative in turn highlights the necessary work that must go into mapping the social and the political before intersectionality is deployed as a straight-jacketed methodology in research work or in everyday life. The paper demonstrates through this case of sexual harassment that the evaluation of marginalities to address offences fails to acknowledge asymmetrical relationalities that play out in everyday life. This argument tied in with the larger concerns noted before that the project raised i.e., keeping an open-ended approach towards the queer

⁴ This wasn’t the first time that Ford Foundation has had a direct influence on queer scholarship (khanna 2016) and in Indian academia at large. Ford Foundation has a long history of knowledge and technology transfers in India (see for e.g., Banerjee and Chakravorty ; Sackley ; Sunil).

⁵ In India, public universities fall under the ambit of the regional state governments and the union government. Jadavpur University founded in 1955 is a state-university i.e., a regional university in Kolkata in the eastern state of West Bengal.

project, the mapping of the social and the political beyond the narrow confines of legal activism.

In a later section, the paper juxtaposes these divergent pathways of queer knowledge productions against the advocacy for intersectional approach to law and equality as framed by the Centre for Law & Policy Research (CLPR) and the draft *Equality Bill, 2020*⁶ which is discussed in detail in the seventh section. This juxtaposition allows for mapping LGBTQ+ knowledge production and circulation, its actors, and provides an insight into its changing contours. The intent is not to draw a causal relation rather to weave a discursive landscape. This juxtaposition becomes even more pertinent given the surfacing of the precise signifier of intersectionality and its manifestation in a legal judgment by the Supreme Court of India (Balaji and Dhawan 2021).

Post-377, LGBT-knowledge and its proponents in India have been trying to move into terrains beyond evidently LGBT concerns and queer disparate sites of struggles. The draft *Equality Bill, 2020* is placed in such a context wherein it is precisely these disparate sites of queer struggles which are limited by an obtuse concern with the state and the juridical order, foreclosing further deliberation and disagreement on what might constitute an egalitarian arrangement. To think and further an egalitarian arrangement necessitates that equality remains open to further deliberation and disagreement so that the political is not foreclosed through an entry of the juridical order and subsequent bureaucratic management (Rancière 2004; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). The paper responds to the developments in both women's studies and queer studies in India parallelly because the two fields are irrevocably intertwined with their concerns of gender and sexuality, with the three knowledges being a central focus for both of them. It was our location in a research project primarily concerned with LGBTQ-knowledge and political formations which enabled us to interrogate concerns of harassment-knowledge, interfacing it with intersectionality-knowledge to demonstrate a) the overdetermined nature of the sexual harassment and b) the limits and reifying tendencies of intersectionality-knowledge in the legal register. However, despite this heterogeneity informing queer activism post the decriminalization of section 377, it is precisely intersectionality-knowledge which gets re-deployed within legal state-gazing activism as a catch all solution for 'equality'. It is this jagged knot of these three knowledges that the paper maps akin to the way science and technology studies (STS) scholars mapped scientific knowledges, their production, and circulation (Latour 1987). But at the same time, this being a feminist endeavour, the sterile neutrality of STS is abandoned to accompany it with the critical mode of feminist scholarship (Haraway 2004; Latour 2005a). The paper does not attempt to undo the messiness of these three knowledges but trace and map the relationship of them from a view from the margins of a research project.

While intersectionality was framed within a legal register by Crenshaw (1991) who is herself a legal theorist, Crenshaw's frame interrupted the existing legal/political order which couldn't account for multiple marginalities and differences⁷. As Crenshaw's articulation was framed within the legal register, the hegemony of the legal and juridical order remained unchallenged in her articulation. Today, as is the case in the articulation of the CLPR drafted *Equality Bill, 2020* intersectionality accrues a catch-all solution to the problematic of difference and inequality where it is presented as a depoliticized solution which chooses to reform the state rather than as a political interruption which tries to rethink the social and the political order

⁶ The draft Equality Bill, 2020 was published by Centre for Law, Policy & Research, a legal think tank based in Bengaluru, which has no direct relationship with the larger project under investigation except a few overlapping actors. The organization has been engaged with state-gazing trans-activism and trans knowledge production and circulation.

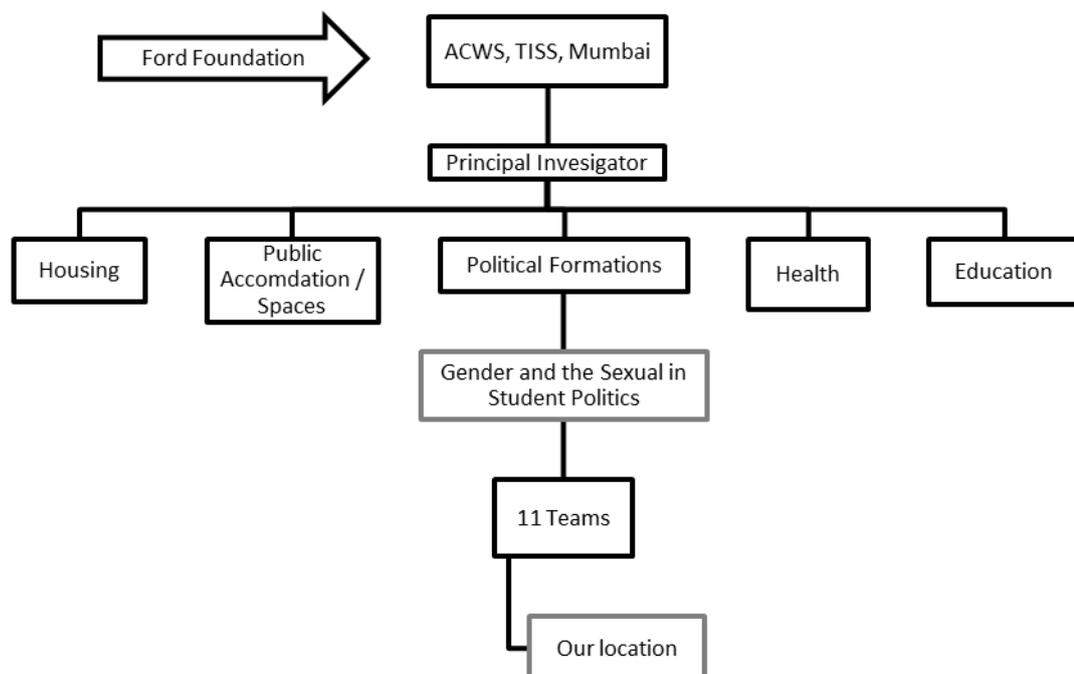
⁷ Certain black theorists have highlighted a much older genealogy of intersectional thinking which traces its roots to black lesbianism in the US which emerged out of informal reading circles, like Combahee River Collective, rather than formal advocacy groups with institutional support.

itself. The CLPR draft bill and advocacy for intersectionality must be placed within this later context without harking onto the initial intent or formulation of intersectionality. In CLPR's articulations, one finds a deployment of intersectionality which frames the 'social' as one where actors are made to vie for maximum marginality against each other akin to the narrative from the field in the sixth section. A whole host of literature over the past decades and more has pointed out the institutional appropriations of intersectionality (Ahmed 2012; Menon 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006) and its undoing. Moreover, intersectionality's overt metaphysical grounding in mobilizing identities to make sense of the world remains its greatest limitation wherein socially constructed representation is privileged over becoming (Bernstein 2020; Colebrook 2004; Geerts and Tuin 2013; Puar 2012).

At the core of the intersectionality debates reside two crucial tensions: first, a possibility of another future bereft of narrow identities (Arif 2015; 2018), however multiple vs. a deep desire to respond to the present in an immediate fashion (Das 2010; Sreekumar 2017) by addressing the marginalities and inequalities through identitarian means; second, there exists, as the bill by CLPR demonstrates, a tension concerning the role of the state and what sort of feminist futures are possible under the regime of the state (Arora 2020). In its critique of intersectionality, the paper is invested in evoking a feminism suspicious of rigid scaffoldings that in their certitude obfuscate the world out-there (Colebrook 2004). Following this, the paper also disavows the injunction to disclose or highlight the author's identity using available registers of caste, class, gender, sexuality, etc., as is expected in feminist research methods, as the paper argues precisely against such a gesture, and any such mention would dilute the argument.

An ethnographic approach is deployed to provide narrative examples from the field which is then brought in conversation with 'remembered narratives' (Keightley 2010) ensuing from my own participation in the aforementioned research project. Being at the margins of a major funded project as a student investigator allowed me to participate, observe, and witness (Dewsbury 2003) these productions and circulations without any contractual obligations.

Figure 1

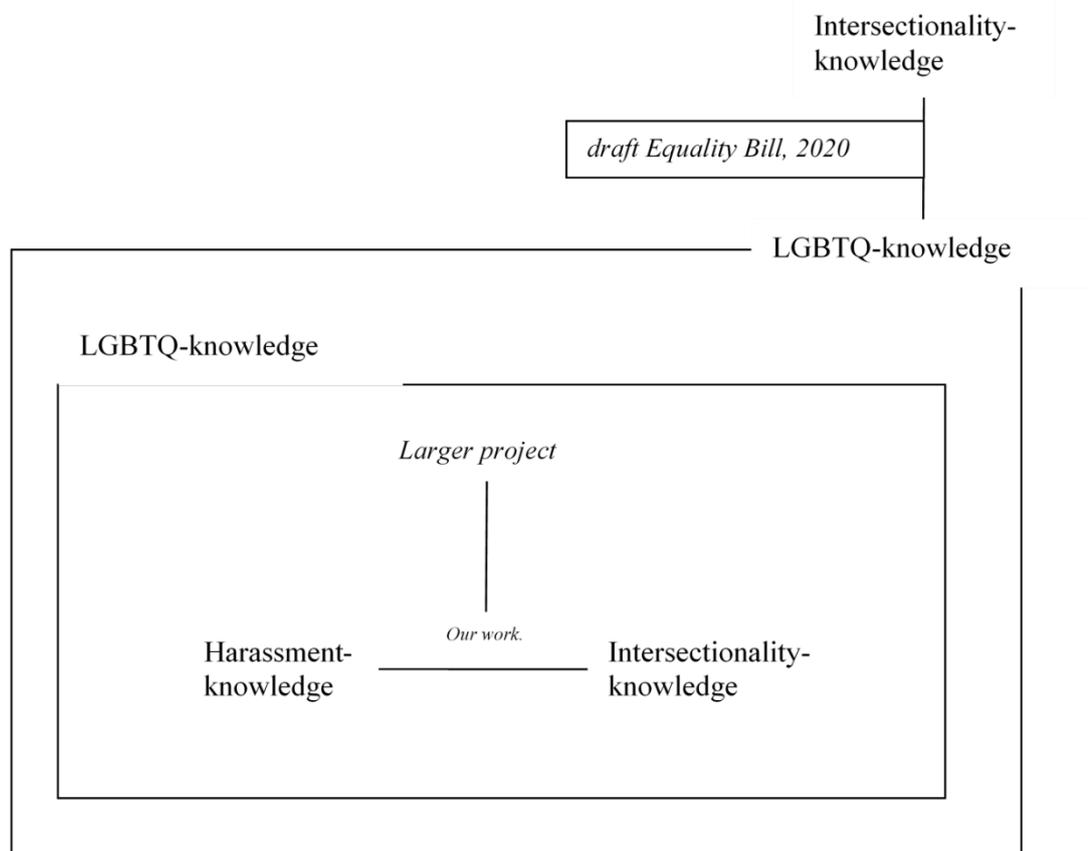


The flowchart displays structure of the larger project and our relationship to it. Other projects might have had sub-projects housed within them as well which I cannot verify.

The paper tracks three knowledges that intersected and coalesced around this research project and our own work within it by juxtaposing the heterogenous nature of the research project that emerges out of queer activism concerned with discrimination, a narrative from the field, and a legal articulation which wishes to address the problem of ‘discrimination’ but in turn flattens the ‘unruliness’ (khanna 2012) of politics and the ‘thickness’ of the social (ACWS, TISS 2019, 85).

In the second section, the paper begins by situating the convergences between the three knowledges of intersectionality-knowledge, harassment-knowledge, and LGBTQ-knowledge in the Indian context where the three knowledges are intertwined and entangled and how this entanglement is reflected upon our own participation in the research project (see Figure 2). In sections three and four, drawing from my own participation in the project, I offer an account of the research project focusing on the interactions with fellow researchers in the larger project and the pedagogic directions that our research was directed towards through workshops and further interactions. The fifth and the sixth section offer two cases which show the limits of intersectionality-knowledge and harassment-knowledge as it manifests and is made operable by the actors in the field. The seventh section notes the intersectionality-knowledge and its juridical encounter in the draft *Equality Bill, 2020* concerned with addressing discrimination and articulating a vision of equality as a site where intersectionality is ‘undone’ (Bilge 2013).

Figure 2



The figure visualizes the narrative and the argumentative structure of the paper. It visualizes the relationship between the three knowledges, our work, and the larger project and the draft Equality Bill, 2020 and how one domain leaks into and connects the other. The visualization Start from 'our work'.

Situating Convergences: Harassment Knowledge, LGBTQ Knowledge, and Intersectionality

The sexual harassment discourse and the articulation of LGBTQ+ politics both have particular convergences in their early interactions with the Indian women's movement. Both had to face opposition from within the feminist discourse as sexual harassment was seen as an “American” and “bourgeoisie” issue (Sunder 1996) while the very signifiers of 'lesbian' and 'gay' were under contestation and still are in queer literature in India (Dave 2012; khanna 2016). The early 90s is marked in modern Indian history as the initiation of post-colonial India into the global market. It is amidst this context that the LGBTQ+ movement finds its footing, slowly being flushed with financial capital from the West (Dave 2012; khanna 2016).

The struggle against sexual harassment by the women's movement has been decades long (Phadke 2003; Tejani 2004) whose legal manifestation one finds in the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013* today. The struggle, among other things, managed to hold the state accountable and demand certain institutional reforms against sexual harassment. What followed afterwards, as witnessed by the publication of the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia ⁸, has had its own peculiar relationalities particularly with the digital and the law. At its heart, LoSHA was a symptom of the failures of law and institutions to govern the minutiae of everyday life.

With the publication of LoSHA, one of the axes of debate among feminists was concerning the nature of due process while another axis of contention, primarily appearing on social media, was concerned with the identity of the compiler of LoSHA, the identity of the accused, and the identity of the feminists calling for a sustained engagement with due process. The second axis clearly marked a certain manifestation of ‘intersectionality-knowledge’.

The ‘intersectional’ approach, however, even if not directly acknowledged in earlier literature in women's studies in India, has been vigorously debated vis-à-vis the concerns of identity and difference (Chakraborty 2003; Datar 1999; Guru 1995; Rege 1998; 2000). More recently, the debate has shown concern that ‘intersectionality’ has become the normative, hegemonic knowledge with the UN accepting it as a valid methodology for policy-making (Yuval-Davis 2006). The debate between Menon and John is a tipping point in this debate wherein Menon argued that though intersectionality appears liberating when approached from an identitarian category of ‘woman’, on the other hand it appears stifling when approached from a terrain of fluidity. Responding to this, John (2015) situated the history of the concept and its radical beginnings, locating it in the context of US feminism which allowed for ‘diversity’. John's retort to historicize the radical beginning of intersectionality failed to account for its contemporary codifications in the juridical register and its dilution within popular politics that take the form of ‘intersectionality-knowledge’, as the instance of LoSHA made it apparent.

These knowledges finally converge within the draft *Equality Bill, 2020*, drafted by a Bengaluru-based think tank Centre for Law & Policy Research (CLPR) co-funded by the European Union. The drafters locate decriminalization of section-377 as a provocation to ask ‘what next’ vis-à-vis the LGBTQ+ movement as well as the necessity to arrive at an intersectional understanding of “positive rights, equality and non-discrimination” (Kothari

⁸ List of Sexual Harassers in Academia eventually acquired its own acronym LoSHA. Further detail is provided in the fifth section.

2019) within the juridical order. The draft was published after consultations with ‘stakeholders’ and upholds intersectionality as one of the key legal remedies to acknowledge “multiple discrimination” enumerated by 26 axes of discrimination and combinations henceforth. It goes on to suggest that “multiple and intersectional discrimination amounts to compounded or aggravated discrimination and shall entitle the complainant to claim additional damages, protection measures and any special remedies” (CLPR 2020). *Equality Bill, 2020* exemplifies the codification of intersectionality-knowledge as a juridical measure, wherein intersectionality-knowledge totalizes the social field, obfuscating the heterogeneity that certain teams in the research project envisioned and stressed through ideas such as ‘thick sociality’ (ACWS, TISS 2019, 85) and expanding the multiple ways in which discriminations can be defined and understood.

First Encounter with the Research Project

I received a forwarded email for a 'call for abstracts' around the month of September 2017 from a professor at the university I am currently affiliated with. The call for abstracts was titled 'Gender and Sexuality in Student Politics' and had asked for ideas ranging from creative writing and personal experiences to academic engagements. The call mentioned the researchers with their bios written in an informal tone. I and my fellow investigator with whom I eventually co-authored the paper had noticed the trend of naming and shaming on social media that was slowly emerging in university campuses, particularly Jadavpur University, a campus which has had a streak of left-wing activism for decades. It's the emergence of this phenomenon of naming and shaming on social media within a non-affiliated left organization which would peak our eventual interest.

Our first intent was in articulating this new phenomenon of naming and shaming and mapping its relationalities. One must bear in mind that this was before #MeToo and LoSHA which would make naming and shaming much more visible in India and across the world. Shaming per se isn't a new phenomenon in feminist praxis, but the reconfigured relationality of the private/public, victim, accused, accuser, technology, and shame was something that drew us to engage with this phenomenon. After the acceptance, one of us was asked to attend a workshop in New Delhi. Given logistical and financial reasons, as they promised to pay travel and lodging expenses for one co-author, I attended the first workshop. Two smaller workshops were later arranged in both Delhi and Bangalore which my co-researcher attended. People weren't yet asked to present a draft of the research paper, but much of the workshop consisted of what the organizers in a tongue and cheek manner referred to as ‘mistress classes’, a play on the phrase ‘master classes’. The workshop was attended by undergraduates, postgraduates, a few doctoral candidates, working professionals, and one doctorate working in a corporate setting.

This is the first time I would meet the researchers of the Political Formations team. The workshop had a seemingly informal character with elaborate performative clothing that gave the workshop a distinctly queer atmosphere (Anderson 2009). The workshop was initiated with jokes and games. The coordinators were dressed up in a mix of Indian ethnic wear such as kurtas, harem pants, sarees, dhotis with lipstick, and such attire, less visible within the formal, non-metropolitan, academic settings. It is important to highlight these markers because none of the other student participants were dressed in a manner which would give away their ‘queerness’.

There was a certain performative streak by which the workshop differentiated itself by clearly marking it as a non-normative classroom not just by one's clothing but how those bodies in turn navigated and interacted with the space around them. The workshop was conducted

inside the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University⁹ with no fixed location for the two days, moving from one room to another, and eventually moving out of the rooms. We were provided with a vague notion of what the workshop would be like and had imagined it to be a formal academic conference with paper presentations. We were made aware of the workshop's pedagogic approach and it being a research project only after we visited the venue. This informal nature of the workshop coupled with being well funded—in terms of the quality and type of accommodation and per diem the participants were provided with—threw me off in the beginning, but at the same time made me curious enough to persist with the project at hand.

Pedagogic Delimitations

The team's introduction to their own larger project which they were working on was presented to all the participants early in the morning. They had been looking into student politics in the University of Delhi¹⁰ and Jawaharlal Nehru University from a particular lens of 'erotics of the leader'. They would provide examples of Umar Khalid, a left-leaning activist against whom a frivolous case of sedition was filed—who is currently in prison since late 2020 over an unrelated case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act—as a figure that aroused sexual desire on the campus and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bragging of his '56-inch chest' as an example of how such imageries evoke a certain configuration of desire vis-à-vis the public. Building on khanna's conceptualization of *sexualness*, the team's approach towards the study of desire moved away from the concerns of sexuality as an identity to sexual as a field of desire. This shift in thinking which the workshop attendees were encouraged to follow dislodged the centrality of identity from queer thinking. Queer in such an articulation was not an identity but a mode of relation. This turn was echoed in another team's work, focusing on discrimination as well as anti-discrimination policy vis-a-vis housing, which argued that the focus of existing literature had "so far, remained largely on identities...[but]...Within the thickly social, it is the interaction rather than the identity of the actors that anti-discrimination practices must focus on" (ACWS, TISS 2019, 20–21).

During the course of the workshop, the participants were also encouraged to think through the concept of 'unruly politics'. 'Unruly politics', that calls for "engaged citizens, activists, development practitioners and academics to participate in...brave experiments of imagining a true politics"(khanna 2012, 171), was presented as a helpful category to think about the messy realities of political praxis. The coordinators of the workshop would go on to cite Badiou's militant subject (Meillassoux 2011) as a subject necessary for practicing politics. Engagement with Badiou remained superficial during much of the workshop because of the lack of time and the larger concerns of the workshop to provide the younger students with training in methodology.

Throughout the workshop, the name-markers such as that of Foucault, Deleuze, Zizek, Badiou, Lacan, Malabou, Saussure, de Certeau, Althusser, etc. were used as clear pedagogical markers to encourage a very particular accent of scholarship. Such acts must be considered as genealogical claim-making and not banal taste judgements. Pedagogically, the project tried to push forth a genealogy of 'French theory' and continental philosophy while making sure to note the coordinators' own contributions and ideas.

As noted, the informal yet funded nature of the workshop had made me curious about the larger research project. But it was the insistence on working with the idea of 'unruly politics' and 'sexualness' which piqued my interest. It is precisely this 'unruliness' which one

⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru University, a public central university i.e., a university under the ambit of the Union, was founded in 1969 and is situated in New Delhi.

¹⁰ University of Delhi is a public central university i.e., is a university under the ambit of the Union government, was founded in 1922.

finds lost amidst the codification of activism and knowledge-production when they start to gaze towards the state. My own interest in politics has been driven by an idea of the ‘political’ where the state is only one site in a larger spectrum of the ‘social’ riven with conflict and possibilities of egalitarian tendencies.

This tension between research oriented towards immediate goals vs. approaches which wanted to interrogate and map the messiness of the social was reflected in the nature of the queer projects envisioned to tackle the premise of discrimination. The project report begins with a methodological note that lists nine axes (namely, caste, class, religion, race, ethnicity, age, ability, region, language) to map processes of discrimination. The approaches to ‘discrimination’ ranged from focusing on questions of access and identity, perceptions of vulnerability to focusing on everyday relationalities and interactions.¹¹

Interlude: An Event before Entering the Field

A few months into the research project but a few months before the proposed fieldwork in Jadavpur University, a list of male academics was published in September 2017 by an individual by the name of Raya Sarkar, who were accused of being perpetrators of sexual harassment. The list-form was distinct from the #MeToo phenomenon which caught on in the media industries, globally. The list-form worked in a very peculiar fashion and allowed for anonymity of the accusers. Raya Sarkar became the individual face of the list, like a crowdsourced compiler of sexual harassment accusations in Indian academia. Sarkar, a citizen of Singapore (Banerjee and Ghosh) and a student in an American university during the publication of the list, had previously studied law in an Indian private university. I’m not interested now in how the list was made or its methodology of naming and shaming. Rather, I’m more interested in the effects that the list created.

The list, which eventually acquired its own acronym LoSHA, led to two distinct articulations from feminists in academia. First response dismissed the list as it violated the principle of natural justice (Menon et al. 2017) while the other characterized it as a ‘list-statement’ (Chadha 2017) or a new form of ‘speech’ (Sen 2017). The first group was decried for being out of touch and were eventually characterized as ‘old feminists’ while the younger feminists on social media were characterized as the new feminists. This characterization has its own set of problems in today’s age of neoliberal rampant calls for ‘new’ innovation and the dismissal of past struggles. Similar distinctions between ‘old’ autonomous, organized women’s movements with ‘newer’ forms of public protest were previously made during the protests following the Delhi gang rape case in 2012. Tellis (2012) had dismissed the popular movement which was clearly not led by the women’s movement but was a popular upsurge—which also included various conservative tendencies—following the volatile years of populist movement against corruption which had then swept the capital city of New Delhi. Roy (2015) argued in contrast to Tellis that one should be open to new forms of organizations and processes. It’s important to note that new forms of organization and social movements and phenomenon must be clearly distinguished as a methodological consideration and not necessarily a political one. What is ‘new’ and ‘different’ might not always be desirable.

The defenders of the list soon resorted to ad hominem attacks on the feminists who hadn’t agreed wholesale with the list. They were quickly characterized as ‘savarna feminists’ i.e., upper caste feminists. Raya Sarkar, the host of the list, would soon publicly start identifying

¹¹ The case of the housing team’s work is exemplary in the way in which the very framing of the larger project around discrimination was challenged and dismissed as inadequate. For example, it argued that the “conceptual category, ‘discrimination’ is not able to hold or understand what prejudice or the expectations of it does to everyday life. It cannot understand the subtle ways of self-disavowal, of the impacts of living with prejudice around you, the shifts in one’s own aspirations and notions of a good life” (ACWS, TISS 2019, 22).

herself as a Dalit and dressed up her social media profiles with images of Savitribai Phule¹². This claim to a certain identity location and genealogy was quite different than how the Dalit movement usually resorts to mobilizing rights-based discourses or more militant universal egalitarian articulations.¹³ On the other hand, in this case Dalitness was proclaimed to gain access to a position of marginality, *tout court*.

Arif (2018) argues this much more succinctly in an evocative essay dwelling on the suicide letter of Rohith Vemula, a (Dalit) student activist from the University of Hyderabad who committed suicide in January 2016. Arif notes how one's personal identity today in case of conflict or situations of discrimination or suffering becomes the one which would best fetch social justice like an algorithm, a process which is cynical yet pragmatic in contemporary politics.

This algorithmic pragmatism that Arif evokes is precisely the ways in which intersectionality is undone, as Bilge has argued, where different identity claims are made to compete with each other as opposed to formulating "radical social justice agendas". In such moments of algorithmic pragmatism that circulates as intersectionality-knowledge, intersectionality is both "'hailed' and 'failed' simultaneously...as a range of minority struggles are incorporated into a market-driven and state-sanctioned governmentality of diversity [and] knowledge of 'diversity' is presented as a marketable expertise'" (Bilge 2013, 407). Similarly, in the debate that ensued post LoSHA, the identitarian claims were deployed to gain access to a position of marginality, that merely named the difference of Dalit women as an issue of identitarian politics, "privileging knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity" (Rege 1998, 44) as opposed to recognizing the "need to reformulate and revision feminist politics for the non-brahmanical renderings" (ibid.). Thus, in the case of LoSHA as well as in the case of draft *Equality Bill, 2020* as we will see below, intersectionality in the form of intersectional-knowledge where it is networked with capital flows, deployed for legal regimes, is "diluted, disciplined and disarticulated" (Bilge 2013, 407).

Entering the Field: Identity Trumps¹⁴

Much of the data for the research project that we had proposed was already collected experientially over the past few years. We interviewed a few actors that we were able to meet in the short span of the project. The point here isn't to reiterate the previous research paper; instead I will recount one particular instance which worked as a catalyst for us to start thinking about the limits of intersectionality-knowledge as a method and an idea for research and praxis.

During an instance of direct action to break locks of all locked women toilets in January 2017, a woman close to the members of United Students Democratic Front (USDF)¹⁵ (but not herself a member of the organization), accused a male member of another student body, Radical, of sexual harassment. Both Radical and USDF, two unaffiliated left-wing organizations, had been in alliance during 2017 campus elections in which they had both put up a dismal performance.

The female student, the accuser in this case, approached USDF, the organization she was close to, to hold a meeting to make the particulars of the case public, following her failed

¹² Savitribai Phule was a social reformer, educationalist, and poet from Maharashtra in 19th century colonial India. She has emerged as a key icon for the Dalit movement and the feminist movement in Maharashtra and beyond.

¹³ For example, the Dalit Panthers Manifesto (Joshi 1986) or the demands made by Jignesh Mevani—an independent MLA representing Vadgam constituency in Gujarat assembly—for land redistribution.

¹⁴ The following narrative is rewritten and adapted from the paper produced for the project with a shifted accent on the problematic of asymmetric identities (Arora and Sarkar 2022).

¹⁵ United Students Democratic Front, now defunct, was an unaffiliated left-wing student organization with presence across a few universities in the state of West Bengal.

attempt to lodge a complaint with the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), the legally stipulated body to investigate cases of sexual harassment in institutions and organizations. USDF went on to make the case public on Facebook and noted that the organization would look into the case. The post included the names of the female student and the accused. For Radical, though, the statement made by the USDF was seen under a different light. After the dismal performance in the election, they believed it to be a smearing campaign. For Radical and the accused, the fact that the accused was not present in the meeting between the USDF and Radical before the case was made public on Facebook would become the pillar of their defense. For the organizers of the meeting though, the exclusion of the accused was justified on the grounds that the accuser did not want him to be present in the meeting.

The accused's exclusion from the meeting would come to have significant consequences as it would come to be framed as an exclusion of a man from a Scheduled Tribe¹⁶ from democratic procedures. This would lead to a drawing of lines wherein the accuser and her supporters would be framed as an exclusionary upper-caste cohort in Dalit-Bahujan¹⁷ circles.

The accused was a first-generation learner with a rural upbringing and belonged to a Scheduled Tribe. The female student, the accuser, though a non-Bengali, which is the language of the region, came from an urban background, and her specific caste identity was not made public or circulated until later. Her identity of belonging to the governmental category of Other Backward Classes (OBC) was revealed by her much later when the support for the case among various activists had already split along an axis of caste and gender. 'Calling out' of the ST man, it was argued, would have significant consequences on his life. The OBC identity, the linguistic status of being a non-Bengali, plus the gender identity deployed together to claim marginality over the ST and the rural identity failed to win over new supporters. It was argued by onlookers that the female student could name herself in the initial statement because she could afford to, but the accused's life would face further setbacks because of the naming and shaming. Coupled with the initial exclusion of the accused from the meeting and his disappearance from the campus would change the mood around the case significantly.

Following the accused going missing from the campus, the family and friends of the accused held a press conference where they announced that FIRs¹⁸ would be filed against members of USDF and the female student for kidnapping charges and under the SC/ST Atrocities Act¹⁹.

The accused was eventually found by the police to be staying in a remote village in West Bengal. But his return to the campus was framed by the organization he belonged to and other people in a discourse of mental illness, of depression. One of the professors would encourage a reconciliation of differences in a post on social media. From being worried because he was missing, the mood shifted rapidly towards a concern for his well-being.

This case offers a limit to intersectionality-knowledge and harassment-knowledge. The two actors, accuser and the accused, and their intersectional identities were deployed strategically by them and their allies to claim a higher degree of marginality, a location which as Arif notes would fetch them a higher degree of victimhood. Raya Sarkar's claim to Dalitness and in the above instance the claim to being a woman, a Dalit, ST, or OBC, in the latter cases were made to claim a certain location which had the possibility of providing a location beyond

¹⁶ Schedules Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) are two of the several official classifications used by the Government of India to classify disadvantaged groups.

¹⁷ Bahujan ('the many') is a particular configuration of Dalit or anti-Brahminical politics which casts its net wide to include various groups and communities to bring them under one umbrella to dislodge the upper-caste, Brahminical hegemony. See Uddipan for a 'Dalit-Bahujan' response to the incident post the accused's disappearance.

¹⁸ First information report.

¹⁹ Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

reproach. Intersectionality, as deployed in these intersectional-knowledges, merely becomes an algorithm used to generate outputs of maximum marginality to claim locations beyond reproach. Intersectionality, as manifested in these intersectional-knowledges, is simultaneously hailed and failed as it did on the ground in the above instance with the quick drawing of the boundaries. Resolutions couldn't be mobilized because of the ambiguous locational asymmetries and contradictions.

I use the twin words 'threshold/limit' as a rhetorical choice to note precisely the limit of 'intersectionality-knowledge' and the possibility of these situations to open up a new configuration. Threshold, after all, also refers to "the floor of an entrance to a building or room", it opens up the possibility of looking at the given situation with new loci instead of focusing on the old ones. Maybe sometimes if a route doesn't open up, it is better to look for a route elsewhere instead of hammering away at the same site. Or as Bilge argues, [we] "should stop doing intersectionality in ways that undo it" (Bilge 2013, 411).

Intersectionality and Its Juridical Encounter

At the conference consultation in 2018, where the various teams presented their findings, there was a marked turn away from the signifier of '377'. As mentioned previously, the research fields that were being queered proliferated across concerns around housing, mobility, health, student politics, architecture, and planning of educational institutions, public spaces, etc. Such a queering of multifarious issues was a break from the narrow, 377-focused, unitary concern of the LGBTQ-knowledge-production and activism.

It is within this larger shift away from 377 that the draft of the *Equality Bill, 2020* must be placed. The document's story or the trajectory of trans-activism in India is not within the scope of the paper but it's worth noting its explicit focus on intersectionality-knowledge as a methodology of juridical qualification and quantification which has become all the more urgent to investigate following the entry of intersectionality explicitly in the juridical register (Balaji and Dhawan 2021).

The draft starts off with an enumeration of forms of discrimination based on:

caste, race, ethnicity, descent, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, tribe, nationality, disability, marital status, pregnancy, family responsibilities, health (including HIV / AIDS status), occupation, political opinion and belief, linguistic identity, place of birth, age, migration, religion, refugee status, socio-economic disadvantage, food preference or any combination of these characteristics and to provide for matters connected therewith. (CLPR, 2020)

Such direct enumeration of identities already limits the possibility of imagining and articulating a 'life' which cannot be measured or enumerated or compared but exists in all its infinite differences. With this juridical act of enumeration, quantification, and qualification, the violence of enumeration inherent in the juridical act, is left unchallenged. Discrimination would always need to be qualified, while 'equality', *égalité* would become a distant goal. A few decades ago, intersectionality was deployed to interrogate the inadequacy of law to think and address inequality and difference. However, in trying to arrive at its normative liberal vision of 'equality', intersectionality-knowledge is now being championed by a juridical articulation, as is evidenced by the entry of the register in judgement by the Supreme Court of India. This makes it necessary to critique intersectionality-knowledge's silent assumptions about the normative that it envisions.

The articulation of a vision of 'equality' in the draft *Equality Bill, 2020* erases the unruliness and messiness of 'social' to codify it into a manageable identitarian ontology on

which calculative operations can be operationalized smoothly. The bill dissolves the possibility of overcoming “totalizing identities [which] are necessarily incomplete” and the possibility of framing democracy “around difference and dissent, rather than the fetishization of consensus”(khanna 2012, 171).

My entry into the project began with an exposure to non-normative classrooms, queering of spaces, and specific pedagogical orientations that are hard to come by in Indian academies except in certain metropolitan centers. This exposure was an invitation to think outside and beyond the already available registers of development, policy, and reform that predominate most social science disciplines in India, including women studies (Arora 2020; Sreekumar 2017). The introduction to unruly politics (khanna 2012) and *sexualness* (khanna 2016) was in effect a call to think beyond the limited concerns of identity as is evidenced by the idea of ‘sexualness’ contra ‘sexuality’. However, it is precisely this unruly vision of queer politics which has the potential to reorder relationalities across various domains of life, is lost and effaced in the juridical encounter of intersectionality-knowledge manifested in the draft *Equality Bill, 2020*, privileging management of asymmetric identities.

Conclusion

Through a recounting of one’s participation in a funded research project, the paper demonstrates the possibility of turning the gaze back into assemblages of research production, particularly in social science. Though it is common for the leading researchers who are part of a research project to present their final work, the process of delimiting the field of research and pedagogic efforts usually go unmentioned. If social science, particularly the field of science and technology studies (STS) has been able to document and ask questions surrounding the practice of scientific knowledge-making in the lab and outside, it would be an even more fruitful endeavour to interrogate knowledge-making practices in the fields of social science. The paper has been a modest step towards developing an inquiry into such practices.

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