

# The Self Within the Collective

Sarah Ahmed and Arooj Aurangzeb

*Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamaaray dil mein hai  
Dekhna hai zor kitna baazu-e-qaatil mein hai*  
[The desire for rebellion is in our hearts  
Let us see how strong the arm of the executioner is]  
— Bismil Azimabadi

In November 2019, a video clip showing a group of students at the Faiz Mela in Lahore's Alhamra Arts Centre was widely circulated. They were chanting the poem '*Sarfaroshi Ki Tamanna*' as part of a mobilisation campaign for the Students Solidarity March organised by the Progressive Students Collective (PSC). Bismil Azimabadi wrote the poem in 1921 as an ode to the young freedom fighters of the Indian independence movement, following the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919.

Central to the video clip and its popularity was a woman in a leather jacket, leading the chant. Her name is Arooj Aurangzeb. In this interview, I speak with her about that viral moment three years earlier and her experience of being part of the collective.

My conversation with Arooj is revealing of the tensions that arise between the individual and the collective. Collectives are commonly understood as mechanisms for individuals to have more access to power and resources by joining a group, union, etc. The PSC, for example, was created as a collective where students could share their problems and strategise how to best have their needs addressed by university administrations, among other objectives. However, Arooj's lived experiences as part of the PSC highlight how collectives can inadvertently replicate the very kind of oppressive power structures they were created to dismantle. Additionally, a collective may not be able to protect its members when they are singled out by the media for criticism. Among many other conspiracy theories shared in the aftermath of the clip going viral, Arooj was accused on social media of being an 'elite' and being foreign-funded. In the absence of protection from the collective due to inexperience, limited resources, and other factors, the individual must protect oneself.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this interview is Arooj's continued commitment to the power of collective action despite losing her idealistic view of the process. She still believes that

collective struggle is the best way to achieve certain aims, including the very important one of finding joy. That is why one must find ways to transform the collective from within, through a constant reimagining of space and power.

**Sarah:** Hi Arooj. Thank you for doing this interview. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and about the viral clip?

**Arooj:** I am a Mass Communications graduate of Punjab University (PU) in Lahore. Currently, I am a Research Assistant at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and have previously worked as a schoolteacher and in a news agency. I see myself primarily as a theatre practitioner and I am part of Sangat, a street theatre collective that performs in the Punjabi language. The video clip is from the time when the PSC was campaigning at the Faiz Mela for the Students Solidarity March in November 2019.

**Sarah:** What were some of the demands of the PSC at the time the clip went viral?

**Arooj:** There were several demands: to restore student unions; have working harassment committees with student representation; include a student representative in the university syndicate; have a quota for students from the peripheries; increase the education budget; remove the affidavit that students have to sign in public universities, in which they declare they will not participate in political activities; hear student grievances that are not being addressed by university administrations regarding transport issues, hostels, and canteen food complaints; and stop the abduction of university students by law enforcement agencies, among others.

**Sarah:** What happened once the video clip went viral?

**Arooj:** In many ways, I was pushed into a position I wasn't initially in. When I joined the collective, I had identified my political role as what I call a 'runner'. During marches, I would move back and forth [in the crowd]. The mobility felt symbolic such that I did not feel like I was fixed in one position. This was a preferable position, as I did not want to occupy the stage.

Being a runner meant being able to consciously flow among different positions, to engage and learn from multiple perspectives within the movement, to gather the courage to question the

power hierarchies within, to fill in the gaps spontaneously, and to keep my individuality without dissolving or freezing in a fixed position. A runner, as I imagined, was like water in character: able to transform its own shape according to material circumstances, easy to flow in and with the movement.

Once the clip went viral, my role shifted. Once at the fringe, I was now in the media's spotlight. It was a big change for me and not one I had anticipated or even wanted. The shift also changed my experiences and understanding of what being part of a collective entails.

**Sarah:** Could you elaborate on this change?

**Arooj:** Romanticism *utar gaya par uskay bawajood kaam kerna hai* [the romantic notion of the collective process dissipated, but one must still be part of the process and keep doing the work].

**Sarah:** Why do you think this happened?

**Arooj:** The lack of support mechanisms within the collective, the competition amongst comrades that became quite toxic, the strategic exclusion from spaces of joy and decision-making, the disciplining force of power-cliques within collectives, the patriarchal gaze, the sexualisation of feminine knowledge, the replication of capitalist principles within, the contrast between the opportunist essence and performative revolutionary acts of a political worker, the alienating praxis, and the career-advancing approach to political work.

*I ask Arooj if this was disillusionment, something we often see when theory turns to practice. She resists this notion and instead terms it as being realistic. The media's interest in her and in the work of the PSC revealed many tensions that were previously not addressed. As part of our conversation, I ask what initially drew her into participating in collectives and how her experience of being part of a collective has changed since.*

**Arooj:** I see collectives as a space for revolutionary possibility: a space to share grievances, to transform the personal into the political, and to experience and express one's creative self without being alienated. I have been part of many collectives and movements over the years, including The Feminist Collective, Sangat, PSC, the Democratic Students' Association (DSA), Girls

at Dhabas, and the Haqooq-e-Khalq Party, among others. In these spaces, I met others whose beliefs resonated with me. When I first found out about socialist ideology, I remember taking my brother to our roof and telling him, "*aur bhi hain meray jaisay, main paagal nahin*" [there are others like me, I am not crazy].

Sometimes an individual can feel helpless against organisations – such as the time I had to repeat a year at PU after coming back from a study-abroad scholarship despite having received permission to do so. It was in collective spaces that I sought to address grievances imposed by the system, even if they were not addressed as such, and subsequently feel joy.

**Sarah:** And were you able to find joy in the collective?

**Arooj:** [Pause]

Not entirely, but there is still the possibility to pursue joy by being part of the collective.

**Sarah:** Have your experiences been different in other collectives, for example Sangat and/or The Feminist Collective?

**Arooj:** Similar in some ways, but since I have been able to avoid positions of power in those collectives, the intensity was much less.

*Arooj notes that she is still processing how to accept the differences between the expectations and the lived experiences of being part of a collective. I ask her to elaborate on this further.*

**Arooj:** I have realised that one still needs to protect oneself even when they are part of a collective. I was not prepared for people to project their lust, shame, and insecurity on me. As a woman, I feel that I inevitably became a source of sexual curiosity, not only when I was visible and vocal but even when I was invisible and silent. Knowing when to put up boundaries, and how to promptly address issues that arise between comrades in the larger collective, are ways one can protect oneself.

In June 2018, I went to the Florestan Fernandes National School in Brazil for a course on political training for political educators. The organisers talked about seeing the collective as a

living organism, which means to think and act in accordance with the organic process of the collective's growth. So, when someone does not find the nurturing force from a collective, I have learned that the solution is not to withdraw or become upset, but rather to find ways to transform the collective through revolutionary action, allyship, and organisation, to make it more inclusive.

And if that does not work, it's good to adjust your working relationships within the collective and be realistic about the end goals, as having too much hope of what can be achieved within the collective can be dangerous as well. Taking pauses to gain clarity and strategically resigning to be able to better organise in the future must not be considered a defeat.

Collectives should ideally be the space for this but sometimes, in reality, they are a replication of the larger societal relations and systems based on power and hierarchy. The difference is that in the collectives, at least the ideology is common and binds the members together. This is very tricky, as revolutionary ideology doesn't necessarily translate into revolutionary actions or ethics.

To get better at setting boundaries, one has to have a strong sense of self and know one's identity – who you are, what you stand for, what you want to do and why you want to do that, how you plan on achieving those things, and so on. Boundaries require clarity of one's sense of self.

Ideally, this should be addressed in the collective but it becomes one's own responsibility to work on it oneself. Having a clear understanding of the collective is also necessary to address issues with comrades and colleagues. Why was the collective formed? Who is involved and what does the membership want to achieve through the collective? Is what the collective actually doing different from what it says it will do? Just as to put up boundaries one needs to know themselves, to address issues one needs to know what the collective stands for and what it can and will be willing to do.

**Sarah:** Do you think the tensions you mentioned earlier were always there, or did they only arise once you moved from the runner position into the spotlight after the video?

**Arooj:** The tension was always there. When I was clear in my role as a runner, I was labelled an 'anarchist', 'liberal', or 'too abstract'. However, once I came into the limelight, these dismissive labelling forces amplified.

**Sarah:** You briefly mentioned your gendered experience of being part of a collective. Could you

expand on this a bit and the ways in which you created space to address grievances within the collective?

**Arooj:** I have learned that within collectives, if one has to, one must organise to make their place. I was the only woman in the PU chapter of the DSA when I joined [although there was no relation between the DSA and PSC, some members were part of both groups]. Often, I experienced marginalisation in various spaces where there were hardly any women. When leadership roles came up, women were not encouraged or given the space to step up.

Frequently, I felt that there just wasn't any power shared with female comrades, especially those who were not from a well-off background, or not under the protection of a male comrade. My experiences have taught me to opt for creative action to find solutions in order to create inclusive spaces within the collective. By creative action, I mean not directly confronting the established power hierarchies within the collective, but registering the protest in the form of political work/organising that is non-hierarchical.

Creative action could be ally-building, internal organising, solidarity work, care-work such as being invested in each other's mental and material stability, consensus-building, using the arts as a tool, or even questioning with a hint of mischief when the know-it-alls define the collective's direction without consensus. The key, I feel, is to keep putting joy at the centre of one's actions, as opposed to anger.

**Sarah:** Do you think things would be different if more women were in the movement, especially in leadership roles? Also, how easy was it to find internal allies?

**Arooj:** The inclusion of more women does not necessarily equate to more inclusivity, especially if the path towards holding power is guarded by gatekeepers and only those women who are allowed by the hierarchy can come into power. At the time, I wasn't invested in making allies as I was scared of it being seen as a divisive process (since I was already being labelled a divisive, chaotic force by the power players). So instead of making allies, I was engaging with the people who were labelling me, and trying to prove that what I was saying was for the collective-building process and not because I was a mad woman!

**Sarah:** Thank you for clarifying. I want to go back to 'joy', which you have mentioned a few times. Could you elaborate on what joy means to you?

**Arooj:** The possibility of a collective free from the exploitative principles of profit and based on the labour of love for life brings joy. Such kind of labour helps in the process of 'un-alienating' oneself and helps in building and experiencing community. One can then be in a better position to experience the joys of life.

**Sarah:** I wonder if these practices are what you would encourage other individuals within collectives to opt for? Subsequently, what advice would you give to those who want to be part of a collective?

**Arooj:** Organising spaces are not free from the symptoms of capitalism or patriarchal sicknesses. Take notes of your experiences to protect yourself. Create allies within the collective so you do not feel alienated or excluded. Even as part of the collective, you are still a person who can be sexualised or marginalised based on your gender or class.

Strive to create processes in the collective where policies and rules are built upon the premise of consensus within. This may not always be easy and can be hard to trace, but it is important to strive for. Ask for help when you require it. You don't need to give control or power over yourself to qualify yourself as deserving of help.

Take a step back if you feel abandoned or exploited by the collective, especially when the collective is hijacked by power players, or if it starts acting like a *biradari* such that the power is concentrated at the top, among a handful of individuals. I have learned that instead of inaction or reacting or leaving, you can opt to consciously conduct your inner soliloquies without judgement, ground yourself in the material reality instead of romanticised ideals, and find clarity and resolutions to your internal chaos that arises as a result of contradictions within the collective and self. This, I feel, becomes the revolutionary task of a political worker, before stepping back into the collective.

In practice, contradictions can arise between the individual and the collective, so evaluation processes are important. For example, after an event there should be a feedback process to address any shortcomings that occurred and how these can be tweaked. This is not to put anyone down, but to ensure that everyone in the collective is on the same page. If such a mechanism is not in place, the individual should at least evaluate her own labour within the union: are there gaps or tensions between the objectives of the collective and what she wants to achieve? Sometimes stepping back and finding the distance for a more objective evaluation of one's self within the collective is important to get the necessary clarity.



Costume and Props: The black leather jacket, the demands of the 2019 Students Solidarity March, a *daffi* [tambourine], a pin with a raised fist, and two dried red roses. Photo by Arooj Aurangzeb

#### Notes

- 1.The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity