

Why I am not celebrating 25 years of Majlis

[An open letter in response to the announced public celebration of 25 Years of Majlis Legal Centre on March 26, 2016 at West End Hotel, Mumbai. I would have made a personal submission during the celebration but since I am not invited, I have no choice but to send this open letter to the people who may have been invited to or informed about the celebration.]

Dear Friends,

To begin with I apologise for requesting you to engage with a comparatively trivial issue at this crucial juncture for the country. Some of you may know me, but for those who don't – I am Madhusree Dutta. I am a filmmaker, curator and cultural activist. I have been a practising feminist for the last 32 years, which more or less makes up for my entire adult life. I also happen to be one of the founders of Majlis.

Majlis began (without any formal registration) in June 1990 with a national level Women's Arts Festival titled EXPRESSION - that was convened by me. It was on this occasion that the name Majlis was coined. With the motto - Right is Culture, Culture as Right; it worked as an inter-disciplinary platform of cultural actions, legal rights, pedagogy and urban development within a broad feminist frame work. It functioned within that innovative premise for next one and a half decades. The division of the organisation into more linear identities (such as the legal centre and the culture centre) came into practice only in the last 7-8 years. This is the time in my understanding, the organisation turned parochial, in terms of imagination and programming. It then started to compartmentalize its activities within narrow and standard binaries. Thus though you are invited to a hotel to celebrate 25 years of Majlis Legal Centre, 25 years back there was no such entity as that. It was only Majlis.

So, in a way, I am one of the few people who have turned 25 this year. In this period I facilitated the art productions, pedagogical initiatives, public culture projects and various programmes of mobilisation of artists for Majlis. I was also the Executive Director of Majlis until recently when the board of trustees asked me to step down because I dissented. Dissent from an individual, a group of individuals, even the founders, especially the ones who practice criticality, is not acceptable to a status-quoist monolithic organisation mimicking a republic. Today's violent wave of nationalism is teaching us that in a painful way. So I am the *deshdrohi* in this context!

Feminist Legacies: the Personal is the Political is the topic of discussion for 25 years of Majlis Legal Centre. A wonderfully innovative title that promises to initiate a lot of 'new' thinking, and hopefully, some amount of introspection too! I take it for granted that the word 'feminist' here marks the period related to the particular movement for women's rights that began in the early 1980s. That feminism of praxis in India always had an uneasy relationship with the state. State as the main pillar of patriarchy had to be opposed and at the same time for protection from domestic violence or sexual crime, the state needed to be approached or even invoked. Down 35 years the legacy of that ideological paradox has become an epidemic.

There were many others who too were opposing the state. But they were not addressing the 'personal' that was then considered as the main issue for women, so we sought autonomy from those 'other movements'. We also sought autonomy from the state but with lesser clarity. Since then women's movements have had many different paths... one of them was institutionalization, the most slippery one. My colleagues and I in Majlis opted for that slippery path 25 years back. Today that path has brought us to a position where our autonomy / separation from those 'other movements' is widest but our proximity to the state and its agencies is close, very very close. This, perhaps, is one of the celebratory points in the agenda of Majlis Legal Centre!

Institutionalisation of an ideology has a classical trope – prove validity, stability, sustainability, accessibility and finally outreach to the funders, to the state and to the media. It requires a lot of alertness, manoeuvring skills, political astuteness and innovative ideas to keep the channels alive for ideology to flow through the labyrinths of an institution. It is a treacherous path and in this process often the survival of the organisation threatens to become more important than the reasons for which it has been imagined. The organisation itself may become the action and activities turn into mere programme. Criticality, and the ability to be agile and adaptive to each political-theoretical shift are likely to become the first casualty in this process. My organisation Majlis has been walking and struggling on this path for the last 25 years.

A part of Majlis has opted for service providing. Service providing again has difficult legacies to follow – feminine legacy, missionary legacy, legacy of social benevolence, legacy of being the private executive arm of the ‘welfare’ state and so on. Please do not get me wrong. I do believe these are all very honourable legacies, but not always conducive to the feminism that we are pledging our allegiance to. In some sense, this has turned us into an outsourcing agency of the state. Not political intervention but service providing is the core activity. Now it has come on us to bring some legitimacy to the state policies by endorsing and assisting in implementing them. But we are in the market of social work and we must play the game well by ousting other players from the bid. It does not matter if in the course of coveting to be the state’s most favoured outsourcing agency we end up alienating other civil society organisations and fellow women’s groups. My organisation, Majlis, has even acquired the distinction of opposing all other women’s organisations in the court in favour of the state.

The state is happy because we are not only bringing legitimacy to their lip services but also doing the field work for them. The funding agencies are happy as only through state networks can we manufacture the magic number of ‘beneficiaries’ and proudly fill up the column on deliverables and outreaches. *Janta*, pardon me, the beneficiaries are happy too because the organisation does not any more appear as an elite outfit engaged with ideas and debates but is now an accessible and ‘sustainable’ model... provider, *mai baap*, benevolent, mainstream, non-intellectual ... and Talk Show friendly. I agree that it is an honorable legacy, so what if it is the legacy of patriarchy!

This dubious path of social work – doing good for others - then ushers us to the point of arrogant refusal to any exercise of critical thinking in favour of the desire to outreach to the lowest denominator. A board member of Majlis, one who is the main patron of the current activities under the aegis of Majlis Legal Centre, takes pride in declaring on record that cultural activities are not qualified as activism. They are frivolous and fancy activities, and expenses on that account should be considered as draining the resources of an organisation committed to work for poor women. So the ‘poor women in need of legal help’ and ‘cultural actions’ are now pitted against each other. This argument sounds uncannily similar to the present day news headlines. RSS could not have hoped for a better ally. Politics does make strange bed fellows! This is the nationalist legacy.

The collective symptoms of all these legacies are simple: A) closely follow the hegemonic logic of utility and flaunt your outfit as the only ‘sustainable’ model, the state agencies will recognise you as ally. B) create a structure of array of middle and lower level ‘paid individuals’ and call that a movement or an organisation. Yet pay them way less than what they would have earned outside, in the name of activism. The funders will bless the outfit for perfectly observing the third world legacy. C) build a cult culture as the main USP of the organisation. All the shortcomings of the organisation can then be hidden behind the public image of the cult figure. This will also help in erasing the footprints of everybody else who dares to dissent. For example, I along with some others who have contributed very substantially in making Majlis what it is today have been rendered invisible in this manufactured history of 25 years.

I wish to make public some of the introspective questions that I have been asking. Since I have been an integral part of the organisation these questions are also directed to myself, at the same time a part of these questions are directed to the broader field of women's rights activism. They are - about being a close ally of the state at this time in history in the name of protection of women; about ethical justification of imposing a dynasty rule in a 'feminist organisation' citing 'the personal is the political'; about shifting the core of the organisation to the role of a service provider instead of the earlier agenda of being critical interventionist in the realm of rights; about alienating the progressive lawyers, legal activists and women's organisations from the city to such an extent that Majlis is now popularly considered as a counsel of the state; about succumbing to let the funders' dictate the functioning criteria and thus turning the organisation into a rigid set up; about adjusting the goal of the organisation by the ability of some of the (loyal) employees posted in high positions instead of searching for people who can match the scale of ambition of the organisation; and also about certain questionable office practices.

The reply to all these has always been rhetorical on the line of diligently observing funding protocols, receiving accolades from the state agencies and reverences from the beneficiaries, and the growing number of administrative staff who are displayed as members. In addition, there is also the strategic use of the personal life story of sufferings and heroics of the leader to counter all dissents. It finally came as a chilling realization to me that the organisation has now become a monolithic territory where the borders of the territory need to be guarded zealously. And it is not surprising then that the paranoia over guarding such a territory (mimicking a republic) against any possible or perceived intervention has ended up in a clannish clique. Then the rest of the rot was easy to set in and yet could go unquestioned in the name of sovereignty and security of the endangered territory. I should have been wiser and recognized the classical symptoms earlier. However, so finally the 25th year has arrived with different meanings for the founders of Majlis.

All of these legacies, of this '25 years', in my political understanding have become dangerous, hypocritical and self-serving. I am aware that I cannot shake off my share of responsibility in all these as I was officially the head of Majlis administration for many years. What breaks my heart is that when the fellow civil society organisations are fighting state crack down due to their political conviction Majlis is entangled in petty issues of internal governance, funding protocols, monetary security and forging partnership with the state agencies only because it wants to be 'secured and sustainable'.

We have worked with political differences in the past; compromises are part of working together. But this kind of politics especially in the present regime is something that I definitely cannot associate with any more. In the last two years we have tried hard to separate the centres into two organizations and move on our independent chosen political paths. However, as we come to this stage the current regime in Majlis shows great signs of anxiety over the possession of the assets acquired by the organisation through the '25 years'. And those assets that are causing acute anxiety are real estate, fixed deposits, title, copyright, registrations and licenses – FCRA, 12 A, 80 G and the kind. With this finally we arrive at the Corporate Legacy. Or maybe in this case it is the Feudal Legacy where properties are to be regarded as inheritance. As long as these monetary assets are not under consideration rest of my submission / questions do not receive any attention. It was very sad for me to watch my close friends and colleagues of 25 years suffering so much of anxiety over monetary issues. All sorts of legal-sounding threats were issued and emotional manipulations played to ensure full control over such properties by a section in the organisation – the same section that is now celebrating the 25 years. In this process I was described by the same board member mentioned earlier - 'a disgruntled individual who happened to have worked for us for 25 years'. I am sure the gentleman, a luminary in the field of law, had his 'legal logic' worked out before pronouncing this. But what an endearing contradiction: sometimes showcasing the administrative employees as members of the organisation in order to prove strength of number and at other times

bouncing off the founder member who was also the functioning executive director then and the main facilitator of the volume of cultural activities through the decades into a mere disgruntled individual employed in the service of an abstract 'us' – only to shut down dissent! Not one, by now, I have had too many last straws!

Hence I publicly announce that I sever my ties with Majlis from today. 25 years is a long time and so the severance may take another couple of months to be executed at the level of logistics. I have already sent my resignation letter to the board of trustees but please accept this as a public declaration of that.

Today I assure the reigning regime that all the assets and capitals are theirs. But the uncomfortable questions that I have asked stay with me and I shall continue to raise these issues in other platforms and at every opportunity. I also nurture a thin hope that after securing full control over properties the current regime will feel secured enough to atleast ponder over the ideological issues raised by me and many others. I leave Majlis with no lingering legacy – of the financial kind or otherwise. Not because I cannot counter these claims but because I do not wish to anymore engage with such greed and negativity. At this historical moment in the country I wish to relocate my work and belief someplace else without any frail legacy of an organisation that has gone morally bankrupt. Nor am I part of any pompous exercise to hand down a legacy to the next generation of privileged family / clan / community. Currently legacy is being formed by the crowd of the 20-plus generation in JNU, in Hyderabad University, in FTII, in Fine Arts Faculty of MS University-Baroda, in Jhunjhunwala College in Ghatkopar, in Moradabad Girls' College, in Tibetan Opera Academy in Kalimpong, in the Film Collective of Manipur, in Martyr's Museum in Kashmir and so on. It is the time for the Political is the Personal!

Some others, who were engaged with Majlis since the inception of the organisation in 1990, have also resigned from the organisation in last couple of days due to various associated issues.

They are:

Mitra Mukherjee-Parikh, Secretary of Majlis. Academic

Neera Adarkar, Treasurer of Majlis. Architect, Urbanist and founder trustee of School for Architecture and Environment

Vidya Bal, Trustee of Majlis. Editor. Miloon Sarayjani

Nilima Sheikh, Trustee of Majlis. Visual Artist

About fifty other artists and social scientists who have been closely associated with the cultural action agenda of Majlis also join in to develop another platform, one that is less sustainable and more porous, less obedient to funders' protocols, more critical, more unashamedly political and more deeply intellectual. With all of us leaving the Culture Centre of Majlis practically shuts down. I am afraid 'culture' is not safe in the hands of the present regime, both in the micro and macro levels.

Thanks for your patience through this long and meandering mail.

Regards,

Madhusree

25 March, 2016