What Inclusion Leaves Out

Dalit Women, Feminism and the
"Afterlives" of Educational Policy in Contemporary India

Dissertation
for Conferral of a Doctoral Title
by the Faculty of Social Sciences
at Georg-August University of Göttingen

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Date of the oral examination: 9th December 2022

SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

This dissertation tells the story about the beginnings, transformations and 'afterlives' of a set of education policies and programmes (the National Education Policy of 1986 and the Mahila Samakhya programme) that introduced new discourses around gender, literacy, and empowerment in India, bringing a host of unlikely players to the table.

Delving into the history and politics of a state-initiated women's empowerment and adult learning programme (Mahila Samakhya) launched in India in the mid-1980s, this dissertation explores the long-term and intergenerational outcomes of educational policies, through the medium of life histories of rural Dalit ('low caste') women who participated in this programme in the underdeveloped district of Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh (North India). By critically examining the under-studied intersection of adult literacy, gender, and social transformation at a key historic moment, as India moved towards economic liberalisation, and the world towards 'mainstreaming' gender and empowerment programmes, this thesis asks: How do educational policies become real? What new rural female subjects were produced as a result of these policies? How did these changes impact official discourses, social relations and institutions?

This multisite ethnography, through life histories, a content review of literacy and curricular material, and interviews with key players in the life of one particular educational policy-programme regime, builds the idea of a policy 'afterlife'. In other words, it explores how gender, adult education, and literacy discourses live on in time, and spread beyond contained policy and programme spaces, across scales, actors, and disciplines.

The findings of this dissertation depart from existing research on adult women's literacy which has been dominated by positivist evidence-based studies highlighting short-term impacts, supporting simplistic assumptions that making women literate will guarantee their 'inclusion' in mainstream development. The in-depth life histories presented here, by contrast, reveal that the process of learning to read and write is laborious, precarious, and often results in profound tensions between notions of individual and collective empowerment within families and communities. The findings also show how labouring Dalit women value literacy for self-making, playing leadership roles in their families and communities, building institutions, seeking non-traditional employment, and to change gender and caste norms within private and public spheres. These aspirations transcend the 'functional' uses of literacy and in fact speak to the fairly radical nature of the feminist education project, in terms of providing the most marginalised with critical tools to navigate their worlds.

By theoretically analysing an arc of dynamic interrelated actions—from policy to practice and back to women's lives—this dissertation provides a unique perspective, that of the subjects of the policies themselves, revealing how forging new subjectivities pushes up against gender and caste norms. In doing so it explores relatively uncharted waters in relation to grassroots feminism

and transformative literacy and adult education in India, offering a grounded and complex understanding of the relationship between literacy, gender, inequality and empowerment and the exercise of power.

SUMMARY (GERMAN)

Diese Dissertation erzählt die Geschichte der Anfänge, der Veränderungen und des "Nachlebens" einer Reihe von bildungspolitischen Maßnahmen und Programmen (die Nationale Bildungspolitik von 1986 und das Mahila-Samakhya-Programm), die neuen Diskurse über Geschlecht, Alphabetisierung und Empowerment in Indien einführten und eine Vielzahl von ungewöhnlichen Akteuren an den Tisch brachten.

Diese Dissertation befasst sich mit der Geschichte und der Politik einer Mitte der 1980er Jahre in Indien initiierten staatlichen Frauenförderungs- und Erwachsenenbildungsprogramms (Mahila Samakhya). Sie untersucht die langfristigen und generationenübergreifenden Ergebnisse der Bildungspolitik anhand der Lebensgeschichten von Frauen aus den ländlichen Dalit-("niedriger Kaste") Kreisen, die an diesem Programm im unterentwickelten Distrikt Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh (Nordindien) teilnahmen. Durch die kritische Untersuchung der wenig erforschten Überschneidung von Erwachsenenalphabetisierung, Geschlecht und sozialem Wandel zu einem historischen Schlüsselmoment, als sich Indien in Richtung wirtschaftliche Liberalisierung und die Welt in Richtung "Mainstreaming" von Gender- und Empowerment-Programmen bewegte, stellt diese Arbeit die Fragen: Wie wird Bildungspolitik Wirklichkeit? Welche neuen weiblichen Subjekte auf dem Lande wurden als Ergebnis dieser Politiken hervorgebracht? Wie haben sich diese Veränderungen auf offizielle Diskurse, soziale Beziehungen und Institutionen ausgewirkt?

Diese ethnografische Untersuchung mehrerer Standorte entwickelt anhand von Lebensgeschichten, einer inhaltlichen Überprüfung von Alphabetisierungs- und Lehrplanmaterial und Interviews mit Schlüsselakteuren im Leben eines bestimmten bildungspolitischen Programmregimes die Idee eines politischen "Nachlebens". Mit anderen Worten: Es wird untersucht, wie Gender-, Erwachsenenbildungs- und Alphabetisierungsdiskurse in der Zeit weiterleben und sich über die begrenzten Politik- und Programmräume hinaus über verschiedene Ebenen, Akteure und Disziplinen hinweg verbreiten.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Dissertation heben sich von der bisherigen Forschung zur Alphabetisierung erwachsener Frauen ab, die von positivistischen, evidenzbasierten Studien dominiert wird, die kurzfristige Auswirkungen hervorheben und vereinfachende Annahmen unterstützen, dass die Alphabetisierung von Frauen ihre "Eingliederung" in den Mainstream der Entwicklung garantiert. Die hier vorgestellten detaillierten Lebensgeschichten zeigen dagegen, dass der Prozess des Lesen- und Schreibenlernens mühsam und prekär ist und oft zu tiefgreifenden Spannungen zwischen den Vorstellungen von individueller und kollektiver

Stärkung innerhalb der Familien und Gemeinschaften führt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen auch, wie arbeitende Dalit-Frauen die Alphabetisierung nutzen, um sich selbst zu verwirklichen, um eine Führungsrolle in ihren Familien und Gemeinschaften zu übernehmen, um Institutionen aufzubauen, um eine nicht-traditionelle Beschäftigung zu finden und um Geschlechter- und Kastennormen im privaten und öffentlichen Bereich zu verändern. Diese Bestrebungen gehen über den "funktionalen" Nutzen der Alphabetisierung hinaus und sprechen in der Tat für den ziemlich radikalen Charakter des feministischen Bildungsprojekts, das den am stärksten Marginalisierten kritische Werkzeuge an die Hand geben will, um sich in ihrer Welt zurechtzufinden.

Durch die theoretische Analyse eines Bogens dynamischer, miteinander verbundener Aktion, von Politik zur Praxis und zurück zu dem Leben von Frauen, bietet die Dissertation eine einzigartige Perspektive, die der Subjekte der Politik selbst, und zeigt auf, wie das Schmieden neuer Subjektivitäten gegen Geschlechter- und Kastennormen verstößt. Dabei erkundet sie ein etwas unerforschtes Gewässer in Bezug auf Basisfeminismus und transformative Alphabetisierung und Erwachsenenbildung in Indien und bietet ein fundiertes und komplexes Verständnis der Beziehung zwischen Alphabetisierung, Geschlecht, Ungleichheit und Ermächtigung sowie Machtausübung.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE CONTEXT

I just wanted to study. I was 12 years old, I had not gone to school, but had seen other girls going. I knew I had to make it to the Mahila Shikshan Kendra[1] (Women's Education Centre) somehow, this was my only chance. I knew that my parents would not be able to send me to school, they were poor, landless. I was able to make it there because of my own strong desire to study at any cost. I was married but my *gauna*[2] had not happened and my father didn't want me to go to a residential programme. The Mahila Samakhya staff convinced him. Later I joined a mainstream school. I managed to get a small scholarship because I was SC (Scheduled Caste). The struggle with family, in-laws and money continued. When I was in Class 9, I went for a year to work in a brick-kiln in Punjab. But I kept struggling and now I am enrolled for an MA.
(Kanika, name changed), Age 35, Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh)[3]

A general improvement in the Gender Parity Index (GPI) is observed at upper primary level (from 0.91 in 2008/9 to 0.92 in 2009/10), while at primary level it is 0.94. While this indicates more girls are now enrolled in schools … the proportion of girls in the out-of-school category is over 50% in many states…. Out-of-school-children amongst Muslims and Scheduled Tribes is far higher than their share in the population ... [this] underscores the need for context-specific and focused strategies to ensure equitable access to elementary education to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. (Excerpt from 12th Joint Review Mission, July 2010)[4]

The narratives above represent two predominant ways in which education of women and girls presently exists in the public imagination and educational discourses: case studies of girls and women from marginalized communities who have used education to better their lives, often described largely through personal grit and overcoming family and community barriers; and statistics that provide us with evidence and objective data that tell us about the 'health'—advances and gaps—of our education system. Both types of 'data' are meant to help us understand better the meanings of education, the progress made and continuing challenges, and to inform future educational policy-making.

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[1] Mahila Shikshan Kendra was a residential non-formal education centre for women and out-of-school adolescent girls run by the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

[2] *Gauna* is the event when a girl finally leaves her natal home for the marital home. The marriage ceremony may have taken place earlier.

[3] Shalini Joshi and Malini Ghose, "Literacy and Women's Empowerment: A Tracer Study," in *The Power of Literacy: Women's Journeys in India, Indonesia, Philippines and Papua New Guinea* (Philippines: Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education, 2012), 128 [excerpted for a longer unpublished interview from the tracer study].

[4] Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, *Twelfth Joint Review Mission:* Aide Memoire (July 19-30, 2010), 16.

However, such narratives create particular discourses around gender and education—its purposes and the obstacles particular 'target groups' have in accessing it. They privilege certain voices and construct the subjects of Indian educational policy for women and girls from marginalized groups in this instance, in particular ways. Both statistics and personal narratives play an important role in shaping these policies—they set the boundaries for policy and programme-development and also become the lens through which 'target groups' are seen and see themselves.

Kanika, the main protagonist of the case study represents an 'ideal subject': she is a girl, Dalit, poor, the face of the excluded child; on the other side of that representation is the state's large-scale generation of data on such girls, who seem to be progressing but also not. Kanika's account also points to huge gaps in the story: What is it that constitutes Kanika's grit? What were her own aspirations along the long journey she has made? Clearly poverty shaped her educational choices but how exactly did these unfold in relation to larger processes in her family, community and the macro environment? Thus while overarching categories draw attention to groups that may have thus far been neglected in policy formulations, they often conceal more than they reveal.

This dissertation interrogates the discourses around gender in educational policies and programmes introduced in India in the mid-1980s through the life histories of the subjects of those policies, who were primarily Dalit women. By embedding national-level debates in ethnographic, micro-political, and historical trajectories, my research provides fresh and contextualised meanings to the big picture data and narratives about marginalised women, adult education, development, and empowerment that the Indian state, international development agencies, and NGOs regularly generate. Such data create powerful understandings of policy categories such as 'excluded', 'women', and 'marginalised', as well as notions of an ideal female subject and of how such a subject can and should be produced through education, paying scant regard to the life-worlds of so-called marginalised women. I revisit Kanika's case and others through this dissertation to surface some of the complications, reveal ambiguities and to break silences around issues that do not find a way into educational research concerning rural women.

The point of entry for my research is the National Education Policy (1986) and the Mahila Samakhya programme, 'Education for Women's Equality' (1989) that was subsequently initiated by the Government of India to operationalise what is regarded as

an important conceptual shift—from welfare to empowerment—in the policy's formulation of the purposes of women's literacy and education. Education for women was broadly defined as tool for their empowerment and not restricted to learning to read and write, as in earlier policies. The formulation of Mahila Samakhya's (MS hereafter) educational mandate and its implementation in its initial years involved a partnership between feminist groups and the state, in itself an unusual conjuncture at the time, and my research discusses the tensions, creativity, and limits that this process generated. The 1986 National Education Policy (NEP 1986 hereafter) and the Mahila Samakhya programme (MS) built on an earlier women's empowerment programme: the Rajasthan-based Women's Development Programme (WDP hereafter) and these (WDP, NEP 1986, MS) together form what I am calling a new regime of education and empowerment programmes for marginalised rural women.

By studying the afterlife of a policy conjuncture, the broad contribution of my research is to demonstrate how we can better understand what literacy and education means, does, and enables for women on the margins, beyond the dominant narratives of educational success or failure or of linear trajectories that describe the positive role of adult literacy in 'empowering' and 'including' women. My research examines the following four sets of questions:

The production of subjects and subjectivities: What meanings do rural subaltern women assign to education, and how has education enabled new subjectivities to evolve? How do the community and family perceive literate Dalit women? What has education accessed in adulthood enabled or foreclosed in the terms of life choices and aspirations? How did feminists (re)negotiate the terrain of knowledge production and subject formation? What can be learnt about the possibilities and limits of feminist transformative education projects in shaping subjectivities, discourse and praxis and the contestations they generate?

Discourses, social relations and institutions: In what ways do Dalit women's narratives relate to and diverge from the prevailing dominant discourses—developmentalist or transformative—around education for marginalised and excluded communities? How do 'target populations' as both subjects and objects of policy

refashion discourses, structures and relations in their own ways, by bringing with them their own expectations, understandings and politics? How is discursive, social and institutional power negotiated within transformative social change processes?

Intergenerational effects: What has educational access meant in terms of intergenerational shifts in life-chances and its impact on reshaping gender relations within individual, families and communities? What has engaging with transformative feminist education contributed to shaping new alliances, networks and institutions?

Policy afterlives: What new insights can be gained from studying policy afterlives with regard to understanding power beyond relations of domination and resistance? How might we better understand the nature of state-society relations from the perspectives of subjects of policies? How does such a study contribute to furthering our understanding of workings of democracy at the grassroots from the standpoint of subaltern women? What might we learn about (re)examining feminism(s) and feminist movements? What new conceptual tools, if any, can be offered to study policy afterlives?

Located in two 'backward' districts of Uttar Pradesh—Chitrakoot and Banda—my research uses a number of methods and sources—such as oral life histories and family histories of Dalit women who were part of the literacy and educational interventions launched by MS in the early 1990s; in-depth interviews with a range of other crucial actors such as feminist educators, MS staffers, mobilisers, literacy teachers, trainers, and policy makers across multiple sites; and archival material including literacy material and curricula developed at the time—to examine how Dalit women understand and value education and its relationship to self and societal empowerment, as well as the negotiated relationships between the state, feminist organisations and rural women as they sought to produce new educational discourses, content, and pedagogies and rural 'feminist' subjectivities (see chapter 2 for a detailed profile of the research area).

In this introduction, after briefly outlining the key findings of my research, I lay out the contexts within which the new policy vision for rural women's education came into being in the mid-1980s and their relevance to the research. Sections 1 and 2 are overviews of the two policy paradigms at the intersections of which the story that I am

telling through my research is located, namely: a critical discussion of the evolution of discourses around gender, development and empowerment (section 1) followed by an analysis of the relationship between these discourses and those of adult literacy and pedagogic approaches that influenced them (section 2). Another critical context that shapes the policies is discussed in section 3 – the nature of relationships between the state and the Indian women's movement and the early women's engagement of caste issues. In section 4, I outline recent scholarship about gender and caste and in section 5, I provide a short overview of current issues pertaining to Dalit women's education, while pointing to what my dissertation adds to this literature. In section 6, I discuss my methodology—the life histories approach—and why I made this methodological decision, which also led to identifying my conceptual framework. I introduce this conceptual framework—the metaphor of a jaal or web—which signalled the processes through which rural Dalit women's subjectivities were reimagined and mapped onto, and within, a minefield of intersecting power relations of gender, class, caste and education. Finally in section 6, I present brief sketches of the chapters that follow.

I. GENDER, DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF EVOLVING DISCOURSES

The points of entry for this dissertation are a national level education policy and programme regime that was introduced in the mid 1980s. In 1986, when the new education policy stated that the purpose of women's education was to bring about their empowerment, it was heralded as a breakthrough by progressive scholars, actvists, educationists and policy makers in India and internationally, as it broke with previous welfare-driven policy perspectives (chapter 1).

A lot has changed in the three decades since. As empowerment has been mainstreamed within global and national gender and development policies and architectures, it has been vociferously critiqued and even rejected by many who promoted it, including those who designed the policy and Mahila Samakhya programme (chapter 1). Critics have argued that empowerment is no longer a transformative concept

but has been reduced to a depoliticized 'buzzword'[5] devoid of substance and power[6] and rendered a tool of neo-liberal governmentality.[7]

This section discusses empowerment's troubled conceptual history by foregrounding sholarly arguments from three perspectives -- the developmental perspective, the transformative and the critical -- but it also shows that the demarcations between the three perspecitves are not necessarily clearcut, which the empirical research discussed in subsequent chapters will also show.

The 'Developmental' Frame

The education policy-programme regime of the mid 1980s was introduced at a time when women's subordinate position in mainstream development was being questioned in academia, activist circles and through UN mechanisms and new frameworks were being put forward. The 'Women in Development' framework (WID hereafter) was the first. Based on critiques of welfare and modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s it was adopted at the launch of the UN Women's Decade in 1975.[8] WID drew on liberal feminist theory, and advocated that women be 'included' in mainstream development policies and programmes.[9] Inclusion, according to WID, would ensure women and men equal access to resources and opportunities within the family and in the public spheres of employment, education and within the law. Excluding women from development, WID proponents argued, resulted in losses in economic efficiency, productivity and women's status relative to men. (see chapters 1, 2 and 3).

By the 1980s the high traction of WID in the international development arena had resulted in new policies, programmes and institutional mechanisms aimed at integrating women and women's issues at national levels as well. In India it led to the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women (see chapter 1) and eventually the

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[5] Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, "What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at 'Participation', 'Empowerment' and 'Poverty Reduction'," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005), 1043-1060.

[6] Srilatha Batliwala, *Engaging with Empowerment: An Experiential Journey* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013), 80-96.

[7] Kalpana Wilson, "Towards A Radical Re-Appropriation: Gender, Development And Neoliberal Feminism," *Development and Change* 46, no. 4 (2015), 804-809.

[8] Amrita Basu (ed.), *Women's Movements In The Global Era: The Power Of Local Feminisms* (USA: Westview Press, 2010).

[9] For an overview of the evolution of women's development discourses see: Caroline Moser, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training* (London: Routledge, 1993).

inclusion of a separate chapter on women for the first time in the Sixth Five Year national plan (1980-1985). This opened a window for new programming on women's development and resulted in the WDP (Rajasthan) being initiated. The WDP is chronologically the first programme in the educational programme-policy regime being studied in this dissertation (chapter 1).

By the 1980s the gender concepts that informed WID were being challenged.[10] Feminist scholarship at the time had begun to veer away from a biological to a relational understanding of gender, power and of women's subordination. Scholars argued that gender was not just socially constructed but also embedded in material, ideological and institutional structures and relations.[11] This resulted in conceptual shifts in analytic categories—from sex to gender and from role theory to a social relations framework,[12] also referred to as the gender and development (GAD) framework.

As theoretical debates advanced, 'empowerment' became the actionable political project of the gender and development framework. Third World scholars and activists who promoted empowerment argued that WID had neglected to question the spread of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 'third world' and its detrimental impacts on women's interests.[13] They contended that women's subordination should be analysed not only with regard to men but other social structures and the unequal nature of the development paradigm itself.[14] Post-colonial feminist argued powerfully for disaggregating the 'Third World Woman' category – as passive voiceless victims – and

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[10] Carol Miller and Shahra Razavi, *From WID to GAD: Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse*, UNRISD Occasional Paper, no. 1 (Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1995, 11-15.

[11] Anthropology (Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210; Marxist economists (Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz and Roslyn McCullagh (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and Its Lessons*, 2nd edition (London, Boston Melbourne and Henley: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1984). [First published, London, CSE Books, London, 1981]; Development (Kate Young, *Gender and Development: A Relational Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

[12] It proposed that relationships be examined at three levels—between men and women, the private and public spheres of production and reproduction, and gender and other social structures—emphasizing that social relations were relations of power.

[13] Diane Elson, "Male Bias in Macroeconomics: The Case of Structural Adjustment," in *Male Bias in the Development Process*, ed. Diane Elson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 164-189.

[14] Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987).

insisted that issues of race, caste and class were fundamental to defining the nature of women's oppression. [15]

Recalling these debates is important as it was at this transitional moment in the mid 1980s and early 1990s when neoliberal policies in India hadn't yet been aggressively impemented and empowerment was still seen as a transformative concept by feminists, that the new education policy regime was being conceptualised and introduced. But very soon women's development and educational programmes using the empowerment framework nationally would have to contend with a rapidly changing conceptual orientation.

From the mid-1990s and espcially since the 2000s, when neo-liberalism had taken hold globally, empowerment was marshalled, appropriated and repurposed by international financial and developmental institutions—notably the World Bank—that worked with an ideology antithetical to the one described above. When Deepa Narayan, an influential World Bank researcher, who was at the forefront of championing the proliferation of 'empowerment' within the World Bank's policies stated "that empowerment was defined broadly as increasing poor people's freedom of choice and action to shape their own lives," [16] she was invoking progressive language and concepts from a very different place and for different ends. In her words empowerment "was not a new concept…. What is new is the attempt to measure empowerment in a systematic way …. [it is important] to specify a framework that both links empowerment to improved development outcomes and identifies determinants of empowerment itself."[17] Thus the move to define and measure empowerment according to predetermined indicators gathered momentum alongside advocacy by the global feminist movement for the inclusion of empowerment using the language of power and empowerment.

The global feminist movement successfully advocated for gender equality and empowerment at the to Fourth World Conference on Women[18] and it has since become an integral part of international frameworkds such as the Millenium Development Goals

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[15] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[16] Deepa Narayan, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2002).

[17] Deepa Narayan, *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2005), 3.

[18] The Fourth World Conference on Women, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, (September 15, 1995) http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf.

(2000) and the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.[19] The official incorporation of empowerment within the World Bank's agenda and other UN mechanisms also connected sectors such as women, education, governance and economic growth.[20] This ironic convergence around the idea of empowerment between the transnational women's movement and international agencies has resulted in a troubled relationship between feminism and empowerment discourses ever since, a subject I will be discussing again later in this section (see chapter 4).

Transformative Frameworks

Another important pathway through which empowerment entered the new education discourses of the mid 1980s was through feminist theories of power and of critical adult literacy, which I shall now discuss briefly.

Three main feminist conceptualizations of power (and their critiques) that informed empowerment discourses in India and elsewhere at the time were – power as a resource to be redistributed (rooted in liberal feminist discourses such as WID), as domination (radical feminist discourses) and as empowerment (influenced by different feminist persuasions). The view of power as primarily a relationship of domination (also referred to as 'power over) was influential in attacking patriarchal theories and to mobilise marginalised communities to act. But 'power-over' has also been theoretically challenged its essentialisations and oversimplifications – analysing power in terms of binaries, focusing on sex rather than gender, denying women any agency, positioning power as a zero-sum game, and articulating a masculinist and negative view of power. [21]

Two counterpoints to power-over relevant to my research were the feminist standpoint theory and the theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault (discussed in the next section). Nancy Harstock[22]for instance proposed that power be re-conceptualized

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[19] SDG Goal 5 (one of 17 goals) was to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', https://sdgs.un.org/goals (accessed June 3, 2022)

[20] By the 2000s concepts—such as poverty, social capital, governance, voice— that had radical antecedents were also got repackaged by the same set of powerful international institutions. John Harriss and Paolo De Renzio, "'Missing link' or Analytically Missing?: The Concept of Social Capital. An Introductory Bibliographic Essay," *Journal of International Development* 9, no. 7 (1997), 919- 937.

[21] See Amy Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2021).

[22] Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1983).

from a feminist standpoint—one that is rooted in women's life experiences and their roles in social reproduction. By doing so, rather than seeing power as 'power over' others it can be conceptualized instead as 'power to'—the capacity to empower or transform individuals and collectives without necessarily diminishing the power of others. 'Power to' has been further elaborated as 'power with' (solidarity bulding) and 'power within' (building internal capacities). 'Power-to-with-within' were considered to be creative and productive conceptualisations of power, which were drawn on by feminist partners who shaped the education programmes I discuss in this dissertation[23] (chapters 2, 3).

Other routes, such Maxine Molyneux's popular framework also brought discussions of power into development discourses by distingiuishing between women's practical and strategic interests (see chapter 2).[24] In Molyneux's schema addressing 'practical' gender interests arose from women's position in the sexual division of labour and did not seek to alter gender relations. 'Strategic' gender interests in comparison emerged from women's experiences of gender subordination and entailed changing gender norms and hence power relations. Addressing strategic gender needs were therefore considered more emancipatory and feminist in nature. [25] As many of these theories were adopted and adapted in the field they were not only challenged but the boundaries between different positions often got blurred (chapters 2 and 3).

A core idea running through the conceptualisations of empowerment discussed above—self-transformation leading to collective action and consequently social transformation—also came into the policies and programmes of the mid-1980s along with Paulo Freire's theory of social change through literacy and education. Often referred to as "conscientisation"[26] Freire's work was enormously significant for progressive scholars, feminists and social activists in India and globally in the 1970s and 1980s (chapter 1) and is still important in adult educational circles today. [27]

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[23] Jo Rowlands, "Empowerment Examined," in *Development and Social Diversity: A Development in Practice Reader,* ed. Deborah Eade (U.K and Ireland, Oxfam, 1996), 86-92.

[24] Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution In Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985), 227-254.

[25] For critiques of Molyneux's framework see, Raka Ray and Anna C. Korteweg, "Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999), 48-52.

[26] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

[27] Freire's pedagogic method has been used in by several national literacy campaigns (for example, Nicaragua, Guinea Bissau, Cuba and India) and more recent international NGO

Freire's now familiar proposition was that to build a liberated society, ordinary people needed to free themselves from all forms of oppression, and the starting point for this process was through conscientisation (also referred to as "critical consciousness"). This was a dialogic form of education, through which individuals and communities transformed themselves, by critically analysing their immediate social realities and the root causes of their oppression, and then taking action to change these. Freire's approach has also come to be known as the 'reading' of the world—both its past and present— that must precede, and not follow, the ability to read the word [28] (see chapter 3). The global circulation of Freire's theoretical and a pedagogic framework amongst diverse constituencies—from international agencies, to national governments and progressive civil society organisations—has also been subject to what commentators have called co-option, selective appropriation and instrumentalisation, [29] much like empowerment (chapters 1, 2 and 3) but also the feminist critiques (discussed in the next section).

Critical Perspectives on Empowerment

As women's empowerment was strategically and agressively incorporated within neoliberal policies from the 2000s, a narrow economistic understanding steadily edged out other perspectives.[30] In the women's development sector, empowerment increasingly became synonymous with microcredit programmes. I have dwelt on and analysed the empowerment and microcredit literature as it serves as an powerful example of the complex entanglements between gender, neoliberal empowerment and development and the diversity of feminist responses to these (chapter 4). For a quick run through of the extensive literature[31] I have used this classifcation —the champions (such as the World bank, international donor agencies, NGOs, and national governments); the critics (some

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interventions such as REFLECT. David Archer and Sara Cottingham, *Action Research Project on Reflect: The Experience of 3 Pilot Projects in Uganda, Bangladesh, and El Salvador* (London, Overseas Development Association, 1996.

[28] Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[29] Ross Kidd and Krishna Kumar, "Co-opting Freire: A Critical Analysis of Pseudo-Freirean Adult Education," *Economic and Political Weekly* (January 3-10, 1981), 27-36.

[30] Sylvia Chant and Caroline Sweetman, "Fixing Women or Fixing the World? 'Smart Economics', Efficiency Approaches, and Gender Equality in Development," *Gender and Development* 20, no. 3 (2012), 517–29.

[31] For an overview: Beth Bee, "Gender, Solidarity and the Paradox of Microfinance: Reflections from Bolivia," *Gender, Place and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2011), 23-31.

feminist scholars, activists, and NGOs); and the sceptical optimists (again feminist, scholars, and NGOs).

The neoliberal argument for promoting micro credit– which Linda Mayoux termed the "virtuous circle" [32]—was quite simply that empowering women economically empowers families and by extension communities and the eventually the nation. The claims made by the champions of microcredit are sweeping. Besides immediate financial gains these include reducing poverty, enhancing women's status in the family and society, redressing social issues—such as improvements in girls' enrolment in schools, improved nutrition and reduction in domestic violence.[33]

The critiques which question the "virtuous circle" arguments of microcredit invoke, among other issues, the instrumentalisation of feminist perspectives on empowerment; [34] the construction of poor women as hyper-industrious, altruistic, entrepreneurial female subjects[35] (chapter 3) and the promotion of women's collectives as simply a collection of individual self-interested women wanting to 'move up'. The latter, it is claimed, has destroyed the principles of feminist collectivisation by enhancing group tensions (chapter 4), excluding the marginalized, and rolling back on social action agendas, shaming and discipining women, individualizing poverty, obscuring any kind of structural analysis, and discouraging women from making any demands on the state.[36]

However, not all feminist scholars and activists are entirely critical of the microcredit model of empowerment. These sceptical optimists, see economic and social benefits accruing from such programmes but warn against the assumption of "automatic empowerment", much like imputing "automatic gains" from education. [37] Other

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[32] Linda Mayoux, *From Vicious to Virtuous Circles? Gender and Micro-enterprise Development*, UN Fourth World Conference on Women, UNRISD, Occasional Paper no. 3 (Geneva: UNRISD, 1995).

[33] For example, Susy Cheston and Lisa Kuhn, "Empowerment Women through Microfinance," in *Pathways Out of Poverty: Innovations in Microfinance for the Poorest Families,* ed. Sam Daley-Harris (Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press, 2002), 167-228;

[34] Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards, "Introduction: Negotiating Empowerment," in *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives*, eds. Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards (London: Zed Books, 2014), 1-31.

[35] Katharine Rankin, "Social Capital, Microfinance and the Politics of Development," *Feminist Economics* 8 (2002), 18.

[36] Lamia Karim, "Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh," *Cultural Dynamics* 20, no. 1 (2008), 5–29.

[37] Naila Kabeer, "Is Microfinance a 'Magic Bullet' for Women's Empowerment? Analysis of Findings from South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 44/45 (October 29 - November 4, 2005), 4709-4718.

researchers have found that poor women want access to loans and are aware of the consequences but still buy in. They are strategic and maintain connections with different types of collectives and programmes.[38] Feminist ethnograhers have also challenged critics for, among other things, imposing an understanding of what constitutes empowerment or female agency that is largely western, secular and liberal from above; [39] evaluating empowerment programmes in black and white terms and for wrongly believing that women and planners have the same assumptions about the programme. The latter conundrum is discussed in relation to what constitutes empowering education in chapter 3.

Many of the critiques above draw on Foucault's theoristation of power and empowerment, such as the rejection of 'totalising' and binary conceptions of the exercise of power; the realisation that subjects could be both powerful and powerless; that no one was outside of power and that power relations were malleable. His proposition that strategies to "govern" were not only repressive but included moulding and managing the behaviour of individuals and groups through various methods, which he referred to as technologies of self and governance —also referred to as "governmentality"–-went beyond a literal association with government and the state and encompassed non-state actors, and brought social action under a critical spotlight in new ways.[40]

Empowerment, scholars like Barbara Cruikshank[41] have argued, is a technology of governmentality. By leveraging the "will to empower" neoliberal programmes, policies or discourses sought to help people to help themselves. The will to empower was thus associated with a form of productive power that regulated, shaped, and mobilised individuals and groups to act in ways and towards attaining certain goals which may not have been theirs to begin with, without coercion. Later, scholars like Janet Halley et al. extended this to feminist action as well and coined the term "governance feminism" to

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[38] Kameshwari Jandhyala, "From Sanghas to Federations: Empowering Processes and Institutions," in *Cartographies of Empowerment: The Mahila Samakhya Story* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012), 105-138.

[39] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[40] Foucault, Michel. "Governmentality." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, 87–104. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

[41] Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

problematize the mainstreaming of gender and empowerment in global governance and NGO agendas.[42]

MS has been studied critically as an example of a women's programme that fosters the "will to empower". Aradhana Sharma's[43] widely read ethnography of MS Uttar Pradesh (UP hereafter) uses the lens of neoliberal governmentality to study the politics, practices, and hybrid (part-state, part-NGO) organizational structure of MS deployed to mobilise rural women towards self-help. According to her, the organizational and pedagogical practices that the MS programme promoted ended up reinforcing some of the social inequalities and welfare-based ideologies that its empowerment perspective set out to challenge. And eventually, by endorsing the language of self-help, the MS programme became far more statist than feminist. However, Sharma holds that it also offered the subjects of the programme spaces to assert new possibilities and subjectivities that were not 'oppressed'. Sharma avoids the 'co-option' of empowerment argument typical of feminist critiques of neoliberal governmentality and takes a middle path. For her empowerment was a paradoxical tool of neoliberal governmentality.

Shubra Sharma's[44] ethnographic case study of the MS programme (conducted in the same area as mine) also uses the governmentality framework, but she is far more critical. By highlighting the affective side of empowerment she terms the state's withdrawal of the programme in her area of study as "betrayal", not only by the state but also by feminists, of the women subjects they mobilized collectively. A similar argument is made by another well received book—*Playing with Fire*[45]—about the UP Mahila Samakhya programme. Written collaboratively by an academic and MS staffers, this book also puts forward a strong critique of the feminist-state-NGO structure that first nourished a feminist perspective of empowerment and then thwarted local struggles,

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[42] Janet E. Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Chantal Thomas, and Hila Shamir (eds.), "From the International to the Local in Feminist Legal Responses to Rape, Prostitution/Sex Work, and Sex Trafficking: Four Studies in Contemporary Governance Feminism," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender 29*, no. 2 (2006), 335–423.

[43] Aradhana Sharma, *Paradoxes of Empowerment: Development, Gender and Governance In Neoliberal India.* New Delhi: Zubaan 2010; Aradhana Sharma, "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality and State (Re)Formation in India," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2006), 60–95.

[44] Shubhra Sharma, *'Neoliberalisation' As Betrayal: State, Feminism and a Women's Education Programme In India* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[45] Sangatin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

leadership and uncomfortable questions as they became problematic for the programme. A fourth book about the WDP by Sumi Madhok,[46] highlights the risks that rural field mobilisers of the WDP were left to confront with, with little help from the state that mobilised them in the first place.

While reviewing the studies above and the broader literature on neoliberalism, govenmentality and feminism in relation to my research, I saw the merits of what the governmentality framework brought in terms of turning the spotlight on feminist action and the complications of state-feminist collaborations. The studies provided a powerful counter to positivist interpretations of the programme and of women's empowerment more generally that were in circualation at the time. It introduced complexity and ambiguity into discussions on power and empowerment. But eventually the neoliberal governmentality lens came to be determined by the 'co-option--resistance' binary at the levels of female subjectivities produced[47] and the programme, thus presenting a view from above. [48]

Though MS is the point of entry for my research, my approach has been not to study the programme per se but its afterlife. It explores how education and literacy discourses live on and spread beyond contained policy and programme spaces, across scales (e.g. local, national, global), actors (e.g. policy makers, educators, curriculum developers) and disciplines (e.g. adult literacy, feminism, caste) and is told primarily through the life histories of policy subjects – in this case rural Dalit women. For the subjects of my research, the question of whether empowerment has been 'depoliticised' or not was not of crucial importance as for them empowerment and its relationships to literacy and education is always embedded in power relations, which many of them elaborated by using the conceptual metaphor of the jaal (section 5).

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[46] Sumi Madhok, *Rethinking Agency: Developmentalism, Gender and Rights* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013).

[47] Srila, Roy. "New Activist Subjects: The Changing Feminist Field of Kolkata, India." *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 628-656.

[48] Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

II. DISCOURSES AND PEDAGOGIES RELATED TO WOMEN'S LITERACY AND EDUCATION

I now turn to exploring how the above discussions impacted discourses on adult rural women's literacy and education, the strategy through which the 1986 education policy sought to empower rural women (chapters 1, 2 and 3).

Development and Adult Women's Literacy and Education

Since the 1970s, the agenda of adult literacy and education has been framed as a 'development issue' by international agencies (like UNESCO and the World Bank) and national governments who remain the most powerful players in this sector.[49] As the low female literacy rates and the stark gender gaps accross the developing world became a cause for international alarm, adult literacy has also come to be positioned as a 'women's issue'. In India for instance, in 1971 the gender gap in literacy rate was 24%, in 1991 it was 24.84%, and in 2011 it was still a high 16.68%.[50] Since the 1970s and 1980s conceptual shifts in global literacy policies have followed the WID-to-empowerment trajectory. [51]

Scholars have pointed out that these discourse shifts have largely been at the level of rhetoric. Alongside empowerment discourses of transforming gender relations through literacy, the argument that has endured is of the 'multiplier effect' of literacy: that making women literate is necessary to 'include' women in mainstream development which would lead to improvements in individual and macro development indicators. Much like the case of empowerment this approach to literacy has been buttressed by research coming out of powerful international agencies like the World Bank and national level government agencies. These actors invested in (and were invested in) establishing

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[49] For a global overview of literacy policies and achievements see: UNESCO, *Reading the Past, Writing the Future: Fifty Years of Promoting Literacy* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017.

[50] The corresponding male and female literacy rates were: 1971 (Male 45.96%, Female 21.97%), 1991 (Male 64.13%, Female 39.29%) and 2011 (Male 82.14%, Female 65.46%)

[51] Anna Robinson-Pant, "Women Literacy and Development: An Overview," in *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education* 2, 2nd edition, ed. Brian. V. Street and Nancy H. Hornberger (Springer, 2008), 179-190.

positive correlation – in effect causality – between literacy and a wide range of development indicators, such as child mortality, fertility and health and income. [52]

Recasting illiteracy as as a 'female' problem has shown mixed results. On the one hand the limited behaviourist approaches were re-purposed within empowerment, and on the other, strong critiques and fresh theories were articulated. First and foremost, feminists critiqued the instrumental nature of the literacy discourses and curriculum content that promoted normative development goals and behavioural change messages inevitably aimed at women, which further tied them to their reproductive roles. These, they argued ultimately reinforced patriarchal relations and served the interests of patriarchal states. [53] Equally crucially, scholars reasoned that the preoccupation with establishing causality between literacy rates (and educational levels) and various development indicators was simplistic and flawed. A raft of factors including power differentials based on gender, caste, class, age, marital status, local institutional contexts crucial to understanding the relationship between literacy, education and women's decision making behavious were ignored. Further, such research advanced a very limited understanding of women's agency.[54]

A second set of critiques not unrelated to those above, concerned the absence of a relational understanding between women's literacy, empowerment, and social structures.[55] For instance, poverty in much of the literature is enumerated as a cause of illiteracy and illiteracy as a cause of poverty, promoting a shallow and circular argument without any serious analysis of either phenomenon (see chapter 1). Relatedly, a third critique pertains to the construction of the rural illiterate woman as 'deficient' and 'lacking'. Rather than analysing the causes of illiteracy, research ends up identifying

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[52] For an overview see, Anna Robinson-Pant, "'The Illiterate Woman': Changing Approaches to Researching Women's Literacy," in *Women, Literacy and Development: Alternative Perspectives*, ed. Anna Robinson-Pant (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 15-34.

[53] Nelly P. Stromquist, "Educating Women: The Political Economy of Patriarchal States," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 1 (1991), 5

[54] Alaka M. Basu, "Women's Education, Marriage and Fertility in South Asia: Do Men Really Not Matter?" in *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World*, eds. Caroline Bledsoe et al., (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 1999); Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery, "Killing My Heart's Desire: Education and Female Autonomy," in ed. Nita Kumar, *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* (Kolkata: Stree, 1994).

[55] Even though theoretical categories had started evolving from 'woman' to 'gender' by the mid 1980s the former remained prominent in literacy discourses.

'characteristics' of illiterate populations: poor, female, rural, cultural practices—which in turn stigmatises people for their illiteracy as well as their poverty.[56]

Criticisms of the stigmatizing discourses around the nature of literacy/illiteracy can be located in an important theoretical debate—over the so-called 'great divide' theory—that raged in the field of literacy studies in the 1970s.[57] Jack Goody's influential and controversial work that set up the binary construction of advanced/literates and literate societies from backward/ illiterates and oral societies, has been difficult to break.[58] For anthropologists such Brian Street, the great divide theory was rooted in a blinkered western perspective of cognitive development, knowledge and identity. This diction, he held, promoted certain types of literacy practices, the formal ones that are learnt through schooling, as being more powerful than a wide variety of informal indigenous literacy practices. He referred to the formal (or 'official') literacy model as the 'autonomous model' of literacy [59] which was plucked out of the contexts within which literacy is used. Street argued for the recognition that in fact, so-called illiterates engaged in a plethora of unrecognised literacy activities that so and that "[literacy's] uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power. It is in this sense that literacy is always 'ideological'—it always involves contests over meanings, definitions and boundaries and struggles for control of the literacy agenda".[60] Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the contested, embedded and ideological meanings of literacy in practice, as learnt literacy skills move from classroom to real life contexts.

This theoretical approach of surfacing everyday non-official literacy practices or surfacing how official literacy is embedded in power relations is also referred to as the 'social practices model'.[61] Its proponents have spearheaded an extensive body of

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[56] John Harris has made a similar argument in the context of research on poverty. John Harris, *Bringing Politics Back into Poverty Analysis: Why Understanding Social Relations Matters More for Policy on Chronic Poverty than Measurement*, CPRC Working Paper 77 (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, May 2007).

[57] For an overview of these debates see James Collins, "Literacy and Literacies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), 75-93.

[58] Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

[59] Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).

[60] Brian Street, "Contexts for Literacy Work: New Literacy Studies, Multimodality, and the 'local' and the 'global'," in *More Powerful Literacies*, eds. Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett (England and Wales: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012), 16-17.

[61] Kathleen Rockhill, "Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy," *British Journal of*

ethnographic research known as New Literacy Studies (NLS hereafter) that has questioned dominant perceptions regarding women's literacy, such as [62] the entrenched perception of women who are labelled as illiterate (and who may internalise this perception themselves), are ignorant, superstitious (read irrational), traditional (read parochial) and therefore the cause of holding back progress. Such research, and my own, adds to this body of knowledge and shows how women 'talk back' to, negotiate and even try and reshape dominant literacy discourses and perceptions about what consitutes knowledge. [63]

Approaches to Literacy Teaching and Learning and Knowledge Production

Conceptual discourses, but naturally, influence pedagogic approaches to adult teaching and learning. In chapters 1, 2 and 3 we will see us how the pedagogic strategies adopted by the new policy-programme regime emerged as critiques of dominant 'developmental' approaches (e.g. the skills-based approach and the functional literacy approach) and also as an endorsement of transformative approaches (e.g. crtical literacy and feminist pedagogies).[64] This brief overview is crucial to understanding the creative tussles related to literacy curriculum production discussed in chapter 3.

The 'literacy as skills' and 'literacy as tasks' approaches are aligned closely with developmental and the 'autonomous' model of literacy. Here literacy skills are viewed as being generic, neutral, independent of context and therefore transferable—that is, literacy skills learnt in one setting (classrooms) can be applied in another (real life situations). The 'tasks' approach promoted by UNESCO and more popularly known as the 'functional literacy approach' has been widely used since the mid-1960s. It is based on

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Sociology of Education 8, no. 2 (1987), 153-167; Jenny Horsman, "Thinking About Women and Literacy: Support and Challenge" in *Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways Towards Autonomy*, ed. Carol Medel-Anonuevo (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute of Education), 63-68.

[62] Examples include: Brian V. Street (ed.), *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Mastin Prinsloo and Mignonne Breier (eds.), *The Social Uses of Literacy: Theory and Practice in Contemporary South Africa* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1996), Robinson Pant, *Women, Literacy and Development: Alternative Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

[63] Priti Chopra, "Distorted Mirrors: (De)centring Images of the 'Illiterate Indian Village Woman' Through Ethnographic Research Narratives," in Robinson-Pant, *Women, Literacy and Development*, 35-56.

[64] For overviews of pedagogic approaches see Juliet McCaffery, Juliet Merrified and Juliet Millican, *Developing Adult Literacy Approaches to Planning, Implementing and Delivering Literacy Initiatives* (Oxfam GB, 2007).

the understanding that for adults, learning only to decode the alphabet, as in the 'skills' approach (locally referred to as *akshar gyan* or alphabet knowledge) may not be useful for illiterate adults. Instead, literacy programmes should also focus on helping adults to use literay and numeracy skills to perform daily-life tasks. The benefits of functional literacy are believed to include increased economic productivity, greater participation in development and governance and improvement in social behaviour at individual and societal levels.[65] Despite considerable criticism at conceptual levels—with reference to the use of decontexualised curricula, instrumental programme objectives, an undue focus on ensuring economic returns from literacy, treating illiterate adults as not fully 'functional'—and ultimately the poor record of such initiatives, the functional literacy approach still prevails in adult literacy programmes, in India and globally.[66] (chapters 1 and 3)

Three transformative approaches—the social practices approach and the critical literacy or Freirean approach and feminist pedagogies—were drawn on in pedagogy related-discussions in the mid 1980s (chapters 1, 2 and 3). All three assert that reading and writing is always rooted in social, cultural and economic relations, which are inevitably relationships of power but differ in how they approach teaching and learning. The social practices approach for instance opposes treating literacy as a decontextualized and neutral skill to be taught by 'experts' through standardized programmes and centrally produced primers. It endorses, instead, contextually relevant and locally produced literacy material that builds up from text and activities available in learners' milieus rather than predetermined 'functional' tasks (chapter 3).[67]

The critical literacy approach or 'consiceintisation' approach (called popular education in Latin America), associated with Paulo Freire's work and developed in the 1970s, was also a response to the functional literacy orthodoxy. Unlike the social practices approach, Freirian approaches are 'interventionist' and educators using this approach articulate their political perspectives and vision of social transformation. Freire

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[65] For a definition see, UNESCO, *Aspects of Literacy Assessment: Topics and Issues from the UNESCO Expert Meeting 10-12 June 2003* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), quoted in UNESCO, *Reading the Past*, 15.

[66] Uta Papen, Adult Literacy as Social Practice (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 5-7.

[67] Though now included in international literacy policies the impact of social literacy approach is seen as being to be too complicated to implement on scale. (McCafferey et. al., *Developing Adult Literacy Approaches*, 75-80).

did not reject primers but recouped and drastically altered the methodology of functional literacy primers. He created a new pedagogic approach (see chapter 3) that entailed crtical analysis through learning to read and write (also called critical reflection), which ultimately unfortunately became something of an orthodoxy itself. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the contestations between various approaches as they were brought together in developing new literacy curricula and materials.

The field of transformative feminist education and pedagogies coalesced around the project of "demystifying canonical knowledge"[68] developed by male theorists and pointing out their gender-blindness. Freire, despite being a massive influence, was critiqued by feminist pedagogues on the ground that his pedagogic strategy used only a male referent and assumed a single kind of experience of oppression (the male experience), which in turn shaped his vision of liberation.[69] Rather than rejecting Freire's approach, several feminist adult educators chose instead to give new meaning to terms like critical reflection by insisting that interrogating patriarchy would be the primary lens to analyse subordination. This opened up several spheres of questioning such as an interrogation of power relations in domestic spheres, decision-making processes, determing what counts as development and knowledge, features that are unique to feminist literacy programmes.[70] (chapter 3)

Feminist critical pedagogy emerging out of women's studies and higher education departments, especially in the Global North was a second stream of influence. [71] While not going into different interpretations of the term here, I will point to some identifiable characteristics of feminist pedagogic approaches that were in circulation amongst scholars and activists in in India. These included: being grounded in feminist social practice and principles of feminism; endorsing the epistemological validity of personal experiences; establishing non-hierarchical relationships; developing a critique of the institutional context and dominant cultures and notions of gender; taking learning beyond the classroom; re-examining relationships of power in culture and using multiple

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[68] Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, "Introduction" in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

[69] Sue Jackson, "Crossing Borders and Changing Pedagogies: From Giroux and Freire to Feminist Theories of Education," *Gender and Education* 9, no. 4 (1997), 457-468. ;

[70] Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom (ed.), "Introduction," in *Gender in Popular Education* (Cape Town: CACE Publications and London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996).

[71] Luke and Gore (eds.), *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*.

lenses to attempt to recognize similarities within differences.[72] An interrogation of power dynamics inherent within knowledge, relationships amongst students and between students and teachers was also critical to feminist pedagogies.

Several of these principles were intuitively and discerningly included in the new pedagogies developed by feminist educators in India in the mid 1980s but their incorporation was not necessarily smooth (see chapters 2 and 3). Some of the these experiences reflected what global debates in the 1980s and 1990s, were describing as the limits of feminist pedagogy – essentialism, celebrating the 'experiential' aspect, making universalist claims about categories of the oppressor and oppressed, paying inadequate attention to different identities within the classroom, formulating simplistic assumptions of what 'consciousness raising' should lead to, and assigning a powerful role for the teacher in creating democratic classrooms without questioning their power and authority.[73] The need for greater self-reflexivity became an important principle especially with the post-modern and post-structural turn in feminist scholarship from the late 1980s and also reflected the shifts in how power was theorised (previous section), the rise of identity politics and the growing importance of intersectional frameworks. In chapter 3, it is precisely these tensions, as they unfolded on the ground, that will be examined.

From the mid 1980s onwards we also see cycles of ideological transformation and re(appropriation) at work. On the one hand, feminists, critical theorists and ethnographers were able to shift the conceptual framing of development and literacy discourses towards power and empowerment, and on the other, these shifts have been accompanied by attempts to 'developmentalise' discourses of adult literacy. By the 2000s, neoliberal empowerment goals (previous section) took hold in literacy discourses as well. The rise of microcredit programmes saw an endorsement of 'financial literacy' and with it a resurgence of a limited functional literacy approach.[74] The emphasis was on measurement and a definitional narrowing of empowerment to align closely with economic aims (discussed earlier) even as the rhetoric of broad based empowerment continued. For instance, the research question asked tended to be: does becoming literate

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[72] Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp and Adela C. Licona (eds.), "Introduction," in *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1-5.

[73] See essays in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*.

[74] Jaya Sharma, Soma Parthasarathy and Archana Dwivedi. *Examining Self Help Groups: Empowerment, Poverty Alleviation and Education*. Delhi: Nirantar, 2007.

lead to women's empowerment? Such research focuses on pre-determined 'indictors' of empowerment such as 'increased decision-making' or 'increased mobility' and its relationship to literacy. Some would argue that this is an improvement, as, for instance, women's decision-making roles in the domestic sphere or issues other than development benefits were being recognised often for the first time. However, in the long run the relationship between literacy and empowerment remained overwhelmingly focussed on measuring impact, cause and effect[75] quantitatively or on case studies that showcased 'success' stories. Easy measurement required that empowerment be compartmentalised into economic empowerment, political empowerment or even cognitive empowerment (see chapter 6 for a different account of political empowerment). The pressure to quantify results is closely tied in with funding, which is critical in the extremely under-resourced field of women's literacy. Ironically, while official approaches continued in this manner, the experiences on the ground, as reflected in this dissertation, showed that women were often drawn to literacy and education programmes for reasons that went well beyond functional or economic aspirations.

III.   THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE STATE: EARLY DEBATES

The 1986 educational policy was framed throught a collaboration between the state and the women's movement, a relationship that was and remains contested. According to the historiography of Indian feminism,[76] the autonomous[77] women's movement was shaped by two interrelated events in the mid 1970s—the declaration of national Emergency in 1975 and the publication of the Committee on the Status of Women Report just prior to that, in 1974 –- which established an antagonsitic relationship with the state. After the Emergency was lifted in 1977, civil society activism that had been pushed underground due to the suspension of civil, political and democratic rights during the Emergency, re-

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[75] Nelly P. Stromquist, *Literacy and Empowerment: A Contribution to the Debate*, Background study commissioned in the framework of the United Nations Literacy Decade (Paris: UNESCO, September 2009).

[76] Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Maitrayee Chaudhuri, (ed.), "Introduction" in *Feminism in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004), xi-xlv.

[77] The phrase 'autonomous' women's movement was coined to distinguish feminist groups without political affiliation from those associated with political parties.

surfaced with renewed energy. The autonomous women's movement also flowered at this time.

If the Emergency exemplified the crisis of the 'political' state, a second crisis pertained to the 'developmental' state's lack of commitment to women's equality. The latter was precipitated by the damning findings of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI hereafter) in 1974, which showed that women 'lagged behind' on every social and development parameter. These findings were perceived as evidence of a betrayal of constitutionally guaranteed rights of women's equality. Written at the start of the UN Women's Decade (1975-1985), the report became a rallying point for activism on women's development issues through the mid 1970s and beyond (see chapter 1).

Through the 1970s and 1980s several city-based autonomous women's groups were formed across the country.[78] These groups set out to create consciousness about women's oppression amongst middle-class and working-class women. In the early 1980s the women's movement became publically visible through prominent campaigns against rape and dowry,[79] which once again pitted women's groups against the state. This phase is often described as being something of a 'golden age' of the women's movement, where the women's movement's capacities for nationally coordinated agitational politics was successfully demonstrated. It was against this background of a contested history that the decision of some feminists and women's groups to collaborate with the state was animatedly discussed and even opposed within the movement (chapter 1).

From the mid-1980s the Indian women's movement confronted new challenges brought about by the introduction of economic liberalization policies by the government and the escalation of identity politics brought about by the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalist and Dalit parties. The latter is a particular focus of discussion in this dissertation.[80] The political anetecedents to these developments can be traced to an

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[78] Examples include, Stree Shakti Sangathana (Hyderabad, 1978) Saheli (New Delhi, 1981), Forum Against Rape/Forum against Oppression of Women (Mumbai feminist group, 1980).

[79] See Kumar, *History of Doing*.

[80] Indu Agnihotri and Vina Mazumdar, "Changing Terms of Political Discourse: Women's Movement in India 1970s-1990s," in *Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader*, ed. Mala Khullar (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2005); Mary John, "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement: Problems for a History of the Present" in *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*, ed. Sunder Rajan (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).

emerging fiscal crisis in the mid-1980s, that led the then Congress government to embark on the path of economic liberalization, a move that was controversital. The Congress Party was however soon voted out of power in 1989 and the National Front Government (a coalition of different regional political parties) came to power. The tenure of the National Front was significant for the passage of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission Report—popularly known as the Mandal Commission Report.[81] The report, which recommended 50% seats in Government jobs and higher education institutions be reserved for 'backward' castes, resulted in a violent backlash across the country, particularly by upper-caste students, including women. However, the political mobilization of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh that followed, marked a turning point in reshaping caste politics in India and in my research site (chapter 2). The National Front Government was short-lived and when the Congress was back in power in 1991 it officially announced India's shift from state-led economic development to market-led development. The new regime of education policies was introduced in this transition phase.

From the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s these tumultuous events had complex consequences for the women's movement and its relationship with the state. Like the global women's movement, the Indian women's movement continuously critiqued the neo-liberal policies of the state and their impact on women in India. These included the 'feminization' and 'informalisation' of the workforce through low-paid, part-time insecure jobs, rollback of labour standards, withdrawal of social security measures and social sector programmes, and the inadequacy of SAPs.[82]

Equally troubling for the women's movement was another global phenomenon associated with neoliberal policies—the expansion of the scale and remit of professionally-run, internationally funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in delivering development.[83] This trend, which peaked in the 2000s, is often described as

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[81] The 'Mandal Commission' (named after its Chairperson B.P. Mandal) was established in 1979 by the post-emergency Janata Government.

[82] Nandita Shah, Sujata Gothoskar, Nandita Gandhi and Amrita Chhachhi, "Structural Adjustment, Feminisation of Labour Force and Organisational Strategies," *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 30, 1994), WS39 - WS48.

[83] Neema Kudva, "Uneasy Relations, NGOs and the State in Karnataka, India," Paper presented at the Karnataka Conference ISEC / Cornell University / The World Bank Conference (Bangalore, June 10-12, 2005); Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal (eds.), *Theorising NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

the 'NGOisation' of the Indian women's movement. For several feminists this was a time when the movement was 'co-opted' by the powerful nexus between national states and international financial institutions, leading to agitational feminist politics being compromised (chapter 2). [84] The MS programme has been studied as an example of this phenomenon, as mentioned earlier. But more recently, this melancholic and nostalgic view, harking back to a romantic past (of the 1970s and 1980s), which may not even have existed, has been questioned.[85] My research also finds that the co-option/resistance dichotomy popular in critiques of the project of feminism in neoliberal contexts can erase the complexities of feminist organizing and focuses far too heavily on national and transnational movements. [86]

Around the same time, the idea of a homogenous Indian women's movement was also being questioned from within. Dalit feminist activists challenged the autonomous women's movement for ignoring Dalit women's issues, excluding them from the movement's leadership and for demonstrating a lack of understanding regarding Dalit women's experiences.[87] Using a universal woman category only paid lip-service to diversity and difference, several scholar-activists argued. It allowed upper-caste women to speak on behalf of all women. On the ground, the anti-Mandal agitations for instance, revealed the active involvement of upper caste female students, fracturing the idea of a homogenous 'woman' category. One response was the establishment of independent Dalit women's organisations[88] that set out to redress Dalit women's marginalization within the women's movement as well as to to contend with their marginalisation within the Dalit movement. [89]

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[84] Mary John, "Reframing Globalisation: Perspectives from the Women's Movement." *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 10 (2009): 47–62.

[85] Srila Roy, "Melancholic Politics and the Politics of Melancholia: The Indian Women's Movement," *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 3 (2009), 341-357; Srila Roy, "The Indian Women's Movement: Within and Beyond NGOization," *Journal of South Asian Development* 10, no. 1 (2015), 96–117.

[86] Catherine Eschle, "Theorising Feminist Organising In and Against Neoliberalism: Beyond Co-optation and Resistance? *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 1, no. 1–2 (2018), 223-39.

[87] Anupama Rao (ed.), *Gender and Caste* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003); Shailaja Paik, "The Rise of New Dalit Women in Indian Historiography," *History Compass* 16, no. 10 (2018).

[88] National Federation for Dalit Women (1995), All India Dalit Women's Forum (1994); All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (1998).

[89] Vimal Thorat, "Dalit Women have been Left Behind by the Dalit Movement and the Women's Movement," *Communalism Combat* 69 (2001), 12.

IV.   RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON GENDER AND CASTE

A second response was fresh debates on how to theorise Dalit women's experiences of being doubly discriminated against—by patriarchy and caste—establishing that one could not think of cannot think of caste and gender separately.[90] Since the mid 1980s several theoretical frameworks have been put forward and are worth recalling as they shaped the course of feminist activism and scholarship. Feminist scholar-activist Sharmila Rege argued that the Dalit feminist standpoint[91] should be the starting point to analyse the experiences of Dalit women in a dialectical manner that engaged other groups of women. She argued that such a position—avoided encouraging narrow identity politics, essentialism, relativism and would establish that addressing issues of caste was not the sole responsibility of Dalit women and Dalit organisations. It also showed that the Dalit woman's standpoint could be multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory.

The heterogeneity of Dalit women's experiences and the interlocked nature of gender and caste has been theorised using different terminology. Some scolars, like S. Anandhi and Kapadia have employed an intersectionality lens, arguing that Dalit women are exploited because of their caste, class, gender and religion and are subjected to multiple, interconnecting oppressions.[92] Paik proposes an "incremental interlocking technologies" framework, where "education, caste, gender, class, sexuality, community, and nation are not only interlocking operations but also simultaneous, consistently constricting, cumulative processes that obstructed Dalit women by each additional level of oppression."[93] Kumkum Sangari positions 'difference' in terms of multiple patriarchies, and asserts that no single type of patriarchy can be challenged in isolation.[94]

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[90] Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, 3rd ed. Kolkata: Stree, 2013.

[91] Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint theory countered Gopal Guru'a argument that Dalit women's disadvantaged position gave them an epistemic advantage over upper caste women. Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," *Economic and Political Weekly*, WS 39-WS 46 (October 1998); Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 1995), 2548- 2550.

[92] S. Anandhi and Karin Kapadia (eds.), *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 3; S. Anandhi, "Gendered Negotiations of Caste Identity: Dalit Women's Activism in Rural Tamil Nadu" in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics,* eds. Anandhi and Kapadia, 97-103.

[93] Shailaja Paik, "The Rise of New Dalit Women Paik in Indian Historiography." *History Compass* 16, no. 10 (2018), 4.

[94] Kumkum Sangari, "Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 51-52 (1995), 3287-3310 and 3381-3391.

More recent scholarship has highlighted contradictions that surface amongst Dalit women (chapter 4). Research has shown how intra-community dynamics such as competition and discrimination between Dalit sub-castes are fractured by issues of sexuality and sexual labour.[95] Issues around addressing the widespread violence against Dalit women highlight these complications (chapter 6).[96] On the one hand, Dalit women have historically been 'targeted' by upper castes who have used violence and sexual assault as instruments to maintain and strengthen upper caste hegemony,[97] and the state through various institutions has perpetuated these biases.[98] And on the other hand, in the name of community honour the Dalit community, especially males, prevent Dalit women from exposing experiences of violence within the home. Similar tensions become evident when Dalit women have sought to remake their identities as politically 'transgressive agents'.[99] Studies have shown that as Dalit communities embark on paths of upward mobility and seek to build respecability Dalit women are 'disciplined' and 'domesticated'.[100] However, recent studies also show different ways in which Dalit women forge new subjectivities which requires them to strategise and work around community related issues.[101]

In this dissertation we will be discussing these issues in the context of new roles that Dalit women have played as an outcome of their engagement with transformtive education (chapters 4, 5, 6). Further the churn of of Dalit politics, activism and theorising was very much in evidence in my field area, when the Mahila Samakhya Programme was being introduced there, as scholarship and Dalit activism developed. The regime of education policies that I am researching was introduced during a transition phase, bot for

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[95] Lucinda Ramberg, "When the Devi is Your Husband: Sacred Marriage and Sexual Economy in South India," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 28-60.

[96] Aloysius Irudayam, Jayshree P. Mangubhai and Joel G. Lee, *Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India* (New Delhi, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, (March 2006).

[97] Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran, "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence," in *Gender and Caste*, Rao (ed.), 249-260.

[98] Anupama Rao, "Understanding Sirsagaon: Notes Towards Conceptualising the Role of Law, Caste and Gender in a Case of 'Atrocity'" in *Gender and Caste*, Rao (ed.), 276-309.

[99] Paik, "The Rise of *New* Dalit Women," 3.

[100] Hugo Gorringe, "Liberation Panthers and Pantheresses? Gender and Dalit Party Politics in South India," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics*," eds. Anandhi and Kapadia, 146.

[101] Manuela Ciotti, "The Conditions of Politics: Low-caste Women's Political Agency in Contemporary North Indian Society," *Feminist Review,* no. 91, South Asian Feminisms: Negotiating New Terrains (2009), 113-134.

for the Indian economy (into full blown globalization) and for Dalit politics in North India (chapter 2). It was a phase just prior to the introduction of microcredit policies and the narrowed agenda of empowerment discussed earlier. The state at the time was willing to partner with the NGO sector, which hadn't yet become a professionalised sector. There was a great deal of questioning on caste within the movement and new theoretical frameworks were being debated. My research provides a grounded view of how some of these debates unfolded in the field and were incorporated in pedagogic interventions and educational material (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). It ultimately offers a new framework – a conceptual metaphor – to understand the relationship between gender, education, caste and empowerment that reflects many of these developments and contradictions.

V.   EDUCATION AND DALIT WOMEN

In this section I draw attention to three types of omissions with regard to the study of Dalit women's education that my research addresses: the silences around caste while discussing women's education and empowerment, the neglect of adult literacy in favour of Dalit women's formal education, and the erasure of Dalit women's experiences of literacy in comparison to that of elite women.

Omissions in Debates on Dalit Women's Education

As discussed in the previous sections, the conceptual discourses that framed the 1986 education policy were theories of empowerment, conscientisation, empowerment and feminist pedagogy.[102] These were in local and global circulation (see chapter 1) and brought to the table largely by MS's feminist partners, who at the time were not intensely engaged with the nuances and politics of caste. Education had been at the centre of the Dalit community's strategies for social mobilisation since the mid-19th century. Revolutionary Dalit educationists, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule not only promoted women and girls' education among the so-called lower castes but also referred to education as *Tritiya Ratna* or the Third Eye: a lens for critical reflection to critique the nexus between caste, gender, knowledge and education. The crucial historical contributions around Dalit women's education, despite the fact that the Dalit women

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[102] Sharma, *Paradoxes Of Empowerment*.

were the primary target group of the MS programme, did not feature as influential factors in policy formulation.[103] Existing scholarship on MS too has reiterated empowerment and conscientisation as being primary influences, and by bringing in debates of caste and education, that go beyond access my research provides a fresh understanding of Dalit women's empowerment through education.

Secondly, looking within the field of education studies and Dalit studies, scholarly attention has followed Dr. Ambedkar's historical legacy of prioritising formal education as an important vehicle of Dalit women's modernization, emancipation and citizenship-building. Ambedkar had famously declared that 'schools are workshops for manufacturing the best citizens' and motivated Dalits to 'educate, organise, and agitate'[104] a slogan that is now ubiquitous amongst progressives of every stripe. Dalit activism too, in the post-independence period has continued to foreground formal education, and adult women's non-formal education has not received much attention, and my research addresses this gap.

Relatedly, a third historical silence lies in the extensive body of research on adult women's literacy and education during the colonial period that largely focusses on elite, upper-caste, urban women.[105] As feminist scholar Shailaja Paik has pointed out, by ignoring the contributions of Dalit intellectuals, Dalit women's struggles and their concerns, prevailing scholarship concealed the ways class, gender, and sexuality intersected with caste oppression and constructed a homogeneous "Indian woman" and the norm became the upper caste (predominantly Brahmin) woman. [106] This norm continues to be reflected in literacy material, which I analyse in chapter 3.

However, despite these critiques, what also remains as an important legacy of this scholarship is educations' disruptive potential. The first generation of elite educated women in the 19th and early 20th centuries did not necessarily stick to the script provided to them—of using education to become good wives and mothers—and they used their

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[103] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), [First published 1985].

[104] B.R. Ambedkar, Bahishkrut Bharat (India of the Excluded), 3 June, 1927.

[105] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (November, 1989), 622-633.

[106] Shailaja Paik. *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination.* London and New York: Routledge (2014), 11-14.

education in unintended, transgressive and creative ways.[107] Their efforts demonstrated early on that women's education is always political and what constituted appropriate educational content, or the purpose of education for women, was constantly negotiated. My thesis draws attention to these issues in a post-indendence context from a perspective that has not received adequate attention, that of rural Dalit women (see chapter 3).

New Understandings of Dalit Women's Education

My dissertation traces a journey from the policy and pedagogic development in the 1980s and 1990s (Part 1) to the present day, which is documented through the life histories of women who participated in literacy and education programmes in the 1990s (Part 2). I mention two themes here: issues of access and the relationship between Dalit women's education and upward mobility

In many of the life histories you will read about first generation Dalit women's struggles to access literacy and non-formal education at a time when not only was Dalit girls' access to formal education exceedingly low, it was also not prioritised by the community itself (chapter 2). The life histories also document how many young Dalit girls and women fought to continue their formal education. Official data shows that over the three decades that my research covers the school enrolment rates and literacy rates of Scheduled Castes (the official category) including those of women and girls has gone up considerably. And yet, the problems of high dropout rates, gender gaps and gaps between the achievements of the general population and marginalised groups remain persistent. According to the 2011 census the Scheduled Caste female literacy rate was 56.5% and the gap between female Scheduled Castes (SC's hereafter) and that of all women was 8.9%.

The high dropout rates amongst rural girls are commonly attributed to a combination of demand and supply side factors such as the availability, affordability and quality of schooling and fears around sexuality, girls' safety and sexual harassment. [108] These reasons along with systemic caste and gender-based discrimination, particularly

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[107] Geraldine Forbes, "Education for Women in Modern India," in *New Cambridge History of India,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996), 64-71.
[108] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS (2017).

affect Dalit girls. [109] With only 0.82% of rural colleges being exclusively for girls, the problems of accessing higher education are further fraught. The percentage of SC and ST students are less than 5% in degree level institutions and less than 9% in diploma level institutions. [110] My research gives meaning to these statistics by documenting and analysing how the intersecting relations of gender, class, caste and rurality—the latter being particularly understudied—and its relationship to women's education get played out in real life (chapter 4, 5, 6).

A second theme that has been important in the literature and in my research has been the relationship between education of Dalits and upward mobility. Here my dissertation fills not just gaps but provides new empirical evidence and insights. Several scholars examining the gendered nature of upward mobility[111] have argued that as lower caste groups move up the socio-economic ladder, women are pulled out of labour and into domesticity, leading to tighter patriarchal controls.[112] Scholars have explained the erosion of gender equality that accompanies upward mobility in different ways: the adoption 'sanskritic' values espoused by upper castes where women do not labour outside the home and are assumed to have less autonomy;[113] a strategic offsetting between a 'wealth effect' (accumulation of family property) and a 'wage effect' (income from labour), where the latter gets valued less as groups move up;[114] the increasing

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[109] Geetha Nambissan, "Exclusion and Discrimination in Schools: Experiences of Dalit Children," in *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Modern India*, eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 253-286; Vimala Ramachandran and Taramani Naorem, "What it means to be a Dalit or Tribal Child in Our Schools: A Synthesis of a Six-state Qualitative Study," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2013), 43-52.

[110] Government of India, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, *All India Survey on Higher Education Report* (2019).

[111] For overviews of the debates see: Clarinda Still, *Dalit Women Honour and Patriarchy*, 5-11; Karin Kapadia, "Introduction," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics*, eds. Anandhi and Kapadia, 21-26.

[112] Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (London: Zed, 1986); Karin Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

[113] Gerald D. Berreman, "Sanskritization as Female Oppression in India," in *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, ed. Barbara Diane Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 366–390.

[114] Barbara Harris-White and Paul Nillesen, "Life Chance: Development and Female Disadvantage," in *Rural India Facing the 21st Century: Essays in Long-term Village Change and Recent Development Policy*, eds. Barbara Harriss-White and S. Janakarajan (London: Anthem Press 2004), 328-348).

importance of gaining community 'honour' that places restrictions on Dalit women, who had previously enjoyed a relatively egalitarian set of gendered relationships.[115]

Other scholars have challenged the conclusions that upward mobility leads to greater patriarchal strictures on Dalit women by questioning the assumption on which it is premised: that Dalit women are assumed to have greater 'freedoms' (in terms of mobility, access to income, household decision-making power, for instance) and fewer restrictions (like purdah, comportment, dress) compared with upper women. For Heyer it is the quality and quantity of work (hours and whether it is menial or not) that determines autonomy and not just the fact that Dalit women work outside the home, that matters. [116]

A significant thread in this scholarship has been to examine whether investing in Dalit girls' education enables upward mobility or not. The focus of has been to examine whether higher levels of education helped organise 'better marriages'—above the natal family's class—where through 'domestication' educated married Dalit girls take on the role of 'status producers'. The research from rural contexts suggests that there is no straightforward way to explain the complicated relationship between gender, caste, upward mobility and education. For instance, the benefits of education in enabling upward mobility through 'prestige marriages' can be thwarted by the loss of honour due to the perceived threat of sexual transgressions (as accessing higher education requires travel away from the village) making education a "risky business";[117] or the induction of educated *bahus* (daughters-in-laws) though critical in improving the status position of those rural Dalit families fostered intra-community differences as well as between Dalit women; [118] or relatedly that becoming educated acted as a unifying force amongst Dalits but its individualizing impact related to processes of upward mobility, blunted collective 'liberating' effects and produced new inequalities (see chapter 4). [119]

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[115] Clarinda Still calls this as a process of becoming more 'honour-oriented' as 'Dalitising Patriarchy'. Still, "Dalit Women, Honour and Patriarchy," 18.

[116] Judith Heyer, "Dalit Women Becoming 'Housewives': Lessons from Tirupur Region, 1981-2 to 2008-9," in *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalization?* ed. Clarinda Still (London and New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 208-236.

[117] Clarinda Still, "Spoiled Brides and the Fear of Education: Honour and Social Mobility Among Dalits in South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2010), 1126.

[118] Manuela Ciotti, "'The Bourgeois Woman and the Half-Naked One': Or the Indian Nation's Contradictions Personifed?" *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (July 2010), 785 – 815.

[119] Manuela Ciotti, "In the Past We Were a Bit 'Chamar': Education As a Self and Community Engineering Process in Northern India," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

My research expands the scope of scholarship on education, gender and caste and upward mobility: The subject of Dalit women's education and social and economic transformation has focussed almost exclusively on the role of formal education and largely urban contexts.[120] Another body of academic work on education's role in fostering social and economic mobility amongst marginalised communities in India has focussed on males, urban contexts, and on formal education.[121]

By studying rural labouring Dalit women's experiences of adult literacy and learning – their motivations, challenges and strategies – and its relation to social change, this dissertation provides new empirical insights about how Dalit women formed new subjectivities well beyond seeking better marriages and greater domesticity or typically ascribed gender and caste roles in the public domain (chapters 4, 5 and 6). In doing so, I have not joined the debate—of whether greater and lesser gender equality results from education's role in upward mobility—but have instead followed scholars who have made a case for letting Dalit women's experiences speak for themselves and to reveal the contradictory lives of Dalit women. My research makes visible the roles played by newly literate rural Dalit women in catalysing paths of upward mobility, self and community re-making.

VI.   METHODOLOGY

My research study is a multisite ethnography—Chitrakoot, Delhi, Lucknow and Jaipur—informed by a critical feminist lens. I used the life history method, with my primary informants—rural Dalit women who participated in educational and literacy programmes organised by MS in the 1990s. While the life history approach is an integral part of the toolkit of the broader field of narrative research across disciplines,[122] my methodological choice of this particular interdisciplinary combination is primarily motivated by two

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(N.S.) 12, (2006), 899.

[120] Paik, "Dalit Women's Education."

[121] Jeffrey et. al. Jefferey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery, and Roger Jeffery. "When Schooling Fails: Young Men, Education and Low–caste Politics in Rural North India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 1-38; Jeffrey, Jefferey, Craig. "Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India. *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 465–481.

[122] For overviews see Sheila Trahar, "It Starts With Once Upon a Time," *Compare*, no. 38 (June 2008), 259-266; Annia Ojermark, *Presenting Life Histories: A Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography*, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 101, 2007.

concerns: 1) to interrogate established narratives of gender, adult literacy and social transformation while embedding them in an analysis of social relations, and 2) to reflexively incorporate my researcher position.

Life Histories: Getting Beyond and Below

Educational research, as the quotations at the start of this introduction suggest, is driven by decontextualised narratives—statistics or case studies – that serve as evidence of advancement. Such accounts focus mainly on externalities like enrolment, retention and completion rates, for example, or straightforward narratives of progression. These fail however, to tell us much about the lived experiences of education of women and girls. Though recent research on gender and education may acknowledge 'context'—diversity or particularities—it is invoked in limited and generalized ways, such as through generic profiles of communities or of regional specificities, serving as descriptors that provide little analytical depth.[123]

Therefore like other scholars across disciplines, the life history method offered me the potential to disrupt authoritative narratives regarding the relationship between gender, education and social transformation. It surfaced the ambiguities, certainties and contradictions around what education means and enables for rural Dalit women. It helped uncover the micro politics of everyday forms of working through and with power relations—acts of resistance, agency, negotiation or accommodation by subaltern groups. It enabled 'thick' alternative readings that take us beyond binary representations of success or failure. (chapters 4, 5, 6)

An early example that I found thought provoking is the Hyderabad-based Stree Shakti Sangathana's (1989) path-breaking study documenting the Telengana People's struggle.[124] The feminist researchers decided not to "ask" women activists questions but requested them to "tell" them about their lives rather than about the struggle alone. The researchers "heard different things" about the politics of women's lives and about the

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[123] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), 9.
[124] An armed peasant insurrection against the princely state of Hyderabad from 1946-1951.

nature of the struggle itself.[125] I found this approach of asking women to 'tell' their stories, rather than binding them to a specific script or chronology very useful as it took me into diverse terrains across spaces, sectors, time, emotions and material realities. And what emerged through my research was a new framework – a conceptual metaphor – that Dalit women offered me to understand the the relationship between gender, caste, education and empowerment, discussed below.

Another life history form used by feminist historians is that found in early women's writings, (generally elite upper-caste women), about their journeys into the world of letters to demonstrate that these are not just individual stories but provide an in-depth picture of gender, caste, and class relations and of the politics of modernity in India at the time.[126] In the case of Dalit women, activists and academics who study caste have pointed out that given their historical exclusion from literacy, written sources are not available in many Dalit homes. [127] It is only more recently, that autobiographies of Dalit women have become important sources to expose the personal and systemic nature of caste biases in education.[128] Thus life history and oral history methods have extensively been used to recoup Dalit women's experiences, establish their politcal agency, [129] break stereotypes of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular and to surface the double discrimination faced by Dalit women. [130] However, academic research on rural adult women's experiences of literacy and education, including of Dalit women in the post-independence period using feminist oral and life history methods is relatively spare. Anthropologists using the family history method have also challenged positivist functionalist accounts that dominate the field—the assumptions that social groups or units move as a block[131] or class, and parental occupation[132]—and explored intra-family

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125 K. Lalitha et al. and Stree Shakti Sangathana, *We Were Making History* (London: Zed Books, 1989), 20.

126 Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999); Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai,* 2nd edition (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), first published in 1989.

127 Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India.*

128 Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2008); Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

129 Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008).

130 Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India.*

131 Veronique Benei, "To Fairly Tell: Social Mobility, Life Histories and the Anthropologist," *Compare* 40, no. 2 (March 2010), 200.

dynamics accross time and locations. [133] I found these approaches particularly useful in addressing the crucial limitation of the black and white "success story" narratives of empowerment or upward mobiltiy through education.

Life Histories and My Researcher Location

My second reason for choosing life histories as a method was my own researcher position in this research project. I was not an 'outsider' to the story I was researching. I was familiar with the area, the programme, and some of my informants before I embarked on my research. Using an embedded and relational life history approach afforded me the possibility of being transparent and reflexive about my researcher position with my respondents. I was able to engage with them, without either distancing myself from the narrative or making myself the focus of the story, as auto-ethnographies tend to do. While insider/outsider tensions have been discussed extensively within anthropology, for my own work I found surfacing the distinction to explain my positionality not very useful. [134] Instead I found that by adopting the life history approach I could enter discussions and interviews with my informants in an informed but effortless way.[135] With former colleagues and experts with whom I had even worked previously, adopting a dialogic interview process allowed me to be reflexive as well as to share my views and I didn't always need to stay outside the conversation.

My engagement with my field area (Chitrakoot) has been over a long period but of differing intensity. I first got acquainted with the area in 1990 when fresh out of university, I undertook training and documentation work for MS, on behalf of a national feminist organisation (see chapter 2). I was an upper caste educated 'city girl' who was getting her first exposure to ground level development realities and understanding rural women's lives. By 1992, I became more seriously engaged with various MS literacy interventions (chapter 3). Between 1994 and 1997 as a founding member of Nirantar—a

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[132] A.R. Vasavi, *"'Government Brahmin': Caste, the Educated Unemployed, and the Reproduction of Inequalities"* (Max Weber Stiftung, TRG Poverty and Education Working Paper Series, 2012), 5.

[133] Radhika Chopra, "Sisters and Brothers: Schooling, Family and Migration," in *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India*, eds. Radhika Chopra and Patricia Jeffery (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 229 – 315.

[134] For example see, Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?", *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (September 1993), 671-686.

[135] Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar, *Reinventing Practice in a Disenchanted World: Bourdieu and Urban Poverty in Oaxaca, Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

Delhi-based feminist organisation—I worked as part of the team that designed the Mahila Shikshan Kendra curriculum (see chapter 3). After a hiatus I once again became more involved with the women and activities in that area but this time through Nirantar's independent initiative—establishing the rural newspaper *Khabar Lahariya*, which grew out of MS's educational interventions in 2002 (chapter 6). Between 2004 and 2011, my interactions with the on-going work in Chitrakoot was more distant. I was more engaged with various national policy debates related to gender and education as part of Nirantar. In 2011 along with other Nirantar colleagues I conducted a yearlong study that sought to trace ex-MSK learners (see chapter 4). Finally, I re-entered the area in a fresh avatar in 2014 when I began my PhD fieldwork.

In fact, it was the tracer study I was involved in that led me to consider doing a PhD. I was able to gather important information and insights but I found the framework we had used limiting: it focussed too narrowly on trying to study the 'impact' of education and establish whether or not women had been empowered, according to predetermined indicators,[136] a critique I have discussed earlier. This return to the field has given me the opportunity to look at the trajectory of development, education and empowerment policies and feminist debates that I have been part of for most of my professional life, from a reflexive, critical lens that privileges and interrogates the formation of rural Dalit women's subjectivities through feminist education.

Metaphor as Conceptual Framing

Using a relational and embedded life history approach also gave me a conceptual framework—the metaphor of a *jaal* or web—that I have used to present my research, and to offer fresh understandings of the relationship between education and individual and social transformation and empowerment.

The use of metaphors in social science research is neither new nor is it discipline-specific. In education studies metaphors have been used extensively and in multiple ways such as to describe, analyse and critique education policies, the education system, pedagogic processes, curriculum, or to describe teachers and learners.[137] Paulo Freire famously compared the mainstream education and its pedagogic system to the banking

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[136] Joshi and Ghose, *Literacy and Women's Empowerment: A Tracer Study,* 113-141.

[137] Elaine Botha, "Why Metaphor Matters in Education," *South African Journal of Education* 29 (2009), 431-444.

system. In recent feminist theory, legal theorist Kimberley Crenshaw[138] also famously used the 'traffic light' metaphor to put forward 'intersectionality' as a framework to understand discrimination based on gender and race.

I have used the metaphor of the *jaal* (web) as a 'conceptual metaphor', which Lakoff and Johnson have suggested,[139] refers to embodied expressions that show changes in the understanding of worldviews, nature of knowledge, language and relationships, for instance. At the outset, it is important to establish that while endorsing the explanatory power of the metaphor, I am aware of its limits. The 'wave' for instance, remains a dominant analogy for documenting and analysing the genesis and important turning points of feminist movements globally even though it has been critiqued for writing out or subsuming the experiences of groups such as women of colour, Dalit women, sexual minorities and fixing an elite telling of history.[140]

However, in my case the jaal metaphor was an emic conceptual metaphor frequently deployed by my key respondents to explain their perceptions regarding the complicated and dynamic nature of the relationship between education and individual and social transformation. Cook-Sather says,[141] every metaphor assumes or generates a lexicon and a way of naming within the conceptual framework of the metaphor, which embodies and reflects certain underlying values.[142] My informants further elaborated the jaal metaphor by including the use of the word *judaav*-—or connections. The jaal conveyed a web of power relations within which education was embedded, which they experienced (often times as 'oppressive') when initiating any process of change, it also conveyed for them the dynamic, intersecting and contingent nature of power relations they negotiated. The judaav(s) were the points of connection or attachment that are visible in any jaal and this for my informants reflected how the process of social transformation was

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[138] Kimberley, Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Colour," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1241-1299.

[139] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphors*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

[140] Kathleen A. Laughlin et al., "Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor," *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 76–135; Paik, "The Rise of New Dalit Women", 2.

[141] Allison Cook-Sather, "Movements of Mind: The Matrix, Metaphors, and Re-imagining Education," *Teachers College Record* 105, no. 6 (2003), cited in Botha, "Why Metaphor Matters", 434.

[142] Iris M. Yob, "Thinking Constructively with Metaphors," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 22 (2003), 127-138.

accomplished, that is by forging new judaavs at the level of ideas, institutions and relationships that Dalit women's engagement with literacy and education had enabled. And while some women's narratives of individual and social transformation (see chapter 4) conveyed a greater sense of being 'trapped' within a jaal, the narratives also expressed that their involvement with transformative education had enabled several new connections (judaav) to be created that resulted in new subjectivities to be produced even if those proved ultimately to be fragile (see chapters 4, 5 and 6). The jaal-judaav metaphor was thus used to convey both a perception of 'entrapment' that accompanied processes of self-making and social mobility many had experienced, and as a 'generative' process that enabled the creation of new connections with the jaal. It also highlighted the creation of new subjectivities through education as a collective and disorderly process, rather than a neat individual endeavour that is common to several social mobility accounts (chapters 2 and 3).

Fieldwork

I conducted my field research intensively between 2014 and 2016. My informants fall into three groups: the women participants of literacy and educational programmes organised by MS in the early to mid 1990s; programme interveners such a MS programme staff, teachers, trainers and curriculum developers; and policy experts. My primary 'field' is Chitrakoot where I developed in-depth life history profiles of my main research 'subjects'. With my other informants I conducted in-depth interviews in Chitrakoot, Delhi, Lucknow and Jaipur. I conducted approximately 150 interviews.[143] I undertook an initial field visit between February and March 2014, where I worked on evolving my life history methodology, meeting local informants and identifying potential women whom I could research. Between June 2014 and August 2015 I was in the 'field' in Chitrakoot. In 2015 and 2016 I conducted most of my interviews with other key informants. My research process began by delving 'inwards' to explore an individual woman's story and I then moved 'outwards' to interview and converse with other family and community members. I spent time with the women and developed the narratives over several conversations across different spaces—for example, homes and workplaces—and over a period of time. This dynamic engagement enabled my 'subjects'

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[143] I interviewed some informants multiple times. Only the cited interviews are listed.

the time and space to reflect on and assess (and re-assess) their present, and past, and to think ahead, and for me to enter their worlds as a participant observer.

While I have discussed the virtues of the life history approach I was also cognisant of the need to address some of the common criticisms levelled against the life history methods, which I discuss later, just before the chapters of Part 2. To counter some of the limitations of life history methods such as tendencies of randomness or triumphalism or the biases of my own location, I related the narratives of my subject to other accounts of family and colleagues, returned to them repeatedly, looked for information from different sources and connected them with the larger contexts. Thus in my work, education was located in this complex mix of social relations. By using what I call a 'relational and embedded life histories' approach as an appropriate method for my research, I have sought to tell a different story about rural women's education.

V.   CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Part 1
My dissertation has two parts. Part 1 examines three different sites through which a new vision for rural women's education were introduced through partnerships between the state, women's groups and rural women in India between the mid 1980s and 1990s. The three sites pertain to (i) policy discourses related to women's education (ii) the field where pedagogic interventions that flowed from the policy frameworks were implemented and (iii) curricular content and adult literacy pedagogies.

1. Education and the Rural Woman: Policy Discourses From The Mid-1970s to the Early 1990s
Chapter 1 examines the policy formulation processes through which a new constellation of education policies and programmes were produced in the mid-1980s. The chapter establishes that the period between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, when the autonomous women's movement came into prominence, and early empowerment discourses were in circulation (before liberalisation took hold fully), presented a unique space for a partnership, between the state and women's groups to flourish, even if these processes were fraught and the results precarious in the longer term.

2. Education for Women's Equality: An Idea Takes Root in a Local Context

Chapter 2 describes what transpired when national policy discourses contained in the NEP (1986) and MS were translated into implementable strategies and embedded in a local context: Chitrakoot District—an underdeveloped district—in Uttar Pradesh. The chapter unpacks two adult learning interventions—feminist gender training and technical training of non-literate women as handpump mechanics—introduced by the programme's feminist partners. It discusses the tensions that followed and their implications in confronting power hierarchies. This chapter shows how a particular conjuncture of gender, caste and knowledge that the pedagogic interventions introduced posed challenges to Dalit women's attempts to shift their subject position.

3. Literacy, Power and Knowledge: (Re)Fashioning Rural Women's Subjectivities

The politics of knowledge production is unpacked in chapter 3 by examining the critical questions of 'what, why and how' adult rural women should be taught. The chapter highlights (i) how the new literacy materials were produced and how this content diverged from the state's imagination of what the rural woman should learn (ii) the contradictions in the encounters between feminist educators and local women in the process of knowledge production (iii) what participants of literacy programmes have chosen to retain as 'valuable knowledge' in their self-making, two decades after they had enrolled in the programmes.

Part 2

The three chapters of Part 2 investigate the journeys Dalit women undertook between the late 1990s and 2014 as they tried to leverage the education they had struggled to acquire to seek individual and collective empowerment. The chapters explore the entangled nature of their experiences using the two dimensions of the jaal-judaav metaphor discussed above.

4. "I Have Walked All These Steps": Dalit Women, Education and Social Mobility

Chapter 4 examines the complicated nature of the relationship between Dalit women's education, individual and collective empowerment and upward mobility. It uses life histories of older and younger Dalit women who used the literacy skills they had learnt as

adults to access lower echelon jobs within Government-run development programmes for women. The chapter showcases the different intergenerational strategies employed by Dalit women to refashion themselves, build new networks and to catalyse change at individual, familial and community levels–-a process that is usually examined from the point of view of male subjects but rarely that of rural labouring Dalit women. The chapter also provides a different viewpoint to the usual narratives of social mobility through education, where the purposes of women's education are not only to seek 'better' marriages or aspire for domestication.

5. "My History is Complicated": Intergenerational Narratives of Education, (Re)Making the Self, Family and Community

Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the processes of self-making through education that was followed by another group of Dalit women, who channelized their efforts towards weaving a jaal outside of Dalit women's typically ascribed locations in the public sphere. The chapters revolve around the biography of one Dalit woman who joined MS's education programme as a young girl, and went on to wholeheartedly embrace the project of feminist education before embarking on a career in local journalism.

Chapter 5 showcases the diverse, competing and contradictory visions of education reflected in the intergenerational visions of social transformation through education–-of feminist consciousness, Dalit consciousness and employment or economic mobility–-within one family and its implications for challenging gender norms. The chapter also unpacks the fraught relationship between gender, education, subjectivity formation and the expectation that education should produce 'good girls'. This chapter argues for the need to complicate narratives by embedding women and girls' experiences of education within the broader field of politics, gender, caste, and economic relations.

6. "Kalavati is a Fearless Journalist": Building Political Subjectivities

Chapter 6 focuses on the protagonist's second innings with feminist education—while learning to become a rural journalist—and her endeavours and those of her colleagues in establishing *Khabar Lahariya,* a Bundelkhand-based rural feminist newspaper. The latter has contributed to repositioning Dalit women's location in the public domain and reshaping the public domain itself. In a context where journalism is unquestionably a

non-traditional profession for rural Dalit women, the chapter interrogates issues pertaining to the public-private divide and the development of political subjectivities. It deepens our understanding of 'local' feminisms and pedagogies of social change that went well beyond the contours of the original programme idea. As the subjects of this chapter negotiate politics at multiple levels what is revealed is a vision of what feminist education with all its complications could be.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL WOMAN:
POLICY DISCOURSES FROM THE MID-1970s TO THE EARLY 1990s

Chapter 1 examines the policy and programme discourses pertaining to gender, education and literacy introduced in the mid-1980s and how they came to be. While in this Chapter I mark the mid-1980s as a period that ushered in a conceptual shift in perspectives around gender and education I also show how this policy moment has a genealogy that can be traced to the conceptual debates that took place at least a decade earlier. In Part 1 of this chapter, I take a critical look at two important policy and programme documents from the mid-1970s that influenced the discourses of 1980's. In Part 2, I elaborate the deliberations—by following people and partnerships—that shaped the discourses around rural women's education and empowerment in Indian education policy in the mid-1980s, how they were distinct from earlier ones and how these sought to produce a 'new' rural woman subject. Throughout the chapter I pay close attention to the complex relationship between the women's movement and the state within the terrain of educational policy-making. I draw attention to concepts such as 'in and against the state'[144] and of occupying 'insider-outsider' locations that were frequently used by my research informants–-feminist activists and women's groups–-to describe how they sought to carve out a space for themselves to change the state's vision for rural women's education, at a time when their relationship to the state was perceived to be antagonistic (see introduction).

I. **WOMEN'S EDUCATION: CRITICAL POLICY DISCOURSES OF THE MID-1970s**

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[144] This phrase is associated with a document written by a group of UK-based public sector workers in 1979. It discusses contradictions experienced by the workers between their socialist political affiliation and their identity as employees of the state. The workers advocated a need to go beyond the binary of their state/worker relationship. London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State: Discussion Notes for Socialists,* 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2021). First published as a pamphlet in 1979.

In this section I discuss two critical policy moments of the 1970s – the Towards Equality report and the National Adult Education Programme—and their impact on later policy discourses.

'Towards Equality': Feminist Engagements with Education and Policy-making

I had mentioned in the introduction that the realisation regarding the non-fulfilment of the post-independence 'developmental' state's commitments to women's equality was precipitated in large measure by the publication of *Towards Equality*, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women In India (CSWI hereafter) in 1974.[145] The CSWI was set up by the Government of India (Ministry of Education and Social Welfare) in September 1971, in response to the UN General Assembly's request to Member States to prepare status reports on their country's progress vis à vis women's equality (see introduction).

Towards Equality was ostensibly a Government report but having been authored by leading women's rights activists of the time, its key finding—that women's exclusion from all developmental sectors was indicative of systemic discrimination—had a far reaching impact on feminist discourses pertaining to development and state responsibility towards fulfilling goals of gender equality.[146] Vina Mazumdar, regarded as the architect of the report and a leading figure in the women's movement said that *Towards Equality's* findings created a "crisis of conscience",[147] as it signalled a complete failure of the post-colonial state in fulfilling its constitutional commitments to gender equality and establishing the principle of non-discrimination.[148] A political and strategic shift in the movement's relationship with the developmental state followed, from benign acceptance to becoming an interrogator, critic and watchdog of state development policies and

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[145] Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), *Status of Women in India: A Synopsis Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India 1971-1974* (New Delhi: ICSSR, 1975). *Towards Equality* was called a 'founding text' of the women's movement. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India* 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 101); John, "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement, 101-123.

[146] Mala Khullar (ed.), *Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2005), 11.

[147] Kumud Sharma, "Towards Equality: A Journey of Discovery and Engagement," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 24, no. 1 (2017), 81.

[148] See Leela Kasturi, "Extract of Report of the Sub-committee, Women's Role in Planned Economy, National Planning Committee Series (1947)," in *Samya Shakti: A Journal of Women's Studies*, no. VI (1991-92), 110-125.

actions: an inherently fraught and tenuous relationship (see introduction).

But equally, the production of *Towards Equality* was an important early example of the complex nature of feminist engagement with policy-making. Not only did it reveal a different face to the 'agitational' anti-state politics of the autonomous women's movement but also a mode of strategic collaboration where the movement representatives—scholars and activists—were willing to occupy an 'insider-outsider' position in order to fight for the inclusion of its agenda within state policies. One way that this became possible was by establishing connections between the movement's scholar-activists and progressive bureaucrats. This mode of interaction had a bearing on educational policy-making in the mid-1980s.[149]

As the first major post-independence policy analysis on the status of women, *Towards Equality*'s framework was firmly rooted in the framework of the Indian constitution. In short, this meant establishing formal equality between the sexes in terms of access to opportunities, ensuring equal participation in education, employment and other dimensions of public life, the removal of barriers that prevented participation and access, which also resonated with liberal feminist and WID perspectives (see introduction). *Towards Equality*'s chapter on education made two important critiques of the post-independence Indian state's performance—the unequal educational access of women and girls and the issue of sexist bias.[150] Empirically, the former was reflected in the enormous gaps between male and female enrolment rates at all stages of education and high dropout rates in school education. And the latter, in gender biases in subject choice, textbooks and curricula and the promotion of values in curricular content that reinforced gender stereotypes[151] (see chapter 3).

While equality in educational access for women and girls and the removal of gender biases in educational content was what the CSWI demanded, it also put forward a more complex understanding of the relationship between education and gender equality that was unusual and important for a Government report. The authors used two terms,

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[149] Mazumdar was asked to lead the CSWI in 1973 by J.P. Naik, a very well regarded bureaucrat and educationist. As member secretary of the ICSSR, Naik put his weight behind the CSWI and Mazumdar. Sharma, "Towards Equality: A Journey," 84. For a self-reflexive account see, Vina Mazumdar, *Memories of a Rolling Stone* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008).

[150] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 88-102.

[151] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 89; see Khullar, *Writing the Women's Movement*," 11. Textbook analysis has remained an important issue for feminist engagement, Dipta Bhog et al., *Textbook Regimes: A Feminist Critique of Nation and Identity* (New Delhi: Nirantar, 2010).

"ambivalence"[152] and "double-edged instrument",[153] to argue that education should not necessarily be posited as a benign and 'universal good', as is usually the case in 'developmentalist' policy discourses (see introduction).

Towards Equality states that, "... attitudes to women's education in India have displayed an *ambivalence* between the *traditional limited* view on one hand and this *broad new concept* on the other … "[154] (emphasis mine). The "limited" view, promoted women's education simply to enable them to better perform their traditional societal roles, as mothers and wives for example, and the "broad" view prepared her instead to play new roles necessary for a modernizing society. The report argues that while the Government's commitment should be to the "broad" view of education as contained in the Constitution, policy makers continued to believe that women's education should improve women's abilities to play their familial and societal roles as dictated by tradition.[155]

The report's use of "double-edged instrument" signals the unpredictable outcomes of education for women. Pointing to the colonial period as an illustration, *Towards Equality* asserts that the reformist agenda of women's education promoted by Indian male social reformers and the colonial state led to many women accessing education, but also reinforced their traditional roles as wives and mothers and thereby promoted a circumscribed educational vision for women (see introduction). However, it also says that education pursued even within this "limited" framework, did have a positive impact: the promotion of two occupations for women—teaching and nursing—brought women into the public domain.[156] The report provided contemporary examples of the 'negative' fallouts that have accompanied an expansion of women's

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[152] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 89.

[153] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 95.

[154] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 89.

[155] The debate over what 'values' women's education should promote (whether these should be based on 'tradition' or 'modernity') and the source of these values (whether these should draw on religion or the Constitution) is an unresolved issue, in India. In 2000, when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance was in power, the new curriculum framework it produced, even as it invoked constitutional equality between sexes, stated that education should "recognise and nurture the best features of each gender in the best Indian tradition" and that "unlike in the West" a gender-sensitive curriculum should "nurture a generation of girls and boys who are equally competent and are sensitive to one another, and grow up in a caring and sharing mode as equals, and not as adversaries." National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT), *National Framework Curriculum Framework 2000* (New Delhi: NCERT, 2000), 8. Feminists issued statements objecting to this formulation.

[156] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 88.

education in the early post-independence years: the number of illiterates increased, the distinction between classes was exacerbated, disparities across regions were sharpened, the sex-ratio worsened and the gender gaps in literacy rates across gender and communities were vast. These continue to be relevant issues today. Despite these contradictions, the authors argued that, "The education system is the *only institution*, which can counteract the deep foundations of the inequality of the sexes that are built in the *minds* of men and women through the socialization process."[157] (emphasis mine).

Rural women's literacy and non-formal education for adult women on the other hand was an afterthought for the Committee and the Government. Mazumdar retrospectively revealed that the CSWI's initial Terms of Reference did not include adult women's literacy and this was included only after members argued for it.[158] This in itself was extremely surprising and revealed the state's early disinterest in adult women's education, as the report was written on the heels of the 1971 Census results, which showed that the numbers of illiterate women had increased.[159]

But my second observation is that the CSWI's proposals for rural women's education was at odds with its overall approach to gender and education:

> The claims of the formal education system which can cater to the needs of only a minority, and mainly the younger generation, will have to be balanced against the educational needs of this group of adult women who constitute the *workers* and *mothers* of the society … [160]

> …The greatest problem in women's education in India today is the provision of *some* basic education to the *overwhelming majority* who have remained outside the reach of the formal system because of age, *social disabilities* …. [and] In order to *integrate* women in the process of *national development* … [it is] imperative to provide *some* education to the vast mass of illiterate and semi-literate women … [161]

> … The system should be continuous and emphasise learning *useful things in spare time*, the object being to provide women with *easy access to information and use of information for better participation in social life.* [162] (emphasis mine)

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[157] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 101-102

[158] Mazumdar, *Memories of a Rolling Stone*, 27-32.

[159] The female literacy rate in 1971 was 18.4%. 65% of women between the ages 15-24 were illiterate. The number of female illiterates increased from 162 million (1950-51) to 215 million (1970-71). Even today, poor statistics related to adult women's literacy has not resulted in greater attention or resources.

[160] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 94.

[161] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 100-101.

[162] ICSSR, *Status of Women in India*, 101.

There are several contradictions worth noting here: One relates to rural women being projected as both 'workers and mothers'. The disquiet arises, not because women's dual roles are being highlighted, which was an important step forward in feminist scholarship in the 1970s, but because 'motherhood' is invoked specifically for rural women. Otherwise the report has critiqued the inculcation of such traditional values as promoting motherhood as representing a 'limited' vision of education. (see chapter 3)

It is possible to account for this by locating the statement in the authors' strategic compulsions of discarding their own and the movement's middle class and upper caste orientation[163] to establish that motherhood was not just a middle-class concern. However, other middle-class biases creep into the language and propositions made regarding the purposes of rural women's education. The call the Report makes is for 'some' education to be provided for the vast majority, which is useful and can be pursued by women in their 'spare time,' which given their worker status would be unlikely. The concern to establish new gender norms and roles as intrinsic values expressed earlier is noticeably absent.[164]

Further literacy for rural women is positioned as being necessary for their integration into the national and social mainstream. The underlying assumption is that the rural woman is not already part of this and may even be suffering from 'social disabilities'. This view sits uneasily with the rural-woman-worker status that the Report proposes, where she is already contributing her labour to reproduce the family and nation, and converges instead with the rural woman subject as being 'backward', responsible for holding the nation back. Such a formulation falls squarely within the 'limited' view of education that the report's authors' critique. The illiterate rural woman subject is still waiting to be integrated into the national mainstream and literacy is burdened with this task (see chapter 3).

Though Mazumdar retrospectively critiqued some of her own positions, such as the failure to address the issue of caste and women's political participation,[165] *Towards Equality* was important in setting the agenda for the women's movement and Women's

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[163] John, "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement," 108.

[164] *Towards Equality* assesses the government's adult literacy programme as being ineffective, marked by wastage of resources, duplication, ad-hocism, and a lack of coordination between different agencies. ICSSR, *Status of Women in* India, 101.

[165] Vina Mazumdar, "The Making of a Founding Text," in *Women Studies in India: A Reader*, ed. Mary John (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 27-32.

Studies at the time. Crucially, its recommendations eventually led to the inclusion of a chapter on women in Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985), which enabled the formulation of the WDP. However, by de-prioritising adult literacy and non-formal education the CSWI undermined their importance as issues for feminist activism and scholarly engagement.

The National Adult Education Programme: Literacy and Politics in the Late 1970s

The second educational intervention from the 1970s that also impacted later discourses pertaining to adult women's literacy was the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP hereafter). The NAEP injected a progressive view of adult literacy from a class perspective based on the critical literacy approach (or Freirean approach) discussed in the introduction. But here too the programme's ultimate failure led to adult literacy being deprioritized, in a different manner from the CSWI.

The NAEP (1978) was the first national level adult education programme that not only elevated adult literacy to an issue of national importance in post-independent India, but more importantly gave it a political charge. The NAEP was introduced by the post-Emergency Janata Government—a coalition of parties that opposed the Emergency—in 1977. It had the support of civil society activists who were invested in rebuilding democratic processes at the grassroots. This was therefore another early example of insider-outsider engagements in educational policy-making, with some overlapping actors from the previous example.

The goals of the NAEP were three-fold: to impart literacy and numeracy, functional development and create social awareness amongst the poor.[166] Social awareness was defined as follows: including an awareness of the impediments to development, of laws and government policies, and of the need for the poor and illiterate to organize themselves for group action towards development. [167] The project of social

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[166] Adult education policy expert H.S. Bhola refers to NAEP's 'awareness component' as 'conscientisation'. H.S. Bhola, "A policy analysis of Adult Literacy Education in India: Across the Two National Policy Reviews of 1968 and 1986," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (Atlanta, Georgia, March 17-20, 1988), 12. For an details of the NAEP see, Prasenjit Deb, "National Adult Education Programme, 1978."

[167] NGOs were provided financial assistance to run village-level adult education centres. An adult education bureaucracy from the national to district level was put in place for the first time.

transformation through literacy had become popular amongst left-leaning social activists in India in the 1970s, when Paulo Freire's important contributions—pedagogic and theoretical—to the field of adult literacy came into global circulation (see introduction). A generation of progressive activists in India in the 1970s had been introduced to Freirean philosophy and many got involved in the implementation of the NAEP.[168]

Renuka Mishra was one such activist influenced by Freire's transformative approach to literacy. A left-leaning intellectual, she was a literacy activist in the 1970s, and later involved in organizing stone-quarry workers outside Delhi. In the 1980s she helped shape the NEP and subsequently worked closely with MS, and then in 1993 co-founded Nirantar, a feminist gender and education organization (see chapter 3). As a co-founder of Nirantar I have worked closely with Mishra. In the mid-1970s Mishra was self-publishing a journal called *How* which carried commentary on social and political events as well as analytical case studies of field-level social change experiments being undertaken by voluntary groups.[169] I interviewed Mishra about her involvement with the NAEP and she directed me to this editorial. An entire issue of *How* was devoted to adult literacy just before the NAEP was launched in October 1978.

The editorial asked: What exactly is the concept of literacy?[170]

"… Some view it [literacy] merely as the knowledge of 3 R's [Reading, (W)riting and (A)rithmetic] … Others question the relevance of literacy to rural masses and plead for imparting them 'functional' education, which will 'benefit' them in day-to-day lives. According to this viewpoint, they ought to be given education in improved agricultural practices, use of appropriate variety of fertilisers, …. [yet]

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[168] Francis Cody, *The Light of Knowledge: Literacy Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2013). Freire visited India in 1979 to engage with NAEP, which may have enhanced its appeal amongst Indian activists. Ironically Freire himself was sceptical about the NAEP. He doubted that its agenda of social transformation could be realized through a state-run programme, where societal structural change was not being proposed. G.S. George Ancy Selind, "Illiteracy is present because of the political, economic and social conditions: Paulo Freire," *India Today* (April 15, 1979).

[169] Mishra published *How* from June 1978 to May 1983. It was funded through subscriptions. Its maximum circulation was 900 primarily amongst progressive civil society. Mishra said she started *How*, " … [because] like me there were many others becoming disillusioned with the Left [parties] … they had become inflexible and there was no space to creatively do grassroots work…. some of us were feeling women's issues were not being addressed. Of course the larger context was the excitement of the post-emergency phase of wanting to influence Government policy." Renuka Mishra (Social activist, founding-member Nirantar), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 24, 2017.

[170] Renuka, *How* 1, no. 5 (October 1978), 1.

others frown and fret when they find that poor women do not know how to cook meals hygienically. Personal hygiene, child and maternity care, knowhow to treat basic ailments in their view should be the essentials of literacy programmes…

… One wonders about those responsible for formulating these programmes … [they] appear to be total aliens: men from a different world altogether… majority of the 'target' illiterate population consists of agricultural labourers, belong to backward castes and tribes like blacksmiths, sweepers, cobblers, weavers, nomads, bhils, and others… [who] own little or no land…

[it] is in the economic interests of their 'masters' to prevent them from becoming literate in any way. They are forced to toil on someone else's land from dawn to dusk to eke out a miserable existence… It then becomes a cruel joke to instruct them on the techniques of improved farming... [or] syllabi for hygienic preparation of food… many illiterate people eat 'lunch' consisting of a chapatti or two with a piece of onion or green chilli… Does training in improvement of cooking skills become in any way relevant in such a setting?"

The extract above presents a textured reading of the realities of labouring women's lives and the difficult place of literacy within it, which was not captured by the CSWI. Literacy is positioned as an act of power working through class relations in two ways. First, through the land-owning and resource-controlling classes' active interest in keeping the labouring class illiterate and uniformed to prevent losing control over their labouring bodies. Landlords policed the boundary between literates and illiterate with threats of violent reprisals, should attempts be made by illiterates to cross it (see chapters 4 and 5).

Secondly, through the bureaucracy which exerted its power through its status of being 'educated' and of belonging to the professional *sarkari* (government) salaried class. On the one hand, the bureaucracy reinforces their social and economic distance from the working classes by maintaining intellectual control through the ideological content of education programmes, which they determined. Their 'alien minds' prescribe irrelevant functional literacy programmes where labouring women are cast as 'lacking' and 'ignorant'. And on the other, they seek to mould rural labouring illiterate women in the image of middle-class notions of womanhood, again establishing intellectual and social hegemony (see chapter 3). If the CSWI provided a feminist perspective on analysing women's education by focusing on education's role in socialization processes the extract above reflects a reading of the politics of literacy from a class perspective. Both types of

critiques of Government policy were in circulation within policy discourses and permeated discourses of the 1980s, as we shall see in the next sections.

The NAEP was launched with a great deal of fanfare and enthusiasm but was discredited equally rapidly.[171] While charges of misappropriation and poor results (against implementing NGOs) and a take-over of the programme by the bureaucracy (by implementing NGOs) attracted public and scholarly attention,[172] there were two far more damaging effects of the NAEP's failure: it 'depoliticized' the transformative project of adult education and its radical agenda at the ideological level, and it marked a failure and mistrust of collaborations between progressive civil society and the state. The eventual consequence of both these problems was the marginalization of the issue of adult literacy itself.

According to Ila Patel,[173] there was an ideological flaw with the NAEP. As she puts it, the NAEP "…mixed pseudo-Freirean terminology (for example, conscientisation, liberation and dialogue) with the dominant developmentalist perspective on education to articulate the populist rhetoric of the Janata regime". Kidd and Kumar had used the term "pseudo-Freirean"[174] to describe the educational theory and practice that grew out of what they termed the "co-optation" and "distortion" of Freire's educational philosophy by international agencies (see introduction). This was achieved through resignifying key Freirean concepts: 'oppression' became 'poverty' (such that exploitative relations were edited out) and the 'culture of silence' (which according Freire was erasure of the voices of the oppressed) became the 'culture of poverty' (blaming the poor for their own poverty).

The NAEP experience was therefore a cautionary one for 'in and against the state' strategies, where the politics of accommodation between the partners—with the bureaucracy retaining functional literacy in NAEP's vision, and civil society believing that

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[171] NAEP's documented shortcomings ranged from: bureaucratic delays, political wrangling, corruption charges against the NGOs that received grants, patchy progress and the non-achievement of targets. Sadhna Saxena, "Education of the Masses in India: A Critical Enquiry," in *Education and Social Change in South Asia*, eds. Krishna Kumar and Joachim Oesterheld (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 408-436;

[172] Prabhu Chawla, "National Adult Education Programme Goes Awry," *India Today* (July 31, 1979).

[173] Ila Patel, "Adult Education: The Legislative and Policy Environment," in *Adult Education in India*, ed. C.J. Daswani and S.Y. Shah (New Delhi: UNESCO, 2000), 70-71.

[174] Kidd and Kumar, "Co-opting Freire."

they could override it with their version of the radical agenda of social awareness—did not work out. The "ambivalence" that CSWI talked about in terms of the "limited" (traditional) and "broad" (new roles for women) views of education can be related here to the 'limited' functional literacy approach and the 'broad' conscientisation approach (see introduction). Conscientisation eventually lost out, enhancing the disquiet that activists like Mishra had felt in the first place of collaborating with the state. We will see the tensions between broad and narrow visions re-emerge in the later discourses as well. In addition, despite the charge of bureaucratic interference by civil society organisations it was equally the failure by progressive civil society to convert literacy into the promised "potent weapon"[175] of social transformation that became an enduring disappointment within adult literacy activist circles in India, for not just failing to offer a compelling programme but also for not processing the reasons for this failure. [176]

The legacy of the twin processes of politicization and depoliticization of adult education and literacy in the two documents discussed was carried into the policies of the mid-1980s.

II.   THE RURAL WOMAN AND HER EDUCATION: FRESH ARTICULATIONS

Between 1984 and 1989, discourses related to rural women's education that were reframed through three important policy and programmatic interventions—the WDP (1984), the NEP (1986) and the MS Programme (1989)—were located in a new and distinctive political moment. The CSWI was prepared just prior to the turbulent Emergency period when state-civil society relations were particularly fractious. The NAEP was initiated in a climate of post-emergency euphoria about potential civil society-state relations. The mid-1980s policies were located at a time when the autonomous women's movement had flowered and largely held an antagonistic position in relation to the state. This period was also at the cusp of the introduction of economic liberalisation, which came into force in India in the early 1990s, when external donor support would be

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[175] Editorial, *How* 1, no. 5 (October 1978), 2.
[176] Saxena, "Education and the Masses," 412.

leveraged to fund 'women's empowerment', a new buzzword in international discourse[177] (see introduction).

Rural women's education: A Policy-making Journey

Initiated in 1984, the Rajasthan-based WDP aimed "to empower women through communication of information, education and training and to enable them to recognize and improve social and economic status."[178] The WDP was conceptualised and implemented by the Rajasthan Government (Department of Women and Child) in partnership with NGOs and women's groups and its funding partner, UNICEF. WDP's three institutional partners—government, women's groups and academics—worked together (initially at least) to implement the project through a specially designed institutional arrangement, which brought women's groups and their representatives formally within the ambit of a state-sponsored programme.[179]

Technically, the WDP was not an education programme but rather, as its name suggests, a development programme. However, it introduced a new discourse around rural women's education and a new pedagogic strategy—which WDP and later MS referred to as training—to implement its vision, which had a significant impact. The WDP's educational vision sought to establish that abilities to critically think, analyse and learn were not the prerogative of educated middle-class women alone but of rural illiterate women as well.[180] A particularly important figure that became the programme's pivot and through whom this educational vision was carried forward was the *sathin* or village-level animator. This new discourse around rural women's subjectivity and of rural women's education travelled from the state to the national level via many of the key actors associated with the WDP, who were later also involved with the framing of the

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[177] Vimala Ramachandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala, "Ambiguities and Silences," in *Cartographies of Empowerment: The Mahila Samakhya Story,* eds. Vimala Ramachandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012), 486.

[178] Sharada Jain et al., *Exploring Possibilities: A Review of the Women's Development Programme Rajasthan* (Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies, 1988).

[179] WDP's institutional partnership was as follows: Government (Project functionaries like the Project Director, responsible for management and reporting to the ministry); feminist activists and NGO representatives (housed within a newly created institutional structure called IDARA, responsible for training and field support); and academic institution (Institute of Development Studies Jaipur, responsible for research and monitoring).

[180] Dipta Bhog and Malini Ghose, "Mapping the Multiple Worlds of Women's Literacy: Experiences from Mahila Samakhya" in *Cartographies of Empowerment*, eds. Ramachandran and Jandhyala, 239.

NEP (1986) and then MS (1989) (see chapter 2).[181]

Sharada Jain, a professor at Rajasthan University with voluntary sector connections when she was drawn into leading the research and monitoring work of the WDP at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur, was one such actor. Her role in shaping the WDP and later the NEP (1986) and the MS, and perhaps more importantly, the perspectives of the young urban feminists who joined the WDP was considerable. An energetic 86-year old, Jain is a storehouse of information and insights and she vividly recalled for me the many twists and turns in process of developing a new vocabulary around rural women's education.

The story of the WDP's genesis, shared with me by Sharada Jain,[182] went like this. In the 1980s there was a "churning", as Jain described it, going on in Rajasthan's development sector. According to her, development programmes were "…not delivering. Women were receiving benefits but men were dominating the [women's development] field." As a result, development experts like her were convinced that, "any new programme could not be looking at women as mere 'recipients' of development benefits". Enabling women to determine development priorities, rather than doling out government handouts to them, became one of the founding tenets of WDP and later MS. A Rajasthan-based NGO was engaged in doing precisely this. [183] They had developed innovative strategies to train rural women to become community leaders to promote women-centred development initiatives, which were not tied to achieving narrow development "targets" and question government failures. While some scholars have critiqued this approach (a central plank of MS as well) for being a neoliberal interpretation of empowerment,[184] Jain and other informants disagree and hold that at

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[181] The programme had also gained traction internationally as an innovative rural women's project and became a reference point for discussions regarding rural women's education.

[182] Sharada Jain (Educationist, Trustee Sandhan, Jaipur), interviewed by author, Jaipur, April 25, 2017.

[183] The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) located in Tilonia, Rajasthan. Founded by Sanjit 'Bunker' Roy in 1972, Roy was a key figure in the voluntary sector represented a cohort of urban educated professionals who moved to rural locations in the 1970s to establish development organizations that practice people-centred development. Aruna Roy, now better known for her work in pioneering the Right to Information Act was instrumental in developing the work with women within SWRC and was later involved with the WDP and MS initially.

[184] See Sharma, A., *Paradoxes of Empowerment*; Sharma, S., *'Neoliberalisation' as Betrayal*.

the time it was a "bottom-up" response to what was happening in the field of women's development and a response to "top-down" development approaches.[185]

The novel nature of this type of work with women in the 'feudal' context of Rajasthan had not gone unnoticed. Anil Bordia, Rural Development Secretary in Rajasthan at the time was "very impressed and wanted to create a similar non-target-oriented programme within the Government system", reported Jain. Bordia was a senior IAS officer but had close ties with the voluntary or NGO sector. He was also responding to a changed policy environment. The Congress had returned to power at the Centre and in Rajasthan in the 1980s but was still shaking off the infamous legacy of the Emergency through a renewed interest in reviving social sector programmes.[186] It was keen to respond proactively to international advocacy (see introduction) around mainstreaming gender and to the findings of the CSWI, which had not totally disappeared from public discussion.[187] The WDP was initiated as part of this mandate.[188]

As a high-ranking bureaucrat, Bordia was able to bring together and inspire representatives of the Rajasthan Government and the voluntary sector to conceptualise a radically different women's development programme—the WDP—and leverage external donor funds to start the programme. A full-blown declaration of liberalisation came in 1991, but the Government was already open to receiving external support for development projects, which were less target-oriented, relatively free of red-tape and bureaucratic interference and involving partnerships with civil society.[189] For such a programme to take root required bureaucratic support. Bordia, who was passionate about education and women's literacy, represented an important node through which the educational interests of the state and women's groups were brought together, even if

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[185] By the mid-1980s participatory approaches to research and development that involved local communities in taking decisions regarding the design and content of development projects as an alternative to centralized, 'top-down' mainstream development planning had become globally popular. See Robert Chambers, "The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal," *World Development* 22, no. 7 (1994), 953-969.

[186] Jain recalled an impetus within the government of the day to implement the restructured '20-point programme' of the notorious Emergency years. When Indira Gandhi's Congress returned to power at the Centre in 1980 the programme was restructured in 1982 and again in 1986 and 2006. Among the '20 points' were expansion of education, equality of women and creating new opportunities for women. The Congress was in power at the Centre between 1980 -1989, between 1991- 96 and between 2004 and 2014.

[187] Jain, interview.

[188] For a study of the WDP, see Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*.

[189] Ramachandran and Jandhyala, "Ambiguities and Silences," 486.

these relationships eventually proved to be unstable.[190] The coming together of women's groups with the state, represented by sections of the bureaucracy sympathetic to progressive ideas, resulted in the WDP offering a considerably different view of poor, rural women from earlier policy constructions. Instead of being represented as ignorant, dependent or helpless victims they were cast as being knowledgeable and as having agency.[191]

The decision to develop a new education policy was announced in 1984, soon after the Congress Government under Rajiv Gandhi came to power. The previouseducation policy had been developed 20 years earlier,[192] and the country was now in a vastly different situation. For one thing, the economy was in crisis. Rajiv Gandhi, a young 40-year-old political novice sought to make the development sector more efficient through technological solutions. In 1987 he established six National Technology Missions including one on literacy. The government of the day was quick to follow global trends in women's development discourses, like introducing the goal of 'empowerment' in the education policy and to give NGOs a greater role (see introduction).

At the time when the NEP (1986) was being formulated, the WDP was in its heyday, having demonstrated a workable yet conceptually 'radical' state-sponsored women's development and education programme. Crucially, Bordia had by then moved up the ranks and was Education Secretary—the highest departmental post—with the central government in New Delhi, and therefore responsible for steering the policy formulation process. He led nationwide consultations where he included key representatives of women's groups and civil society. Many feminists, who had engaged

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[190] For a critical perspective on Bordia's role see Sharma, S., *'Neoliberalization' as Betrayal.*

[191] Jain, interview; Dipta Bhog (Educationist, founding-member Nirantar), interviewed by author, New Delhi, March 18, 2016.

[192] The first National Policy on Education was produced in 1968 under the Congress Government, when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister. The 1968 National Education Policy emphasised girls' education to accelerate social transformation. The "liquidation of mass illiteracy" was deemed necessary to promote participation in democratic institutions, and improve industrial and agricultural productivity, through voluntarism. No specific mention of women was made. Government of India, *National Policy on Education*, 1968 (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, 1968), 41 & 44.

with the WDP (Sharada Jain), or with the CSWI process (Mazumdar) or the NAEP (Mishra), played a part in framing the women's education chapter of the policy. [193]

However, though the WDP had enthused certain sections of the bureaucracy not everyone accepted the vision it championed. The women's group's representatives had to make the lessons learnt from the WDP, a state-level programme, relevant for a national policy and agreeable to a diverse range of actors. Bureaucrats, educationists, and even activists who were not necessarily invested in promoting women's issues, questioned its educational vision.[194] In the view of several bureaucrats, the WDP was principally a women's development or empowerment programme and not even a programme of the Education Department. From their somewhat hostile perspective, it did not warrant emulation: the definition of education it espoused was too broad—as a process of observation, reflection and planning and establishing women's ways of knowing—and hence not implementable or monitorable on a national scale; literacy could not be sidestepped; and the interveners weren't trained educationists with credentialed opinions on the technicalities of education.[195]

Srilatha Batliwala, who was not an educationist but a women's rights activist, participated actively in the consultations.[196] She recalled for me the heated debates between what she referred to as the "good old education-walas" (people associated exclusively with the education sector) and "*narivadis*" (feminists) like her. According to her, though the education-walas comprised a disparate group of activists, academics and some education department bureaucrats, they shared a common concern about improving formal education, schooling and traditional educational interventions like literacy for women. The narivadis on the other hand, she recalled, were interested in framing education in terms of "a long-term investment in promoting women's rights and empowerment, but not necessarily through formal education or conventional strategies".

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[193] Government of India, National Education Policy (1986), Part IV, subsection "Education for Women's Equality," 6. See also Programme of Action 1992, "Education for Women's Equality," 98-103.

[194] Vimala Ramachandran (Educationist, former National Project Director, Mahila Samakhya), interviewed by author, Jaipur, April 25, 2017; Srilatha Batliwala (Scholar-Activist, former State Programme Director Mahila Samakhya Karnataka), interviewed by author, Bangalore, May 27, 2015; Jain, Interview, April 25, 2017.

[195] Ramachandran, interview.

[196] Batliwala was then working with an NGO organising women pavement dwellers in Mumbai.

In her words:

> The process [NEP consultations] was a *political moment* … There had been a 'political moment' in the late 1970s but this was different. It wasn't situated within particular individuals who had a vision[197].… Education was being positioned as an instrument or as a lever of some kind of larger political transformation. For us this was particularly in the arena of *gender power structures*.… I feel for all of us [feminists] we had insisted that we have to talk about *education for women's equality* as we were calling it in those days. We were asking what has education done to change gender relations? Nothing! So it has to take on a *radical role*. So we pushed that section [women's education]. If I was to think of a sort of *tipping point* then the 1986 policy is a kind of interesting moment.[198] (emphasis mine)

Batliwala's reference to the NEP formulation process as being a "tipping point" is worth reflecting on. As I see it, the tipping point relates to the important question of what kind of politics informed educational policy-making. Batliwala recognises that a certain kind of politicization of education had already started from the 1970s (a point I have already discussed), but what that "political moment" had missed was 'gender politics' in relation to rural and adult women's education. Renuka Mishra held similar views. Between the NAEP (in the late 1970s) and the NEP (in the mid-1980s), the autonomous women's movement had flourished and many left-oriented activists like Mishra who had realized that women's voices and experiences had been made invisible in their activism had aligned with the women's movement (see introduction).[199] According to Mishra the NEP (1986) would not have been possible without the experiences of the NAEP. The latter she explained was an education sector programme and therefore had set a precedent for the inclusion of radical pedagogy and civil society involvement, which bureaucrats working in education could relate to. There was an institutional memory of the NAEP even if it was a failed one. Moreover, despite her personal disappointment regarding the lost opportunity of the NAEP she continued to argue for the inclusion of transformative education and literacy pedagogy in the 1986 NEP—for her it was a second chance but informed by a different perspective: that of gender politics.

Thus with the NEP, we see a coming together of voices and politics we have been tracing since the mid-1970s. This moment marked for the first time a narivadi

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[197] Batliwala was of the opinion that though Bordia's role was crucial in shaping the NEP and later MS, the new educational vision that feminists introduced went well beyond his interests alone.

[198] Batliwala, interview.

[199] Mishra, interview.

brigade of practitioners and academics not specifically aligned with the education sector coming together to shape national education policy, at a time when women's education and literacy was not very high up on the women's movement's agenda. They sought to re-position women's education as a political lever so that analysing and challenging unequal gender relations would find a central place. And ultimately as a result of their advocacy, informants I spoke with argued that they were able to insert a progressive statement linking women's education to their empowerment into the policy document, where education was positioned not as an instrumentality to achieve other development goals but as an instrument that "will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past … the National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women." (National Education Policy, 1986)[200]

The inclusion of this statement provided the narivadis and their supporters within the bureaucracy an opportunity to push for the inclusion of this vision in developing future programmes. In 1987, a year after the NEP (1986) was formulated,[201] when the challenging task of converting this policy statement into an actionable programme was initiated by Bordia, he enlisted Srilatha Batliwala and Vimala Ramachandran to design a framework for such a programme. Ramachandran was a University lecturer at the time but with ties to the voluntary sector and WDP in Rajasthan. She too had participated in the NEP formulation process. Both Ramachandran and Batliwala have described first-hand, the process they undertook to design Mahila Samakhya (or Education for Women's Equality).[202] After wide-ranging discussions with various stakeholders and several revisions, the blueprint for MS was finally accepted and launched on a pilot basis in 1989 with external funding.[203]

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[200] NEP 1986. Part IV, subsection "Education for Women's Equality," 6.

[201] In 1987 the Indian Parliament accepted the Programme of Action (POA), a document that translated 1986 NEP's rhetoric into actionable strategies. The revised POA was accepted in 1992.

[202] Vimala Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya (1987-1992)," in *Cartographies of Empowerment*, eds. Ramachandran and Jandhyala, 31-69; Srilatha Batliwala, *Engaging with Empowerment*, 25-39.

[203] Mahila Samakhya was funded by the Dutch Embassy as part of their international post-Beijing Conference commitments. The funders were supportive of the programme and had close ties with both the bureaucrats and the women's groups. Later during the 11th and 12th Plan periods getting the Government of India to commit resources for MS became a huge challenge. Ramachandran, Interview.

It is usually the case that policy framers and implementers comprise different sets of people but in this case there was considerable continuity in people and ideas in the translation of policy to its initial implementation. For instance, Ramachandran went on to become the first National Project Director, Batliwala became the first State Programme Director (for Karnataka) one of MS's pilot states, and Sharada Jain, Renuka Mishra and other feminist scholars and practitioners were trainers and members of the National Resource Group, an advisory body[204] (see chapter 2).

The partnership struck between women's groups and the state in implementing the WDP and MS was different to the ones mentioned earlier in this Chapter. The CSWI was a Government committee that inducted feminist members, who allied with supportive voices within the bureaucracy. With the NAEP, civil society organisations injected progressive rhetoric into the framing of the programme and were given financial grants to implement the programme. But in the case of WDP and MS later, women's groups, feminist practitioners and scholars were both part of conceptualizing and on-the-ground implementation. Further, they had a formal space in the form of the programme's National Resource Group through which they could hold the state accountable—all of which meant a far more hands-on engagement with the state. For many informants this arrangement resonated with a desire to influence state policy from within.

Given that throughout the 1970s and 1980s (see introduction), a primary mode of engagement between the women's movement and the state had been for the former to hold the state to account through protest-driven politics, why did feminists join a state-led venture? This was a much-debated issue when the WDP and MS were being rolled out. Feminists associated with the programmes that I spoke with, cited fairly consistent rationales. Dipta Bhog, who as a student of Delhi University had participated in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns in the 1980s and gave up her career as a journalist to join the WDP, and later worked with MS and co-founded Nirantar, provided this explanation: "the women's movement was at an interesting juncture in terms of its strategic position—it was protesting against the state on several fronts ... [the] desire to work with and impact a greater number of rural women, led women's groups in Rajasthan to collaborate with the Rajasthan Government in conceptualizing and implementing the

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[204] I have also been a member of the National Resource Group.

WDP." [205] The appeal of working 'at scale' (which small-scale NGO interventions were unable to do) and of going beyond the city was also tied to the movement's wishful ambition to transcend the image of representing elite, western and middle-class feminism of little relevance to 'ordinary' women.

A second reason lay in the desire to change the state's attitude to women and women's education and to promote a feminist vision of education by working from the 'inside' and over a longer term. As Bhog explained: "We used to say then that 'the state' is not a homogenous entity, so we should take advantage of the positive voices within it." It is precisely this space that women's groups tried to 'excavate' within the policy sphere by aligning with supportive individuals within the bureaucracy—a strategy that had also been tried somewhat differently previously—without giving up on their ability to act 'against' the state, should their feminist politics or the space to function autonomously be intruded upon. This was a strategy that eventually did not work out smoothly.[206]

A third reason to partner with the state stemmed from the need to demonstrate workable strategies to 'show' what constituted a feminist vision of education. Several informants said that phrases like 'gender' or 'empowering education' were just words to people outside the circle. Sharada Jain went further, "There are limits to being critical. If you can't demonstrate the alternative, what's the point?" She and many others who joined these programmes believed that the women's movement would stagnate if they remained in the 'protest mode' and needed urgently to move towards a 'co-construction mode'.[207] To re-imagine the poor, rural woman subject and what an educational vision for her might look like and actually demonstrate it, according to Jain, was the more creative and productive strategy (see chapter 2).

Feminist Politics, the State and the Shaping of Education Discourses in The Mid-1980s

Consider the following statements:

> To empower women through communication of information, education and training and to enable them to recognise their social and economic status …

[205] Dipta Bhog, interview, March 18, 2016.
[206] See Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*.
[207] Jain, interview.

education and training are the basis for development … (Women's Development Programme, Rajasthan)[208]

Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women… (National Education Policy, 1986)[209]

Education in MS is understood not merely as acquiring basic literacy skills but as a process of learning to question, critically analyse issues and problems and seek solutions. It endeavours to create an environment for women to learn at their own pace, set their own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices. (Mahila Samakhya, n.d.)[210]

The broad continuity in conceptual ideas from WDP to MS is evident from the three statements above, and is hardly surprising given the journey I have traced above. There are three overarching conceptual ideas—that both bind these statements together as well as set them apart from earlier conceptualisations of women's education—that I would like to draw attention to: the positioning of education as a tool for empowerment and social transformation; the distinctions made between the 'broad' (read education) and 'narrow' (read literacy) visions of education that are critical to defining what 'empowering education' meant; and finally dismantling the stereotype of the **'uneducable'** poor rural woman. Together these discourses redefined the purposes of rural women's education and in so doing the imagined rural woman subject that it sought to produce. While policy articulations are fairly clear, what I will point to are the underlying tensions—or behind the scenes discussions—contained in these conceptualisations and the rationale for their inclusion.

Literacy, State and Women's Movement
WDP's feminist partners devised a completely different vision and pedagogic approach,

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[208] Government of Rajasthan, *Women's Development Project Rajasthan: Concept Paper* (Jaipur: Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, 1984), quoted in Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*, 81.

[209] NEP 1986. Part IV, subsection "Education for Women's Equality," 6.

[210] Government of India, *Mahila Samakhya* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resources Development, Eleventh Plan Document), 3. [First edition 1998]

called 'training', to foster rural women's learning and education. Training represented WDP's education component. It was an immersive process through which urban trainers enabled rural women to question gender relations at personal and societal levels and equipped them to challenge these through concrete actions in private and public domains.[211] The 'success' of WDP's training approach as representing a broad-based education strategy for rural women was carried forward into MS (see chapter 2).

Key to articulating this expansive definition of education was disassociating adult women's education from literacy. The feminist partners of WDP and MS contested the perception of illiterate women's alleged inabilities to learn, lead, decide, analyse and critique—an established trope within policy and popular discourses. Some informants went so far as to call this insistence an 'anti-literacy' stance.[212] Why should affirming critical thinking and learning capacities of illiterate women have entailed adopting a so-called 'anti-literacy' stance by feminists? The answer I believe lies in the complicated relationship between the women's movement and the state, and the location of literacy in this relationship.

From the Indian women's movement's standpoint there were six closely connected lines of argument, a context for which has been provided in the introduction. First, feminist practitioners and scholars deprioritized women's literacy, as they perceived it to be an entirely 'state-driven' agenda in order to promote the state's development interests such as population control, which they argued were not necessarily in the interests of marginalized women. As adult women's literacy got tied to state-led projects of nation building and modernization, which feminists critiqued for either excluding women or incorporating them in narrow instrumental ways, it lost its political edge. Jaya Sharma, one of the young urban feminist activists who joined the WDP in its early days, compared the pre-independence position of literacy in struggles for women's emancipation to the situation she found herself in in the mid-1980s.[213] According to her, "in the 19th and 20th centuries, women's literacy had a political edge as it was part of the struggle against colonialism, the Brahmanical order and widowhood [meaning the

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[211] For a description of WDP's training strategy, see Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*, 83-84.
[212] Ramachandran, interview. Vimala Ramachandran, Kameshwari Jandhyala and Radhika Govinda, "Cartographies of Empowerment: An introduction," in *Cartographies of Empowerment*, 27.
[213] Jaya Sharma (Activist, founding member Nirantar), interviewed by author, New Delhi, March 21, 2016.

disadvantaged status of widows]. Women's literacy and education became a critical issue around which pre-independence women's organisations got created. The radical edge disappeared as women's literacy became the sole agenda of the post-independence state." And as we have seen, even a feminist policy critiques like *Towards Equality* did not re-position literacy to re-establish its 'political edge'.

Secondly and relatedly, feminist critics saw the positioning of literacy in dominant state discourses—as a standalone solution to a wide range of intractable social problems—as extremely problematic. The simplistic causal relationship posited between women's illiteracy and poverty or fertility has been the subject of substantial critique[214](see introduction). The failure to relate the causes of illiteracy to other social, economic and political structures and power relations was antithetical to a feminist analysis of how patriarchy functioned.

Thirdly, in their engagement with grassroots development, feminist practitioners claim they never found rural women spontaneously articulating literacy as their 'felt need', requiring intervention, unlike say health or livelihoods. Kamla Bhasin, an important figure for the autonomous women's movement, makes exactly this point when she reflects on her early career as a development practitioner in rural Rajasthan:

> … I went in with a typical development project mindset. At the time, we were focusing on literacy. Why were we doing this? Because we thought that if we are literate, they should also be literate. … I spent six months trying to start a literacy project. When we asked the community initially, they said they wanted the project. A few months later, when there was no progress … "You are blind," they said to me. "Don't you see that this village hasn't had water for the last two years?"[215]

Bhasin identifies her insistence on initiating a literacy programme based on her middle-class assumptions about the value of literacy as a crucial error, a sentiment shared by many feminist activists who are sceptical about the need and importance of literacy.[216]

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[214] Kamla Bhasin, "The Why and How of Literacy for Women: Some Thoughts in the Indian Context," *Convergence: An International Journal of Adult Education* 17, no. 4 (1984), 37-53; Kumar, Krishna. "Freire's Legacy." *Economic and Political Weekly* (November 14, 1998): 2912-2915.
Anita Dighe, "Deconstructing Literacy Primers," *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 1, 1995), 1559- 1561.

[215] Kamla Bhasin, Interviewed by Sangeeta Menon and Rachita Vora, IDR interviews, May 10, 2018.

[216] Other informants problematized 'needs assessment', a standard practice preceding the launch of any development project. They argued that these exercises establish a hierarchy of

Taking this argument further, an insistence on introducing literacy programmes without women's endorsement was considered tantamount to coercion. Consider Sharada Jain's explanation: "WDP had one major principle, not to introduce any intervention except with the approval and participation of rural women in the decision making. Such a position led to a clear opting out of all literacy campaigns as also family planning crusades."[217] The coercive aspect revealed in Jain's likening of literacy campaigns to family planning campaigns, a fourth reason for avoiding literacy, has a powerful context. Beginning with the forced sterilization drives of the Emergency—that targeted men from poor and marginalized communities, especially Muslims—the autonomous women's movement has over the years consistently canvassed against the state's population control policies for being anti-poor and anti-women.[218] The 'campaign' mode through which both literacy and family planning was often promoted in state development policies, epitomized the actions of a blatantly brutal and patriarchal state. As Bhasin argued, "… the message that comes through these [family planning and literacy campaigns]: 'the poor are poor because they bear too many children, they are poor because they are illiterate .…"[219]

The assumption was that illiterate poor women were unaware of the problems of having too many children, unreceptive to modern family-planning methods, which perpetuated their own poverty and the nation's as well. Therefore, on the one hand poor illiterate women were burdened with bearing the blame for India's 'monumental' population problem and on the other, there was the simplistic and unreasonable solution of making them literate.

This points to the fifth reason why feminists have been wary of promoting literacy interventions: the widespread stigmatization of illiteracy and the denigration of illiterate people. Therefore, for the women's movement in the 1980s, the stigma of illiteracy was to be obliterated not by advocating that women become literate but by

needs that places economic needs over others and are highly mediated exercises. Issues like addressing literacy, violence, discrimination or sexuality may not be mentioned as an immediate felt need but that need not be a reason to avoid these. Jaya Sharma, interview, New Delhi April 4, 2016.

[217] Jain, interview.

[218] N. Sarojini (Feminist health activist, founder of SAMA-Health Resource Centre), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 4, 20160. Deepa Dhanraj's documentary film, *Something Like A War* (1991) reflects the feminist movement's position on the national family planning programme from the standpoint of rural women connected with the WDP.

[219] Kamla Bhasin, "The Why and How of Literacy," 37-53.

consciously devaluing its importance and emphasizing instead women's traditional knowledge and valorising oral modes of communication to share information and to teach new skills (see quote about WDP above).

The autonomous women's movement's firmness on using oral modes of communication and acknowledging women's knowledge and experience was very much in consonance with global feminist discourses that were questioning the dominant knowledge paradigms for excluding women. A common question being asked by feminist scholars was: whose knowledge gets counted as being valid and important and why?[220] From a grassroots perspective, the Indian women's movement was doing its part by recording and creating songs, street plays and oral histories.[221] As much of what counted as 'official-authoritative knowledge' was in the written form, it evidently followed that promoting 'unwritten-indigenous knowledge' could challenge the hegemony of dominant forms of knowledge (see chapter 2). Another important example of recouping traditional knowledge, was the documenting of traditional healing or birthing practices of *dais* or midwives (particularly among rural, illiterate, Dalit and Adivasi women)–-an activity that was taken up by WSP and MS.[222] In the mid-1980s, such approaches to transformative education rather than literacy, which also highlighted the importance of urban educated practitioners learning from rural non-literate women was what feminist grassroots praxis strongly advocated. The message that, "*anpadh bhi bahut kuch kar sakti hai?*" (even an illiterate person can achieve a great deal) was zealously adopted by the WDP [223] and later MS (see chapter 2). Broadly, within the women's movement such work came to be recognized as 'consciousness raising' or 'awareness raising' or 'consicentisation': critical education that did not necessarily have any formal education requirement.

The sixth argument for downplaying the importance of literacy lay in building solidarities between women, in a context where the women's movement nationally and

[220] Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical and Scientific Debate," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies,* ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-16.

[221] Kumar, Radha. "Contemporary Indian Feminism." *Feminist Review*, no. 33 (Autumn 1989): 20-29.

[222] N. Sarojini, interview. The feminist reproductive health classic, Our Bodies Ourselves, produced by the Boston Women's health collective in 1969 was being widely used by Indian feminists activists in the 1980s.

[223] Kavita Srivastava and Jaya Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps* (Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies, 1991), 3 (unpublished).

globally was coming around to recognizing that 'women' did not constitute a homogenous category (see introduction). In the case of programmes like WDP and MS this had meant both building alliances amongst rural women within women's collectives, and between urban educated feminist interveners and rural women. One axis of hierarchy between women was based on literacy and education levels, which simultaneously reflected other hierarchies, such as class and caste, and this had to be minimized. The WDP, for instance, went to great lengths to see that literate sathins were not privileged in any way, including insisting on doing away with a 'report writing' requirement, which was an unimaginable departure from the state-led development programmes, usually characterised by large amounts of paperwork. Such a move changed perceptions at two levels: firstly, with regard to who could be a development worker in a government programme, and secondly, regarding state-run development programmes themselves, which were inevitably cast as being *kagazi* or as on-paper programmes.[224]

In policy imaginations and in literacy material (see chapter 3), the ideal that the rural Indian woman had to aspire to was the modern, middle-class, urban and educated woman, and since the feminist trainers inevitably represented the latter, they were acutely conscious of the importance of reversing or at least altering this perceived hierarchy. Thus, with their roots strongly entrenched in such perspectives, the feminist partners of the WDP resisted moves to include formal literacy interventions for several years—till a challenge was posed by women themselves (see chapter 3)—and went on instead to develop other pedagogic forms like training, that exclusively relied on oral and indigenous forms of communication. This resistance, and the relationship between literacy (the narrow view of education), education (broad view) and women's empowerment as Jain said, "had to be constantly clarified and reassessed" in discussions within the WDP, NEP and MS.[225] (see chapter 2).

Educability and the Rural Woman

Though the WDP provided a template, its educational vision and institutional framework were reconfigured in MS. As MS was a programme of the Education Department and not the Women and Child Department (as in the case of WDP), to pass departmental

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[224] Jain, interview.
[225] Jain, interview.

muster (which was extremely difficult and contentious),[226] its educational mandate required further elaboration and this included moving beyond rejecting literacy outright to finding a suitable place for literacy. In her recounting of MS's journey, Ramachandran recalls a workshop in Jaipur as being crucial in working out MS's educational vision. Attended by educationists, feminist practitioners and WDP sathins—the all-important village-level animators—the question of why education was not accessible to poor women was debated. Two important reasons were identified that helped contextualise the underlying politics that eventually informed MS's educational vision, and I quote from her account:[227]

1. Because she is *poor*. The sheer business of survival drains her of all energy and education is *hardly a priority* in her *everyday* battle for *survival*.

2. Because she is a *woman*. Among the poor, education is *not perceived* as being of *critical importance* to *women*. Women are caught in a *vicious circle* where their *inability to educate themselves* lends credence to the stereotype that education is *irrelevant to women*; and this *stereotype* itself is responsible for women's inability to educate themselves. (emphasis mine)

On first reading, the two propositions in the quotation above appear to reinforce rather than break the stereotype that poor rural women lack the motivation to educate themselves. But in fact the statements put forward a layered understanding of how the stereotype of labouring women's disinterest in education and its irrelevance in their lives is created and how this eventually becomes self-perpetuating.

The propositions powerfully describe the interconnections between the categories 'poor' and 'women' and 'education' and locate education within the everyday lives of poor women. The vicious cycle fuelling the creation of the stereotype is made possible through a process of re-signification. Low-priority (Statement 1) can be read off as women's supposed indifference to and the irrelevance of education in their lives. Further the structural and material compulsions can be de-contextualised to give a different ideological meaning, so as to construct an image of an 'unmodern' and

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[226] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 46-47. The debate on the appropriate departmental location – Education or Women & Child – of MS was never resolved. Informants who were working with MS in 2106 were still addressing this issue. Smriti Singh (MS-UP State Project Director), interviewed by author, Lucknow, September 9, 2015); Prashanthi (MS-Andhra Pradesh State Project Director), interviewed by author, New Delhi, February 26, 2016.

[227] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 46.

recalcitrant rural woman (see chapter 3). Further, while the allegation of disinterest may relate to individual women, irrelevance condemns an entire group as being unworthy of education (statement 2). It is this assumption that the MS questions.

As with all stereotypes, being ideological, these are deeply internalised by women themselves, who think that education is not important for them and that they simply will not be able to learn (see chapter 3). Dismantling a powerful stereotype regarding the 'uneducability' of poor rural women and thereby constructing the new rural woman subject—who is a worthy recipient of education and for whom education is meaningful—became the basis for defining MS's vision.

These arguments coming from the subjects of the proposed policy and upheld by their feminist partners differed from the language of dominant policy discourses on women's literacy in three important ways. The first pertains to avoiding the language of 'barriers to women's literacy'. Women's literacy programmes have generally been labelled as 'failures', assessed primarily on the basis of women's low participation, which in turn apparently indicates low motivation. The most commonly invoked barriers to women's low participation are the paucity of time due to heavy domestic workload, resistance from male family and community members and poverty.[228]

While the language of 'barriers' may be well intentioned, it has two unfortunate fallouts. One is the cultural rather than a structural explanation of so-called barriers. Consider domestic work. This is typically described as work related to fulfilling women's traditional familial and societal roles, which also leads to another barrier—the lack of mobility. Being restricted to the home is a cultural problem that prevents women from attending classes. In this formulation, women's economic work outside the household is largely ignored and is therefore not factored into the fact that she has little time due to the double-burden of work.[229] And by stressing domestic work in this manner, literacy and the barriers to accessing it are tightly linked to women's traditional and reproductive roles, and consequently material and structural barriers are recast as exclusively social and

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[228] Marcela Ballara, *Women and Literacy,* (London: Zed Books, 1991); Agneta Lind, *Mobilising Women for Literacy* (Paris: UNESCO, International Bureau of Education, 1990); Anita Dighe, "Women and Literacy Developments in India," in *Women and Literacy in the Third World,* ed. Eve Malmquist (Sweden: Department of Education & Psychology, Linkoping University, 1992).

[229] Patel's analysis of literacy primers shows that women's work outside the home is ignored, in texts and visuals of literacy primers. Ila Patel, "Analysis of Literacy Primers," in *Women Reading the World*, ed. Carol Medel-Anonuevo (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute of Education, 1996): 89-96.

cultural ones. The blame for low participation therefore comes back to rest on families and communities, especially male family members. Women who are unable to resist such pressures or 'overcome' such barriers and embrace literacy are seen as being demotivated, which again points to a deficit in poor rural women and their families and communities. Such women and communities are perceived to lack a 'modern' perspective. By associating low motivation with women's traditional domestic work duties, rather than focussing on the patriarchal structures that assign them a disproportionate workload (unpaid) in the first place, the individual woman is blamed for her ignorance and illiteracy. Ultimately the 'barrier' becomes the woman herself.[230]

Secondly, enumerating 'barriers' externalises and decontextualizes the problem and is unable to provide a nuanced understanding of the location of literacy in the power dynamics defining the everyday lives of women. For instance, women have reported facing violence when trying to participate in literacy programmes,[231] which is grossly inadequately represented by the language of barriers-as-resistance from male family members. As Rockhill, in her study of US-based Hispanic women's attempts to become literate, powerfully shows, literacy is embedded in the everyday relationships, which are in effect relationships of power.[232] Mishra's editorial (discussed earlier in this chapter) makes a similar case for locating literacy in relationships of power, outside the family.

Similarly, most policy documents mention 'poverty' as constituting a barrier, an externalised and distant articulation of a complex and intimately experienced problem. Thus by using "survival" instead of poverty in the statements above, education is inserted into women's daily grind to eke out a living, and experienced as a relationship of power. What is also striking is that by using "survival" to reflect the realities of their lives as poor women, no distinction is made between productive and reproductive work. Both are subsumed under "survival" thus making all work—productive and reproductive—that women do crucial and relevant to their inability to access education.

Importantly, the statements politicize the notion of 'time', by establishing that education is a time-consuming pursuit and a luxury that poor labouring women simply

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[230] Anna Robinson-Pant, "Women and Literacy: When Will We Stop Talking about Barriers and Benefits?" *Compare* 44, no. 4 (2014), 662-675.

[231] Jenny Horsman, "Moving Beyond 'Stupid': Taking Account of the Impact of Violence on Women's Learning," *The International Journal of Educational Development, Gender Equality in Adult Education* 26 (2005).

[232] Rockhill, "Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy."

can't afford. This lack of time however, should not mean a lack in women—that they are unmotivated to educate themselves. This connection—between work, time and education—that was established through these discussions was radical and found reflection in the MS official project document in the third quote at the start of this section. Robinson-Pant perceptively points out, there has not been much change in the "barriers to participation discourse" over the past 30 years;[233] therefore the noticeable absence of this language itself is an important way in which the stereotype of an uneducable labouring woman was challenged.

Lastly, and most importantly, unlike most policy articulations where women's education is presented in terms of instrumentalities—such as to ensure that their children enrol and remain in schools—in the statements above, we see something different altogether: rural women making a case for their own education.

Thus the traditional relationship between women, literacy and empowerment was altered and a new one proposed in MS's vision statement:

> MS regards education *not merely as acquiring basic literacy skills* but as a process of *learning to question, critically analyse* issues and problems and *seek solutions*. It endeavours to create an environment for women *to learn* at their own *pace, set* their *own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices* (emphasis added)[234]

By embedding literacy and education within the everyday lived realities of poor rural women, the relationship between education and empowerment was flipped around. That is, instead of insisting that literacy and education will lead to women's empowerment—the assumption that dominates the policy literature—MS suggested that women needed to be empowered first. [235] This would create an environment for learning, leading women to demand educational inputs, including literacy. Empower women irrespective of their illiteracy and they will ultimately ask for literacy themselves was the

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[233] Robinson-Pant, "Women and Literacy: When Will We Stop Talking about Barriers?"

[234] Government of India, *Mahila Samakhya* (Eleventh Plan)*, 3.

[235] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 41; Sharada Jain and Shobita Rajagopal, "Between Questions and Clarity: Education in Mahila Samakhya," in *Cartographies of Empowerment*, eds. Ramachandran and Jandhyala, 171-198; Kameshwari Jandhyala, "Empowering Education: the Mahila Samakhya Experience,*" Background paper prepared for Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/04 (Paris: UNESCO, 2003).

approach, or to use Alan Rogers' term, a "Literacy second" approach was what was finally agreed to.[236]

Concluding Observations

In this chapter I have shown how a new regime of educational policies and programmes for rural women that also reimagined the rural woman subject was introduced in India in the mid-1980s through complex and negotiated processes.

While concluding I would like to reiterate three sets of underlying tensions in this process that will also come to life in subsequent chapters. First, is the tension between the state and the women's movement. While the relationship between the two has generally been described as being antagonistic and fraught, what the chapter has shown is that neither of these entities were in fact of singular character.[237] The encounters mentioned in this chapter have instead revealed the oppositional, collaborative and reformist dynamics that defined this unlikely alliance. Thus, I would agree with Sunder Rajan's position that the Indian women's movement's relationship with the state was shaped "in opposition to" and "continuous with", from its inception, despite the antagonistic overtone.[238] This was echoed in my feminist informants' articulation of their position as being both "in and against" the state.

In this chapter, I have focussed on tracing the emergence of fresh educational discourses related to rural women, but the relationship between the women's movement and the WDP programme ended bitterly, as did the relationship between some sections of the sathins and the state, and there were also fissures within women's groups, issues that have been written about elsewhere. [239] In the next chapter we shall witness the

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[236] Alan Rogers, *Teaching Adults*, 3rd ed., (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2002). [First published 1986]

[237] John, "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement"; Chaudhuri, *Feminism in India.*

[238] Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Post-Colonial India.* New Delhi: Permanent Black (2003), 31.

[239] See Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*, 102-107, Shail Mayaram, "New Modes of Violence: The Backlash Against Women in the Panchayat System" in *The Violence of Development,* ed. Karin Kapadia, 393-424; Uma Chakravarti "Rethinking the Goals of Education: Some Thoughts on Women's Education and Women's Development," *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 9, no. 2 (2012), 223-243.

instability of the relationships between women's groups and the state, or put differently, the dynamism in partnerships, that took this new educational vision into the 'field'.

The second tension was between the 'narrow' and 'broad' visions of literacy and education, which surfaced in different ways in the CSWI, NAEP and then WDP and MS. Literacy, narrowly defined as reading and writing skills, was considered secondary to the process of empowering education by feminists who instead espoused a broad educational vision which mirrored a reimagined rural female subject—a woman who was knowledgeable, analytical, agentive, who could determine what and how she would like to learn, and who could be illiterate. While in this chapter I have shown how women's groups negotiated this tension either by sidestepping literacy or insisting that adult women must learn to read and write, we shall see in chapters 2 and 3 that this was challenged by the women themselves, compelling the feminist partners to alter their stance.

Further, it is worth noting that while it may seem that the feminist constituency had been 'successful' in altering the discourse and multiple stereotypes around the rural illiterate subject, in fact, the same National Education Policy accommodated a mass adult literacy programme, which was concretised through the National Literacy Mission (NLM). This was set up in 1988 to address the massive 'problem of illiteracy' and used stigmatising images of illiterates, something that was critiqued by progressive members of civil society. Yet the Total Literacy Campaigns (TLC)—the nationwide volunteer-based mass campaigns to impart 100% literacy—drew directly on Freirean pedagogy. At the helm of the TLCs was the left-leaning network, the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, which worked closely with district administrations. A close reading of the NLM mission statement reveals how it accommodates more radical ideas of literacy's purposes with more circumscribed ones by re-appropriating the term 'functional literacy' to include all three— conscientisation in the Freirean pedagogic tradition, learning the 3Rs or skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and its nationalist and instrumental function of imbibing values that serve in the nation's progress. I am raising this here to point to the contradictory and contingent nature of policy-making and how different interest groups may actually 'excavate' spaces within what is cast as a monolithic state apparatus.

A third area of tension is around conceptualising the idea of the political. A running theme through the discussions in this chapter has been how alliances between

certain sections of the women's movement and of the bureaucracy were established to negotiate a space to re-conceptualise the purposes of women's education and the rural woman recipient of such efforts. The possible impression in this recounting, that progressive ideas regarding education and empowerment in the policy world remained within an elitist 'bureaucratic-activist' nexus, which was different and separate from the field of electoral politics, warrants reflection. Yet, as I have shown in the previous paragraph, it is not just one set of actors that lobby with the state or vice-versa. The sobering reality is that issues such as women's education or even mass education are not burning 'electoral issues' in India.

And finally, in the process of policy-making outlined in this chapter, I have discussed how feminists chose to practice politics differently and in a different space: through the shaping of feminist 'political' subjectivities of rural women, who in turn could challenge political forces closer to the ground, be they formal political parties or institutions like schools or the family (chapter 6). Fighting for the inclusion of feminist perspectives in the policies and programmes of the mid-1980s was not the end goal of those women's groups' representatives who decided to join the process, but an opening to spread feminist consciousness at the grassroots level, where their ideas had not yet reached. And it was precisely this movement from policy to field that brought feminists into contestation with other kinds of politics, compelled them to revisit their assumptions and complicated the state-bureaucracy-activist alignment that brought them together in the first place. These issues are the subjects of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY: AN IDEA TAKES ROOT IN A LOCAL CONTEXT

In this chapter, I describe what transpired when the discourses related to rural women's education in the mid-1980s were transferred from the pages of policy documents[240] (discussed in chapter 1) and were 'embedded' in a local field site, namely, Banda (later Chitrakoot) District in Uttar Pradesh. In particular, this chapter unpacks the dynamics unleashed and the ideological trajectories that unfolded, with the introduction of two adult learning interventions: feminist gender training and technical training of non-literate Dalit women to become handpump (drinking water) repair mechanics, between 1989 and 1994. By mapping the encounters between policy from above and the subjects of policy on the ground, the chapter brings to life the working out of rural women's subject formation, as well as the partnerships between state, women's groups and rural women introduced in the previous chapter.

Part 1 of this chapter provides a contextual background of Banda/Chitrakoot districts, in Uttar Pradesh where MS was launched in 1989. Part 2 describes how the first pedagogic intervention—feminist gender training—imagined and sought to produce the rural feminist subject,[241] the nature of interactions between rural women and urban feminist trainers, and the realignment of partnerships between MS, urban feminists and the local implementing NGO. Part 3 discusses a second pedagogic intervention, which built on the foundational gender training to teach illiterate rural women to become handpump repair mechanics. The combination of providing access to technical knowledge—a skill considered non-traditional for women in general—to Dalit women brought issues of caste to the fore and led to an interrogation of the relationship between gender, caste and knowledge. Part 4 describes how Dalit women's participation in these two learning processes—where their 'illiteracy' had been deliberately set aside—ironically spurred them to seek literacy skills. Their desire to venture into the world of letters added

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[240] Government of India, *Mahila Samakhya.*
[241] See chapter 1 for a discussion of this new educational vision and what the pedagogy of training involved, in WDP and MS.

a new layer to the evolving Dalit feminist subjectivities, as literate women. The chapter also analyses the turnaround from an initial reluctance in addressing issues of literacy on the part of MS and its feminist implementing partners (discussed in chapter 1) to their actively designing literacy programmes.

I.   MS COMES TO CHITRAKOOT DISTRICT

In 1989 MS was launched by the Ministry of Human Resources Development (Government of India) in Uttar Pradesh.[242] Banda was one of the four pilot districts in Uttar Pradesh (UP hereafter), where the programme was rolled out in two blocks— Manikpur and Tindwari [243] (see Annexure 2. Map of UP and Bundelkhand). When Banda district was bifurcated in 1997 into Chitrakoot and Banda Districts, MS continued to work only in the newly created Chitrakoot district, where Manikpur Block was located and my research is primarily focussed.[244] I will henceforth be using 'Chitrakoot district' even when referring to MS's initial phase when it was part of undivided Banda District.

The Local Landscape

Development and Social Relations

Chitrakoot District was selected as a site for the programme's intervention because of its poor development and social indicators. While this section primarily deals with the developmental and social context of the mid-1980s, most of the pressing issues of that period still persisted when I was doing my fieldwork.

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[242] In 1989 MS was piloted in 10 districts across the 3 states – Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Gujarat. Later MS expanded to Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand.

[243] India's administrative structure is as follows: The country is divided into States; States into Divisions; Divisions into Districts; Districts into Sub districts (called Tehsils in UP); followed by Blocks (in rural areas); then Gram Panchayats and villages. Blocks are largely Development units, whereas Tehsils are Revenue units. The 3 tier elected structure is as follows: The Gram Panchayat is the lowest tier, above which is the Block level panchayat and then the District level council.

[244] Chitrakoot district has 5 blocks – Karvi, Manikpur, Pahadi, Ramnagar and Mau.

Chitrakoot falls within the Bundelkhand region of UP, which is one of the least developed regions of the state.[245] In 1989 Chitrakoot district was (as it continues to be) one of the poorest and least developed districts of the country. For instance, the female literacy rate for Banda District in 1991 was an abysmal 16.44% and the gender gap in literacy rates was a huge 35%. By 2011 the female literacy rate for Chitrakoot District had gone up to 52.75%, still well below the national level of 65.46%.[246] The literacy rate for rural Scheduled Caste[247] (SC) women was 43.2%, 10% lower than the national female literacy rate, and for Manikpur block the figure was a shocking 39.96%.[248] Chitrakoot's sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) in 2011 was 879, far lower than the state-level figure of 912 and the national figure of 940. In 2018 the Niti Aayog (Government of India's apex Planning body) included Chitrakoot in its list of 100 backward districts in the country.[249]

Statistics, revealing as they were (and are) in establishing the parameters of socio-economic underdevelopment, were not entirely helpful in understanding the complexities of an area. Chitrakoot district and Manikpur block in particular, lie at the heart of a region that has persistently been referred to as the 'badlands of Bundelkhand', a label it

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[245] Bundelkhand is one of 4 regions in UP: Western UP (Pashchim, 22 districts); Eastern UP (Purvanchal, 32 districts), Central (Awadh, 14 districts) and South-Central (Bundelkhand, 7 districts). The Bundelkhand region comprises 13 districts in central India, seven in Uttar Pradesh and 6 in Madhya Pradesh (MP). The seven districts that fall in UP are Chitrakoot, Banda, Jhansi, Jalaun, Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Mahoba. Wide interregional variations exist within UP. Bundelkhand and Eastern UP are consistently at the lower end of most socio-economic indicators. For an overview of the socio-political context of UP and regional variations see, Roger Jeffery and Jens Lerche, *Social and Political Change in Uttar Pradesh: European Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 17-54; Sumit Mishra and Pramit Bhattacharya, "The Regional Divide within Uttar Pradesh," *Livemint* (March 16, 2015),

[246] In 1991 the Male Literacy Rate in Banda District was 51.50 % and the Total (Overall) Literacy Rate was 35.70%. Census of India, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India (1991).

[247] I have used the terms 'Scheduled Caste' (SC) and 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) when referring to official data. Otherwise I have used Dalit and Adivasi, the preferred terms used by these communities. However, Dalit was not a term that was in currency in the area in the 1990s. Even during my fieldwork in 2015, the category Dalit was used largely by social and political activists, Government officials used *anusuchit jati* (Scheduled Caste). My respondents usually used specific caste names (like Chamar, Kori, etc.) or even Harijan or anusuchit jati. 'Harijan' or children of god was coined by Gandhi to replace the 'untouchable' label but has been rejected by Dalits as being condescending.

[248] Census of India, District Census Handbook Series 10, Part XIIB. Directorate of Census Operations, Uttar Pradesh (2011).

[249] For an overview of the development profile of Bundelkhand see, Niti Aayog and UNDP, *Human Development Report Bundelkhand 2012* (New Delhi: Niti Aayog and UNDP, 2012).

has earned primarily for three reasons associated with its 'terrain'—physical landscape, feudal social relations and the political economy.

The area's topography, especially in Manikpur block, is rocky scrubland. Water is scarce both for drinking and agricultural purposes. The acute hardships that women faced in fetching drinking water are reflected in this local *kahavat* (saying):

> The baskets we make sell for 1 paisa
> Let our village Rukma Dadri burn, it's better than this poverty
> Bhaura (a local water tank) your water is so precious
> My pot shouldn't break, better my husband dies.

Poor irrigation infrastructure makes agriculture commercially unrewarding. Droughts occur regularly and out-migration—seasonal and long term—is a defining feature of the local economy.[250] Chitrakoot block has a Scheduled Caste (SC) population of 26.9%, higher than the state level figure of 20.7%.[251] The District has a significant Kol (the local Adivasi community) population, mostly concentrated in Manikpur block. However, the Kol (Adivasi) population is not visible separately in the statistics as they are enumerated as SC and not ST in UP.[252] The Chamars are the largest and the most powerful Dalit community locally and across most of most of northern and central India (under different names and sub-castes), and have historically been associated with stigmatised activities such as leatherwork and the removing of dead animals—occupations that imply impurity, low status and immorality—but most Chamars work as landless agricultural and manual labourers.[253] My respondents were predominantly Chamars and a few Kols.

Imprinted on this terrain are *samantvadi* or feudal social relations. My local informants frequently used the word samantvadi as a shorthand to describe the area's

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[250] See https://bundelkhand.in/info/migration-in-bundelkhand

[251] Census of India, Directorate of Census Operations Uttar Pradesh, District Census Handbook Chitrakoot, Series-10 Part xii – B (2011).

[252] Kols are enumerated as STs in neighbouring MP. Kols in UP have been agitating for ST status for some time. They often blame their extreme 'backwardness' on the dominant SC sub-castes (particularly Chamars') for cornering state-funded development benefits, jobs and educational opportunities.

[253] For historical accounts see, Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969).

oppressive caste and class relations that included labour relations, structural violence, and the nexus between dominant castes, the political class and government administration. An important reflection of the samantvadi character of the area lies in its grossly unequal land distribution patterns and oppressive labour and social relations, between the land-owning upper castes and labouring Dalits and Adivasis.

Both Dalits and Adivasis have historically been landless and worked as *bandhua mazdoors* (bonded labourers) for the upper castes. Though this form of exploitation was legally abolished in 1976, when MS started in Chitrakoot in 1989, a significant number of the Dalit women it mobilised were still effectively bandhua mazdoors or were trying to get out of debt bondage relationships[254] (see chapters 4 and 5). Dalit and Kol women performed agricultural labour and a range of other tasks for upper caste households to which they were tied. Both Dalit and Kol women are still primarily employed as agricultural wage labourers. Kol women are also particularly dependent on the highly exploitative and physically strenuous work of firewood and minor forest produce collection and sale.

The manipulation of land records through the nexus between landlords, bureaucracy and those holding political power is also common in the area. Many large landlords avoided land-ceiling restrictions in the 1970s by putting land in the names of their sharecroppers and 'bonded servants' but these land transfers were never actualized.[255] In the current context, the same nexus comes into play in the case of *pattas*

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[254] Bonded labour or debt bondage, is a form of forced labour, which results usually when a borrower, in order to repay loans, is forced into a relationship of long-term servitude (slave-like exploitation frequently including sexual exploitation) with the lender, often across several generations. According to a 2011 National Human Rights Commission Report, UP headed the list of reported cases of bonded labour (Vijaita Singh, "UP tops in bonded labour cases: NHRC," *Indian Express* (September 24, 2011). Ishita Mehrotra's research in Eastern UP provides a detailed account of new manifestations and increased burden of debt-bondage relationships amongst Dalit women in a context where men increasingly escape them through out-migration. Ishita Mehrotra, "Subsidising Capitalism and Male Labour: The Scandal of Unfree Dalit Female Labour," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of An Alternative Politics*, ed. Anandhi and Kapadia, 247 - 275.

[255] The extent of fraud and corruption is reflected in the popular story that does the rounds: that big landlords even put land in the names of their pet *kutta-billi* (dogs and cats). I also interviewed, Mohammad Amin (changed name) (Retired land record officer), interviewed by author, Karvi, December 11, 2015; Karwariya (Landlord), interviewed by author, Marayyan village, Chitrakoot District, December 13, 2015. Karwariya corroborated the strategies mentioned of avoiding land-ceiling provisions.

(land deeds given to the landless, usually from common lands)[256] where land titles are never clear or actually transferred. Dalits and Kols struggle with cases for years to get *kabza* (control) over patta land.

As elsewhere in rural India, the social geography of Chitrakoot's villages is defined by caste. Different caste groups live in separate *purvas* (neighbourhoods) and Dalit purvas are almost always located at the periphery of a village. Compared with upper caste habitations, Dalit purvas are poorly endowed in terms of infrastructural facilities like roads, electricity, schools, sanitation and handpumps.[257] Besides the inequities in relation to land and labour, caste-based discriminatory practices were (and are) expressed in tightly controlled social restrictions, notably around access to water. Dalit women could not fill water from handpumps located in upper caste purvas; Dalits were never offered water in upper caste homes; while working on fields of upper caste farmers, Dalits labourers were served water by women from the landlords families who would pour it into their receptacles from a height; they were prohibited from touching upper caste *matkas* (earthen pots) and altercations often broke out if they did accidently touch a matka belonging to an upper caste. Such descriptions will hardly surprise those familiar with the social dynamics of North Indian villages as these practices still continue today despite legal provisions prohibiting them. But given the continued stranglehold that upper castes have over Dalits and the tight connections between cultural and social practices and access to resources—privately owned—resources like land, and government resources like handpumps, a little repetition is in order.

A distinctive feature of the region's political economy and samantvadi character, and one that plays a significant role in locking its social and economic underclass into a vicious cycle of poverty and oppression is its notorious dacoit (armed bandits) [258] culture.

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[256] Several older Dalit women had been given pattas in lieu of sterilization operations they had undergone. In the 1970s sterilization operations were incentivized, a strategy critiqued by women's groups, for placing the burden of coercive family planning methods on women.

[257] Compared to the 1990s, Dalit purvas today have many more Government facilities. But the differences in access, quality and maintenance of Government infrastructure between Dalit and non-Dalit purvas are still stark. During my fieldwork I found schools and Anganwadi centres in complete disrepair in Kol and Dalit neighbourhoods, in sharp contrast to those in upper caste habitations.

[258] The local word used is *dakait* (dacoit) or simply 'gang'. 'Gang' is prefaced by the name of the gang leader, which was often a caste name. The local Dalit and especially Kol population, my informants repeatedly told me, get caught between a rock and a hard place. They are harassed and beaten by the dacoits if they fail to provide them food and shelter and then by the police for allegedly sheltering dacoits.

Gangs of dacoits hold sway over large swathes of rocky scrubland with impunity, notably in Manikpur block, drawing on their *saanth-gaanth* (nexus) with the police, government machinery and political establishment. An example of this saanth-gaanth in the 1990s, repeatedly reported to me related to the collection and procurement of *tendu* leaves (used to make *bidis* or local cigarettes). The collection of tendu leaves is an important, though highly exploitative source of seasonal employment for Kols in Manikpur.[259] The procurement and sale of tendu leaves has traditionally been auctioned by the state to powerful contractors—inevitably upper caste landlords and dacoits. More recently, during the 2015 Panchayat (village-level local bodies) elections (which took place during my fieldwork) several dacoits contested, resulting in widespread violence in several areas where Dalits and Kols were at the receiving end.[260]

In a context of such extreme social and economic inequalities, violence—domestic, caste-based and sexual violence—is pervasive. While official figures on the prevalence of violence against women in the district are not available,[261] historically sexual exploitation had been intrinsic to the labour relationships between Dalits and Kols and the upper castes. It was also a fairly common feature of women's encounters with dacoits or the state machinery, especially the police and forest guards.

Local Ramifications of the Rise of Dalit politics
As mentioned in the introduction, from the mid-1980s and in the 1990s, the rise of identity politics—Dalit and Hindutva[262]—at the state and national levels impacted the

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[259] Informants recalled the tendu leaf collection process in 1990s thus: Kol women trudged several kilometres to the forest to collect tendu leaves. The entire family worked to make bundles of 100 leaves each. A bundle of 100 leaves then fetched Rs. 12. The women took the tendu leaf bundles to contractors, where *phad munshis* (accountants), recorded the number of bundles, based on which payments were made. Typically bundles were under-counted, many were rejected on the pretext of not having 100 leaves. Payments were always late.

[260] See for an account of female dacoits see: Khabar Lahariya, "Dacoit Sundari Sadhna Patel." n.d.

[261] Local media reports and reports of women's organisations, besides oral testimonies that I recorded, indicate wide-scale caste and gender-based violence. Vanangana a local feminist organisation deals with about 100 cases annually. Pushpa (Vanangana leadership team, former MSK teacher), interviewed by author, Banda, September 9, 2015.

[262] In parallel, the rapidly growing presence of right-wing Hindu nationalist politics that had coalesced around the nationwide movement to claim the mythical birthplace of Lord Rama in the town of Ayodhya (also in UP)—had local repercussions. Chitrakoot and its environs are described in folklore and the *Ramayana* as the site of Rama's vanvas (exile in the forest) and the

local political economy. The reverberations of the lower caste political mobilization,[263] spearheaded by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in UP were felt locally, especially amongst the formerly untouchable Chamar (or Jatav) *jati* (sub-caste) that formed BSP's core support. While the BSP draws its ideological roots from the writings and teachings of Ambedkar, it emerged out the efforts of a union of government employees in 1984 drawn from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes and Minorities—communities that the BSP's founder Kanshi Ram declared as constituting the *bahujan samaj,* representing 85% of India's downtrodden people but controlled by the 15%, who were upper caste and privileged. The BSP's political mandate was to reverse this equation. Unlike Ambedkar who stressed both political and social transformation through education and women's empowerment, the BSP's main strategy was to ameliorate the conditions of the bahujan samaj through electoral politics. The BSP's genesis and main support base amongst urban, educated, employed Chamars (also known as Jatavs), has resulted in it being called a petit bourgeois party, representing the class interests of better-off Dalits who have benefitted from state affirmative action policies and are alienated from their untouchable identities.[264] According to Sudha Pai, the BSP's non-revolutionary origins make it a reformist party, working through the parliamentary system.[265]

Through the 1980s and 1990s Kanshi Ram, along with his protégé (and later political heir on his death in 2006) Mayawati, oversaw saw the party's grassroots expansion in UP. During this period the BSP, led by Mayawati, formed the government in UP thrice. Albeit short-lived, these episodes of experiencing political power significantly boosted Dalit self-assertion locally, which was consolidated during the BSP's heyday between 2007 and 2012, when it was in power for an uninterrupted 5 years. At

area therefore had considerable significance in the Hindu nationalist project, which I have not dealt with here.

[263] For accounts of the rise of lower caste politics in North India see: Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002); Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2003); Badri Narayan, *The Making Of The Dalit Public In North India: Uttar Pradesh 1950–Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a sympathetic biography of Mayawati: Ajoy Bose, *Behenji: A Political Biography of Mayawati* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2008). For a review of Bose's book see Nicolas Jaoul, "The Mayawati Factor," *booksandideas.net* (November 1, 2011),

[264] Suryakant Waghmore, *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2013).

[265] Pai, *Dalit Assertion.*

the grassroots this instilled an immense sense of confidence amongst Dalits, cemented by their dramatically improved access to the administration and police. By the time I was doing my fieldwork the BSP was in 'decline' having lost the 2012 State elections and then not having won a single seat in the 2014 Parliamentary election. What I heard was lamentation about the BSP having lost its way and as my informants described it, abandoning the 85-15 formula—simply put, ignoring its grassroots base amongst deprived Dalits.[266]

Coming back to the mid-1980s and 1990s when the MS was being initiated, Dalit men and women were joining the BSP in droves (see chapters 4 and 5). Women were not the focus of the BSP but were attracted to Mayawati's *nidar* (fearless) and charismatic personality. They too joined the party but not in leadership roles. [267] Local Dalit action spearheaded by recently politicised young Dalit men was centred around calling out discrimination—whether by boycotting stigmatized occupations, or protesting against everyday caste practices and discrimination within schools.[268] Two stigmatized occupations that were actively being given up by the Chamar community were leatherwork and *daigiri* (midwifery) both considered ritually impure. Midwifery was also tied to relationships of bondage and was a part of the labour services that Dalits traditionally had to provide. Dalits were also slowly raising their voices against everyday casteist traditions they had long acquiesced to—removing slippers while walking through an upper caste neighbourhood, or sitting separately at wedding feasts, where they were asked to wash or remove their own plates.

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[266] In 2012 the BSP lost the UP Assembly election to its bitter rival the Samajwadi Party (SP) whose core constituency was amongst the middle castes–OBCs and Backward castes–particularly the Yadav community. At the grassroots the relationships between Dalits and OBCs, though both technically belong to the 'bahujan samaj' is fraught. While doing my fieldwork, informants spoke about BSP's loss of the support of its core Dalit constituency, especially amongst the smaller non-chamar Dalit jatis (such as Koris locally). Chamar women informants were both distraught and angry with Mayawati's leadership for the following reasons: corruption, surrounding herself with a coterie and therefore losing touch with the masses, appealing to the already empowered Dalits and for abandoning Kanshi Ram's ideology by aligning with the upper castes which brought her to power in 2007. The BSP, with Mayawati as its Chief Minister, formed the government in UP thrice in 1990s, by making strategic alliances with the right-wing BJP.

[267] BSP's rural women's leadership has not been studied. Ciotti's research (see introduction) is with Lucknow-based women in the BSP.

[268] Several informants, including during focus group discussions with members of the local Dalit Mahila Samiti, recounted such actions. (Focus Group Discussion. Dalit Mahila Samiti leaders, Karvi, March 22, 2015)

As discussed earlier, Dalits were actively denied education, faced discrimination and the levels of educational access locally were extremely low. The discrimination that Dalit children faced in government schools and the need to educate the next generation of Dalit boys (girls' education was not seen as a priority then) was also being discussed by the educated Dalits in the early 1990s. Two of my informants recalled their involvement in setting up a local school and its importance as a site where Dalit consciousness was fostered. Nearly three decades later Shivrani's[269] eyes misted over as she told me, "We built the school, one brick and one bamboo at a time. Educated Dalit youth began teaching at the school. It was our space."[270]

It was into this quagmire of 'badland politics' and political churn that MS, with its new-fangled educational vision was transported, and unsurprisingly it had a bumpy (though remarkable) landing. Being a government-led programme, such overtly 'political' issues were not 'officially' part of MS's mandate (and have not been a part of any of its documentation) but they seeped in, to influence and complicate discourses, strategies and the partnerships that were unfolding in important ways, as we shall see in this chapter.

MS's Initiation

MS had a standardized structure that went from the national to the village level (See Annexure 1).[271] Till 1992, MS in Chitrakoot was implemented through a tripartite

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[269] Name changed.

[270] I visited the school located in Kabrapurva village as it represented an important moment in Dalit hyperlocal community-level organizing in the 1990s. The school is now a registered school up to Class 10, with an impressive infrastructure, made possible due to the patronage of Daddu Prasad, a powerful former BSP MLA. When I visited, Daddu Prasad was in the political wilderness, having fallen out with Mayawati. Daddu Prasad's political downslide had affected the school's fortunes. Further, with the expansion of Government and private schools in the area, attracting students had become a problem. There were fissures within the community of founders, over proprietorship and corruption allegations. My informants were bitter, as they felt the school represented a failed collective political project. Based on Field visit Kabrapurva, October 15, 2014, and interviews with, Shivrani (Leader of the Dalit Mahila Samiti, former sakhi), interviewed by author, Saraiyya village, Chitrakoot District, March 16, 2015; Dhokhia (Staff member Vanangana, former sakhi), interviewed by author, Chowkipurva village, Chitrakoot District, February 23, 2015.

[271] At the national level there was a National Project Office within the Ministry of Human Resources Development helmed by a National Project Director. At the state level, MS was registered as autonomous societies to ensure independence from bureaucratic interference and the State Project Directors were usually experienced civil society representatives led a state level team. At the district level independent District Offices were established to implement the programme. Government of India, *Mahila Samakhya*, (Eleventh Plan Document, n.d.), 8-11. (see Annexure 1 for the MS structure)

arrangement between the National MS Project office housed in the Ministry of Human Resources Development in Delhi, a Delhi-based feminist training organization and two district-level NGOs, both run by men, as no local women's organizations could be identified at the time.[272]

An important initial task was selecting and training MS's field-level cadres: sahayoginis, sakhis and district staff. Sahayoginis (or field-level mobilisers) were local women with minimal levels of education,[273] who mobilized women and established the village-level women's collectives (usually 15-20 women) called *mahila sanghas* or simply *sanghas.*[274] Initially two volunteers called sakhis,[275] were identified in each village and were trained to take a lead in addressing local development problems and women's issues. Sakhis were the conduit through which information and other inputs provided at MS-run training workshops were conveyed to other village women. Sahayoginis played a crucial

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[272] Until 1993 the MS national office coordinated the UP-MS programme. For an insightful account of the process of establishing the MS programme. Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 69-71.

[273] Given low educational levels amongst rural women and to encourage the recruitment of women from marginalized communities, MS did not ask for educational qualifications in the initial years. Sahayoginis education levels were mostly 5th grade or at most 8th grade. Sahayoginis were paid a nominal salary (Rs. 1000) at the time.

[274] The MS document defined the mahila sangha as: "The village level institution … that will provide the space where women can meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analysing and above all feeling confident to articulate their needs through this collective action (Government of India, Mahila Samakhya, Tenth Plan Document, 6-7). From 1995, a pyramidal federated structure of sanghas—called *mahasanghas*—were established. Women's leadership was developed at all levels so that mahasanghas could function as autonomous grassroots institutions, independently of MS structure. According to National Evaluation Report conducted by the Indian Institute of Management in 2014 there were 5483 mahila sanghas in UP with a membership of 1,17,676. There were 52 federations of which 22 were registered (Indian Institute of Management (IIM), *Mahila Samakhya National Review,* Ahmedabad: Ravi Mathai Centre for Educational Innovation, 2014). For a discussion on MS federations in Uttar Pradesh see, Runu Chakravarty, *Study on Federations in UP* (Lucknow: Mahila Samakhya, Unpublished Report, 2012).

[275] The 'sakhi model' was developed on the lines of the WDP 'sathin model'. Sakhis were not programme functionaries, but were called 'catalysts' or 'change agents'. They were paid a small honorarium (Rs. 200) to compensate for the time they gave to the programme and helping women with their problems. By 1995 the 'sakhi model' was withdrawn in favour of the 'sangha model', after an internal review found that sakhis were getting empowered 'individually' but not necessarily the women's collective. Sakhis were all non-literate Dalit and Kol women. See Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 36; Jandhyala, "From Sanghas to Federations," 105-138. What is not recorded in these accounts is the WDP *sathins* demand for higher wages and to be regularized as government workers that had set off alarm bells in the bureaucracy who favoured the disbanding of appointing sakhis. This has been part of the critiques made by academics such as Sumi Madhok, Shubra Sharma and Aradhana Sharma mentioned in the introduction.

'linking' role by taking MS's philosophy down to the village level and bringing the insights from the field back. All programme staff were women.

While the local NGOs oversaw the field-level operationalization of MS, its core content and ideological foundations were established through trainings conducted by the other partner, Jagori, a Delhi-based feminist organization.[276] Jagori representatives, who were all urban middle-class women,[277] also spent substantial time in the districts working with the local NGOs, sahayoginis and sakhis to translate concepts discussed in the trainings into a field-level programme.

II. PRODUCING RURAL FEMINIST SUBJECTS: FOUNDATIONAL FEMINIST TRAINING

Training was the principal educational strategy through which MS sought not just to establish a new kind of women's education programme but also to produce 'empowered' rural women subjects and subjectivities. It was through these new subjects, primarily its district staff and field interveners—sakhis, sahayoginis and sangha women—that MS sought to realise its objectives.

I have used the term 'feminist training' to describe the trainings conducted during MS's initial phase (between 1989 and 1992) for two reasons: one, because the training content and pedagogy were in fact determined by self-identified feminists and women's groups and reflected feminist politics, theoretical and pedagogic concerns at the time. And secondly, to distinguish this approach from later versions that proliferated, as 'gender training' was mainstreamed within development programmes. I have called this 'foundational' as this was the basic pedagogic process on which subsequent pedagogic interventions were overlaid.[278]

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[276] State programmes appointed different external agencies to conduct trainings that worked within the approach outlined in the MS project document. There were variations in the perspective and content of trainings, but by and large during the initial phase trainers who had a 'feminist' orientation were enlisted. Exchanges regarding training strategy between the different MS states and with WDP trainers were common in the programme's initial phase.

[277] My first association with the MS programme was in 1990 through Jagori, where I worked for a year (1990-1991).

[278] For the purposes of this study, I have focused on the content and pedagogy of these trainings. For greater details on how the mobilization and logistics of the programme were run, as well as how other programme interventions built on the trainings, see essays in Ramachandran,

Fashioning Rural Subjectivities through Training: Content and Approach

Jagori conceptualised and conducted the initial gender trainings in UP at state and district levels during MS's initial phase.[279] Set up as a national resource and training centre in 1984, Jagori's founding coincided with the early years of the autonomous women's movement's growth (see introduction). Jagori's mission was to spread "feminist consciousness for the creation of a just society" by devising creative communication strategies—songs, poems, posters and feminist trainings—that went beyond the written word.[280] By the time MS was launched in UP, Jagori was already conducting feminist trainings with rural NGOs and was an important player in the autonomous women's movement.

Given the fraught relationship between the women's movement's and the state discussed earlier, Jagori's decision to formally enter into a partnership with the state-led MS was taken after heated internal deliberation.[281] They decided to formally partner with MS as they saw an opportunity to spread feminist consciousness to new frontiers and on scale (See Chapter 1), and believed that the programme's promoters within the bureaucracy were committed to fulfilling MS's educational vision—as a process of 'conscientisation' rather than just learning to read and write. Despite the clear reasoning behind this decision what transpired was anything but smooth, as we shall see later in this chapter.

During the initial phase, the MS-UP trainings broadly reflected the theoretical perspectives and issues that the national women's movement were engaging with at the time,[282] experiences gained from the WDP,[283] as well as global feminist discussions. I

Cartographies of Empowerment; Aradhana Sharma, "Paradoxes of Empowerment," Shubra Sharma, Neoliberalism as 'betrayal' for critical analyses.

[279] Jagori conducted its first training in Varanasi in September 1988. By September 1991, 36 trainings for sakhis and sahayoginis across UP (Mahila Samakhya 1991) had been conducted. And in Chitrakoot district 100 sakhis and 10 sahayoginis had been trained. (Mahila Samakhya, UP State Annual Report, 1991-92).

[280] See Jagori, *Living Feminisms: A Twenty Year Journey* (New Delhi: Jagori, 2004).

[281] Jagori, *Living Feminisms*, 12.

[282] This section has been collated after scanning reports, interviews and my own experiences. A defining feature of these trainings was that a standardised module was not used. Trainers designed the trainings depending on the nature of the group, their needs etc. Previously planned structures and activities were frequently changed. The duration of trainings also differed.

[283] See Institute of Development Studies, *Report on Training Programme Conducted in Padampuri* (Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies, 1984), quoted in Madhok *Rethinking Agency*; for a discussion on WDP's training strategy see Madhok, *Revisiting Agency*, 69-119.

would like to point out that such training strategies have later been described following Foucault as 'technologies of self',[284] but this was not the vocabulary or theorisation used by the trainers then or by my informants while describing their experiences, who simply spoke of training or consciousness raising, which is how I am referring to it as it conveys a particular feminist political orientation. Conceptually, training entailed understanding how patriarchal power operated in women's lives, families and other public institutions. Though the template was flexible, trainings evolved around a set of core themes, which included: distinguishing between sex and gender; questioning traditional gender roles and stereotyping; examining societal structures—family, government, law, media, religion; analysing the sexual division of labour and social reproduction; sexual and reproductive health and sexuality; and interrogating violence against women.[285] The training content principally sought to build a *narivadi nazariya* (or 'feminist perspective') and not to provide information per se.[286] The process of self-transformation began during the training, and the expectation was that once armed with a conceptual understanding and practical information, trainees would work on changing their own self-image, building self-esteem, questioning iniquitous social relations and simultaneously transform society by implementing MS on the ground.

A fundamental premise of the training pedagogy was that the process was as crucial as its content and anticipated outcomes. It was through the pedagogic design that gender relations were interrogated and feminist understandings of em'power'ment—power both as a relationship of domination and its enabling and collaborative dimensions—were communicated (see introduction). The three feminist pedagogic principles closely followed were that trainings should: 1) be non-hierarchical, 2) be based on women's experiences and 3) privilege oral communication forms rather than literacy.

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[284] Srila Roy, "Changing the Subject: From Feminist Governmentality to Technologies of the (Feminist) Self," in *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*, eds. Stephen Legg and Deana Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 200-222.

[285] This is not a complete list of themes taken up during the trainings but it is a fairly exhaustive one (see Jagori, *Living Feminisms*, 11-12). It is important to note that there was no standardised training module.

[286] At the district level trainings however, basic information about the development schemes, the administrative structure, laws related to women's rights were shared accompanied by a critical analysis of the information.

The first two were common principles of feminist pedagogy while the latter emerged from the specific context of the trainee group—rural non-literate women.

Each of these principles interrogated different yet connected domains of power relations and simultaneously sought to establish an alternative image of the rural woman subject. Thus the 'non-hierarchy' principle sought to alter power equations between trainer (educated, middle-class, upper caste) and trainee (non-literate, 'poor' and 'lower' caste) and amongst women from different villages and sub-castes; building on women's experiences, challenging dominant sources of knowledge; and privileging women's indigenous communication methods established that rural illiterate women could create new forms of knowledge

A distinctive aspect of the trainings was that they were residential. Trainers and trainees spent several days together—eating, discussing, learning and spending leisure time—to break barriers of caste, class, educational status and rural-urban location.[287] The training pedagogy firmly avoided formal methods like lectures and using text-based teaching aids. Methods like games, role-plays, stories and songs were used to create an open learning space and to build solidarities instead.[288] Trainees were encouraged to express themselves using local cultural expressions and dialects while the trainers communicated in *khadi boli* (or standardized Hindi). Sessions carried on through the day and often continued well into the night. There was a lot of intimacy and *masti* (fun), singing and dancing. Creating a celebratory mood was an important strategy used by the women's movement in its formative years, deployed to create images of women other than as being 'oppressed' and 'victims'.[289]

Recalling her first MS training experience, an informant commented on how the lack of structure, absence of concrete information, the fact that as an educated woman she was treated at par with illiterate women, irreverent trainers who smoked during breaks had seemed distasteful to her and she was ready to quit the job. However, by the end of the ten-day training she says her "whole life opened up in front of her"—she

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[287] This section draws on several interviews, review of reports and documents and my own experiences.

[288] Feminist songs were crucial to establishing 'bonding' and spreading feminist consciousness. Soon, trainees began creating their own repertoire of songs, which served to validate the importance of women's experiences, knowledge and skills and were also included in learning material and curricula.

[289] Kumar, "Contemporary Indian Feminism," 25

became a feminist, an ardent supporter of the approach, and ended up working with the MS-UP state office for over two decades. The fundamental purpose of trainings she concluded in her interview was "*soch badalne ka kaam*" (changing ways of thinking).[290] (For a first-hand recollection of the training process see footnote).[291]

Several reports document that the rural feminist subject that emerged through this process came to mean a self-confident woman able to critically analyse the power relations between men and women, embark on social action, which ranged from steps like questioning social norms within her home to more public actions.[292] Women were questioning why widowed women should be considered an economic burden or not be allowed to wear a *bindi*, why women should be paid lower wages than men, why daughters are not educated, why they should be expected to fast for their husbands' welfare or why they should be disallowed from fetching water from the communal well. Women took actions and faced the risk of being ostracised, and lived with the fear of reprisal from

[290] Rita (Senior Consultant MS-UP), interviewed by author, Lucknow, September 7, 2015. Changed Name.

[291] Sushila, a 25-year old MS veteran represented a cohort of such women, many of whom I interviewed, who said their *soch* (thinking) had changed through the training process. Sushila joined MS as a literacy instructor, became a sahayogini when I interviewed her she held the post of District Resource Person. She recollected the process of taking the content of the foundational training down to the field in the following way, "We went with no targets, our targets were *apnapan* (building closeness) *sukh-dukh bantna* (sharing joys and sorrows), *muddon ko samjhna* (understanding issues) and *aurton ko ghar se nikaalna* (getting women out of their homes)."

I heard these terms used by several informants during the course of my research. *Sukh-dukh bantna* was used as a shorthand by many informants to signal a 'feminist' orientation to collectivizing women and a view of women's empowerment that connected 'emotionally' with women in their times of *sukh* (happiness) and *dukh* (sadness). *Ghar se nikaalna* (getting women out of the home) describes what in development speak is referred to as 'mobilization'. However *ghar se nikaalna* had important feminist connotations that the more managerial 'mobilization' did not capture. In this process, were directly intervening in the private domestic space and bringing women into the public space for purposes that they had not previously left home for like labour. Sushila (MS District Resource Person, former sahayogini), interviewed by author, Manikpur, Chitrakoot District, December 13, 2015.

When I was doing my fieldwork in 2015-16 the landscape of women's development programmes was dramatically different from the one being described. Every village had several women's savings and credit groups. Many of Sushila's descriptors were specifically chosen to distinguish the work they had done in the initial phase of MS with the current development approaches to collectivising women. Her use of 'targets' was to distinguish the quantitative targets used by SHG programmes (figures of loans, repayments etc.) from qualitative targets that sahayoginis had used, to build personal connections with women leading to social change. (discussed in the introduction)

[292] Unpublished Reports: Mahila Samakhya, *Indo Dutch National Review* (New Delhi: Mahila Samakhya, 1991), 3; Mahila Samakhya, *National Evaluation Report* (New Delhi: Mahila Samakhya, 1993), 3; Mahila Samakhya, *MS-UP Overview Report* (New Delhi: Mahila Samakhya, 1989-1991), 16.

powerful groups and their own communities while the new rural feminist subjects also incorporated themselves as part of a new collective identity and forged new personal relationships.

According to Madhavi Kuckreja, an urban upper-class woman (and a long-time colleague of mine) who joined the Jagori team in 1990 and conducted several trainings in Chitrakoot,[293] the sharing of personal experiences—the building block on which the training process was developed—worked at the level of affect, in terms of creating strong bonds across social locations, but equally importantly comprised the 'knowledge base' from which patriarchal structures were analysed and a *samuhik samajh* (collective understanding) on social issues was built across the rural-urban locations.

Many of the trainers (including myself) are now experienced activists and trainers, but at the time were cutting their teeth with MS and WDP. They held that the training process was equally critical for their 'immersion'—as educated and middle-upper-class-caste women—into the life-worlds of the rural women subjects, building friendships and learning lessons they have since carried with them. Farah Naqvi, who participated in several trainings as a consultant with the MS national office, [294] called the process 'de-classing'. At one end of the spectrum, the trainings, she said, were 'tactile'[295] as physical contact was encouraged between women across social classes as a way of dismantling boundaries. At the other end, 'intellectual' boundaries were also transgressed. "We [as trainers] were constantly told that we have an ideological understanding, which is feminism, but are not the knowledge bearers". Dipta Bhog described the process of 'de-classing' she underwent as "entering experiential worlds of rural women" which meant challenging dominant conceptions of gender relations and rural women.[296]

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[293] Madhavi Kuckreja (Activist and social entrepreneur, founding member of Vanangana, former MS Chitrakoot District coordinator), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 17, 2017. Kuckreja joined MS on returning after completing her Masters in the US. She lived and worked in Chitrakoot for over a decade.

[294] Farah Naqvi (Writer and activist, founding member Nirantar, formerly MS National Consultant), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 27, 2017. Naqvi too joined MS on returning from the US after completing her Masters. I identify with their descriptions of the training process, including this section about the immersion.

[295] In this instance 'touch' was used to build a sense of sisterhood. For the philosophical foundations of untouchability through an analysis of the phenomenology of 'touch', see Sundar Sarrukai, "Phenomenology of Untouchability," *Economic and Political Weekly* xiiv, no. 37, (September 12, 2009), 39-48.

[296] Dipta Bhog provided several personal examples of how 'immersion' in rural women's life worlds enabled more complicated readings of 'traditions' that in development policies are

While gender trainings are considered to be an important feminist pedagogic innovation they have received a fair share of criticism.[297] One set of critiques made by my own informants relates to the trainers' lack of self-reflexivity—the sharing of experiences was usually one-way, with rural women opening up about their lives unlike the middle-class trainers and that trainers could be dogmatic about their positions.[298] A second problem that the literature points to is that the trainers (and programme) were protected by their limited responsibility in handling the backlash that could result from such consciousness-raising trainings. Madhok for instance refers to the WDP sathins' encounter with the language of rights and the roles that the trainings prepared them to play as being "creative, injurious and risk-laden".[299]

The most common criticism however, pertains to the 'depoliticising' impact of the proliferation of gender trainings from the mid-1990s. The UN Women's Conference (1995) mandated the mainstreaming of gender concerns within national and international programmes and bureaucracies. As gender-trainings were mainstreamed they no longer remained feminist pedagogic consciousness-raising interventions but became a strategy to promote a developmental view of gender, reflected in the professionalization, simplification and increasingly prescriptive character that trainings took on (see introduction). According to my informants these trends eventually became evident in MS too.[300]

Contestations and Ruptures in Partnerships

There were three main points of tension—primarily ideological—in the partnerships. Firstly, there were strains in the partnership between the state-led MS, feminist

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presented only as being regressive, for instance that of *naata*—a practice prevalent in amongst backward castes, Dalits and Adivasis in Rajasthan, where a woman can leave her husband and live with another man who agrees to pay a bride price to her husband. Women's narratives brought in issues of sexuality not part of development discourse. Many women saw *naata* as an act of agency. Dipta Bhog, interviewed by author, New Delhi, May 26, 2017.

[297] Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Franz Wong (eds.), *Revisiting Gender Training: The Making and Remaking of Gender Knowledge, Gender, Society and Development Series,* Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, 2007); Kirsty Milward, Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Franz Wong, "Gender Mainstreaming Critiques: Signposts or Dead Ends?" *IDS Bulletin* 46, no. 4 (2015), 75-81.

[298] Renuka Mishra, interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 24, 2017; Madhavi Kuckreja, interviewed by author, Lucknow, March 23, 2014.

[299] Madhok, *Rethinking Agency*, 120.

[300] Rita, interview; Ganga (Senior Consultant Mahila Samakhya), interviewed by author, Lucknow, September 9, 2015.

organizations and local NGOs. The upper caste male-headed NGOs protested that the trainings that urban feminists were unleashing were 'western' in orientation and promoted feminist ideas of women's equality that were in opposition to 'Indian' values of gender equality that rural women apparently naturally embodied.[301] Particularly objectionable was the fact that the trainings actively encouraged women to question cultural norms regarding the institution of the family, marriage, sexuality and traditions. Women came back from the trainings 'transformed,' they asserted themselves, laughed too loudly, ate samosas at tea shops in the middle of the bazaar and even had the temerity to question decisions taken by the NGO heads.[302]

The charge of feminism being a 'western' imposition was not a new one and similarly, [303] the accusations about gender trainers being elite, city-bred, and western were live discussions at the time[304] and unfolded in different ways – through ruptures in and realignments of partnerships and modifications in the grassroots training processes. However, it is important to note these allegations were now unfolding within a political and cultural context of a rise in aggressive Hindutva politics, which stridently espoused women's traditional roles and that the local NGO partners were actively supporting the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.[305] As tensions came to a head, the MS National Office "had to take the programme out of the clutches of the concerned NGO"[306] and an independent local District Unit was set up in 1992.

Another set of tensions emerged between the MS programme and Jagori. On the one hand the MS-National Project Office was getting uneasy about the training content and were raising concerns about whether issues like sexual autonomy or rights of single women were relevant for rural women.[307] MS in turn was being pressurized by the Education bureaucracy in UP and Delhi to explain why the trainings they were providing

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[301] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 65.

[302] Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2014; Sushila, interview, December 13, 2015.

[303] Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," *Manushi* 6 (November-December 1990), 2-8; Chaudhari (ed.), *Feminisms in India.*

[304] Ranjani Murthy, "Power, Institutions and Gender Relations: Can Gender Training Alter the Equations?" *Development in Practice* 8, no. 2 (May 1998), 203-211.

[305] Tensions regarding feminism, westernization and Hindutva were conveyed during interviews. Kuckreja, interviewed by author, Lucknow, March 28, 2014; Renuka, interview; Naqvi, interview.

[306] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 65

[307] Ramachandran, "The Making of Mahila Samakhya," 55.

should be considered as being 'education'.[308] On the other hand, pressures from the larger women's movement and their own fears of 'co-option' fuelled Jagori's apprehensions.[309] Developments within the WDP—the clampdown on sathins' demands, removal of WDP's partners, and the state's lack of response to sathin Bhanwari Devi's gang rape— had heightened the women's movements unease about partnering with the state.[310] These stresses and strains eventually led to Jagori's dramatic withdrawal from the partnership in 1991.[311]

A third and somewhat unexpected point of disagreement came from within the trainer group. Kuckreja, the Jagori representative working with the local team in Chitrakoot, recalled that trainees indeed returned from the training 'transformed', but were confused about how to relate the concepts they had learnt locally, and to weave them into a field programme. Although at the time, and subsequently as well, critiques of the training content and pedagogy have not been well documented, whether by scholars or practitioners, this response was a critique from the trainees themselves of the difficulties of immediate application of the feminist training content to the lives of poor Dalit women.[312] This feedback propelled Kuckreja and others to re-conceptualise the content for local trainings, with a greater focus on understanding women's labour relations and the local political economy, which inevitably led to more complex discussions on caste relations, and more material linkages between the content and lives of women. Later, this changed organically as local trainers started conducting the trainings.

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[308] Interview Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2017; Ramachandran, interview.

[309] Jagori, *Living Feminisms*, 12.

[310] See, Chakravarti, "Rethinking the Goals of Education"; Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State*, 34; Saheli Website (national conferences).

[311] Jagori's withdrawal from MS-UP was the subject of debate. The 1993 National Evaluation Report made a case for a continued partnership between the women's movement and state-led MS arguing that staying away from such collaborations would ultimately be detrimental to the women's movement—leading to isolation, the risk of limiting itself to small sections of Indian women and men and "forfeiting a right to determine trends and impose conditions at both a functional and policy level…and to effectively intervene on behalf of women" (Mahila Samakhya, National Evaluation Report (1993), 54-55).

[312] Informants mentioned that the trainings generated turmoil, and that not all of it was negative, but it did lead to changes in training content and design. Laxmi Krishnamurthy (Former Mahila Samakhya National Resource Group member and Trainer), interviewed by author, Bangalore, May 25, 2015; and personal recollections. Some local informants mentioned that initially they did not have the language to critique, which evolved through 'doing'. Sushila, December 13, 2015, Durga (Anganwadi worker, former sahayogini and literacy facilitator), Karvi, April 25, 2015.

Retrospective discussions with informants about the location of caste in the initial feminist trainings revealed an interesting mix of positions. [313] Everyone agreed that the predominant identity categories in the MS document and discourses were 'woman', 'rural' and 'poor'. Some informants argued that naming—making explicit—caste had been unnecessary at the time. "There was no ambiguity about the fact that MS's constituency was the most excluded and marginalized, which a priori was Dalit women," stated Batliwala, one of the project's conceptualisers.[314] She and others believed that by using the categories 'poor', 'rural', 'women' urban feminists were successful in hiring rural Dalit women with no formal qualifications and getting rural women into the room to begin conversations about a radically different visions of women's education and empowerment, that too within a government programme.

Others felt that despite this implicit recognition, 'caste' as a category was not rigorously interrogated.[315] For some of the feminist trainers this was a transition moment when identity issues within the women's movement were being seriously broached (see introduction) and were in this case, being extended to the consciousness-raising efforts with rural women. It is worth reflecting on some of the contradictions that this moment threw up.

On the one hand, training frameworks as discussed earlier, emphasised creating a universal sisterhood, making personal transformation the basis of political change, and seeing patriarchy as the predominant conceptual framework. The equality and solidarity principles were extended to caste through norms—inter-dining[316] and communal living—that set up the training process and space as one where a culture of anti-casteism was established. Norms around communal eating, sharing the same utensils and glasses

[313] Interviews with Batliwala, May 25, 2015; Deepa Dhanraj (Film maker), Bangalore, May 15, 2015, Dhanraj made films about the WDP and the Karnataka MS; Kuckreja, April 17, 2017, Bhog, March 18, 2016; Naqvi, April 27, 2017.

[314] Interview with Batliwala May 25, 2015. This is borne out by sangha membership data, which at the national level was 13,47,065. The caste wise break up was as follows: Scheduled caste (35.2%), Scheduled Tribe (20.7%), Other Backward Classes (26.1%), General (5.4%); Minority (8.5%), Other (4.1%). Indian Institute of Management (IIM), *Mahila Samakhya National Review.*

[315] There is no reflective documentation on this aspect. Conveyed during interviews with Dhanraj, Kuckreja, April 17, 2017, Bhog, March 18, 2016, and Naqvi.

[316] Historically, Gandhi endorsed inter-dining as a way to build solidarities across castes and pushing for the 'acceptance of 'harijans' by other castes. Ambedkar argued that such were not enough to dismantle the caste system, as these did not address structural, economic and political bases of caste. Untouchability was not a cultural aberration but was rooted in the political economy, which required Dalit subservience and their labour.

were strictly enforced. The caste-related disagreements that surfaced within the group and space of the training were dealt with as part of the training process. It was through these norms and interactions that caste issues began to be discussed in trainings, in particular, notions of purity and pollution and caste-based discrimination around practices of untouchability. It was a powerful symbolic strategy that also foregrounded the gender equality principle, which necessitated that all women be treated as equals.[317]

For the women too, it created a social space that was starkly different from what they confronted in their villages.[318] Women came from different villages and sub-castes and often opposed the idea of drinking and eating together.[319] Interrogating untouchability, as the normalized and internalized practices in their everyday lives, so that they could openly question, discuss and reject these as discriminatory was an important anticipated outcome of the trainings. This of course is not to say that Dalit women did not realize that untouchability was deeply humiliating, stigmatizing and discriminatory but they certainly had not openly talked about their caste experiences in a formal learning space.[320] Addressing untouchability was considered important so that they could stop seeing themselves as being polluted and polluting and also to affirm simultaneously, that they were worthy of being able to learn.

On the other hand, while opposing untouchability was acceptable to the middle-class trainers, this ethos was often established by 'flattening' out identities other than gender. This was reflected in the same veteran MS staffer's (quoted earlier) comment to me, "When women come to the training [we say] this is the door, your *pehnava* [clothes], your *varg* [class], your *jati* [caste] your *khana* [food] and *peena* [drink], leave everything [at the door]. You enter this space only as *nari jati* [woman caste]. We are not concerned about what kind of woman."[321] She went on to explain that the main objective of the training was to build women's self-esteem and to enable them speak out against all forms

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[317] Trainers used analogies like 'everyone's blood is red irrespective of their caste' (Bhog, interview, March 18, 2016). During my fieldwork I also heard Dalit women use this expression to assert that they were human beings first and that while god had made everyone's blood red, caste-discrimination was 'man made'. This reversed the common belief that the caste-system is God-given.

[318] Interviews with former sakhis, see interview list.

[319] Looking back, trainers said that at the time they did not have an understanding of the politics of 'sub-castes' nor was that really explored in the trainings. The category Dalit or SC was largely perceived as being undifferentiated (Interviews with Bhog and Kuckreja).

[320] Interviews with former sakhis and MS staff.

[321] Rita, interview.

of discrimination including caste but equally she believed that talking about caste explicitly was somehow regressive and divisive. Caste-based inequality could be taken care of by establishing gender equality where woman constituted an inclusive caste. This upper caste perspective (which was interrogated as this chapter later shows) has also remained a strong position amongst many former and present MS staffers I interviewed, who saw themselves as being 'sensitive' while glossing caste to mean 'Dalit'.

A second introspective observation came from the trainers themselves, recognising that they had interrogated their class but not their caste identity. Naqvi, who had spoken about training as an important process of 'de-classing' for trainers, admitted, "…we [trainers] were working with an almost exclusively Dalit constituency and questioning our identities as upper caste-women was never in the fray." As progressive liberals the assumption was that they had transcended caste or that caste privileges were subsumed within class.[322] At the level of training content it meant that caste was not taken up for self-interrogation personally or based on theoretically informed perspectives in the way patriarchy was. While the experiences of being 'women' could be shared between trainers and trainees in an embodied sense this was not the case with caste, where the connection was always a more cerebral (as discrimination) or empathetic, even though training were 'tactile' as discussed above. Although this has been discussed by the middle-class trainers in my respondents' group, accessing the trainees' memories of discomfort due to the training content was not really possible in interviews, given the relationship between them and myself, as well as how they have chosen to remember the trainings: as empowering and celebratory.

A third and related observation was that by focussing on untouchability as discrimination the discussion remained primarily within a cultural realm with limited linkages made to Dalit women's material realities or how the two systems of caste and patriarchy were closely interlocked.[323] However, as discussions moved from a training space to the field-level actions several complications surfaced, which we will discuss further in the next sections.

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[322] I would agree, based on my own personal experiences of the time, with the assessment that the caste privileges of trainers and upper caste MS staff members were not confronted even while trainers acknowledged that they learnt about the complexities and everyday manifestations of caste.

[323] Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*.

III. TRAINING DALIT WOMEN AS HANDPUMP MECHANICS

The independent district-level MS office being set up in 1992 was led by a cadre of rural women functionaries who identified strongly with the basic tenets of MS's pedagogic and ideological approach. What profoundly shaped MS Chitrakoot's course, however, was Kuckreja's decision to shift base from Delhi and take on the post of District Coordinator.[324] Her move meant that larger debates around feminist politics were negotiated at the local level in interesting ways.

The team decided early on to work on addressing drinking water problems. As mentioned earlier, women in Bundelkhand spent several hours fetching water, which was scarce as it was a drought prone area but also due to dysfunctional handpumps and an indifferent administration that did nothing to fix them. To redress the problem of non-functioning handpumps, the team first appealed to the bureaucracy—submitting petitions, publicising a locally-conducted survey that found that 80% of 472 handpumps in Manikpur were not working[325] and even marching through town on International Women's Day carrying *matkas* (earthen water pots), which they smashed in front of the District Collectors office. Eventually, frustrated by the lack of success with their approach of collective action powered by information, the team looked to identifying alternative strategies.[326] The story goes that a light-hearted suggestion during a meeting—'Lets train women to repair the pumps'—struck a chord with MS functionaries.[327]

The idea was eagerly taken up as it fit well with MS's gender politics. It provided a 'constructive' solution—without necessarily giving up on protest—and an opportunity to design a feminist 'non-traditional' skills training programme that was different from

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[324] In Gujarat and Karnataka too, in the early 1990s MS district teams were led by urban, upper caste, middle-class English speaking university educated women. The involvement of urban feminists directly in implementing a state-led development programme was different from other such efforts of urban women activists moving to rural areas to set up NGOs or to join social movements.

[325] Vanangana, *Reclaiming Rights over Water and Challenging Caste and Gender* (Karvi: Vanangana, 2014), 8.

[326] MS's status as a quasi-state programme did not automatically lead to other Government departments responding to their demands, which was frustrating for local teams. Nishi Mehrotra (Gender and Education Consultant, former State Project Director MS-Uttar Pradesh), Lucknow, September 8, 2015, Prashanthi, interview.

[327] Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2017; Avdhesh (Vanangana leadership team, former literacy teacher), Karvi, December 5, 2015); Pushpa, interview, Delhi, January 10, 2016.

the stereotypical weaving-pickle-jam-making programmes critiqued by WID and GAD frameworks (see introduction). The handpump training intervention sought to address the gendered nature of women's engagement with technical and scientific knowledge by concretely challenging perceptions about women's inabilities to learn technical skills and what constituted appropriate work for women. It was also informed by the important distinction Maxine Molyneux made between women's practical and strategic interests (see introduction). [328] To recap, strategic interests, which are commonly identified as feminist, emerge from and contest women's experiences of gender subordination. Practical interests, by contrast, emerge from women's immediate and perceived needs. I will discuss the limits of this framework for this intervention in more detail later.

Training Handpump Mechanics

To put this plan into action, Kuckreja negotiated a partnership at the UP-level with UNICEF and Jal Nigam, the state-level body in charge of repairing handpumps.[329] The handpump training programme, built on but reworked the content and pedagogic principles of the foundational feminist training and was the second major pedagogic intervention that (re)shaped the figure of the rural woman, by taking the learning process in new directions.

The trainee mechanics were recruited from MS's mahila samoohs, or women's groups. They were all illiterate Dalit and Kol women between the ages of 20 to 60. The only requirement of them was their participation in a ten-day residential training and an agreement to work as mechanics subsequently. However, as reports and my interviewees related, the task of recruiting trainees had met with resistance from multiple fronts. [330] Despite their exposure to trainings and enhanced self-confidence, women had to be

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[328] Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization Without Emancipation?"

[329] MS conceptualised the programme and was the implementing partner, UNICEF came in as the international agency mandated to support the Government in improving hygiene, sanitation and drinking water access and UP Jal Nigam provided the technical expertise. This partnership lasted from 1992–1994.

[330] After a difficult phase of field mobilization a group of 45 women agreed to participate. For accounts of difficulties faced: Mahila Samakhya Banda and Nirantar, "More than Skills: The Experience of Women Handpump Mechanics," in *From Knowledge is like Flowing Water* (New Delhi: Mahila Samakhya, n.d.), 37-42; Vanangana, *Reclaiming Rights Over Water*, 10-13 and interviews with handpump mechanics: Rajkumari (Handpump mechanic, leader Dalit Mahila Samiti), Dandi village, October 4, 2015; Prema (Agricultural worker, former mechanic), Dandi village, February 23, 2015.

convinced that they were capable of learning technical skills and then to actually repair handpumps. Male family members objected vociferously: time away from home meant disruptions in managing housework, wage-loss, and fears around sexuality and 'losing control' over their women—the Jal Nigam trainers with whom women had to be in close physical proximity were all men.[331] Jal Nigam and UNICEF for their part, harboured serious reservations about illiterate women's abilities to learn recall, record and comprehend abstract technical concepts. It took a lot of convincing to get them to agree to recruit illiterate women.[332] It is noteworthy that none of these contentions explicitly brought up caste, but it was the trainees' caste identity that proved most controversial when the programme was taken into the field.

The handpump trainings had three aspects: 'perspective', 'technical', and 'practical' according to Kuckreja, it was this combination that gave it its critical edge. During the ten-day residential training, the perspective-building component—such as interrogating gender stereotyping, gender-role formation and the sexual division of labour and caste issues related to access to water resources and untouchability were discussed [333]—and technical aspects were taught at the training venue and then through field demonstrations. Literacy was sidestepped. Blackboards, notes and technical charts were avoided. This was a significant departure from Jal Nigam's usual training programmes, which extensively used technical manuals and terms. Instead, games and exercises were devised to make the learning process simple by using visuals and other

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[331] Vanangana, *Reclaiming Rights Over Water*; Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "More Than Skills."

[332] Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2017.

[333] The training deconstructed patriarchal biases for example – that women are physically *kamzor* (weak) therefore could not lift heavy pipes (never mind that they carry heavy head loads daily); they won't remember the names of spare parts as they are *bhavuk* (emotional), *murkh* (stupid) and without *vivek* (irrational). Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "More Than Skills," 37.

memory aids.[334] Unsurprisingly, all the Jal Nigam trainers were educated, upper caste men.[335]

Negotiating Resistances: 'Anpadh' (illiterate) 'Achooth' (untouchable) 'Mahila' (woman)

> Chamela of Chandramara village went with some of the fitters [technicians] of the Jal Nigam to Bhawri, a village in which the handpumps were not working. The upper caste *pradhan* (village headman) in the village opposed them, preventing Chamela from touching the handpumps. He told the fitters, "This Kol-Chamar woman who works with *gobar* (cow dung) and *lakdi* (wood) – how can she know anything about repairing a hand pump?" The fitter explained to him that she was entirely capable of fixing it. As a test, the pradhan asked her to fix a handpump near his house, which was broken many months previously. It was covered in garbage and faeces. Chamela took on the challenge and fixed the handpump … his attitude towards her changed. She asked him, "You should speak of the handpump getting repaired, not of the caste or gender of the person fixing it." He offered her tea and gave her a chair to sit on.[336](Extract: *Vanangana, Reclaiming Rights Over Water*, 14.)

The women mechanics eventually became so good at their jobs that they became trainers for other NGOs. Still they were not easily accepted. Once, male upper-caste trainees from an NGO revolted when they were told that the trainers were Sumitra, Aitwariya and Chandrakanta. They refused to be trained by *anpadh* (illiterate) *achooth* (untouchable) *mahila* (women). They refused to eat and drink with these women. There was a huge fight. I was called to intervene. I negotiated. They should allow the training to proceed, and at the end they could decide if indeed these women were adequate trainers. There was no compromise on the

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[334] One exercise vividly recalled by informants related to learning the different parts of the handpump and tools. Being technical terms and in English, trainees found them difficult to pronounce and memorise. A memory aid was devised. Trainees were given a name of a spare part that somewhat resembled their body type. So a tall, stout looking woman was called 'cylinder', while a thin one was 'wrench' etc. Once technicalities were demystified, women learnt quickly. Being able to reel off technical terms was an important part of establishing themselves as equal to the male mechanics (Vanangana, *Reclaiming Rights Over Water*, 9).

[335] Creating a non-hierarchical training space was challenging. The Jal Nigam trainers all upper caste men were unwilling to give up their position and power that came with being 'technical experts'. Training norms such as sitting on the floor, speaking respectfully to the trainees, eating and drinking the same food and washing ones plates after meals were strongly resisted. Kuckreja's strategies were to be non-confrontational and build personal rapport. The women mechanics spoke of respectful friendships they eventually developed with the male mechanics. Interview with Kuckreja (April 17, 2017) and a group discussion with mechanics (Karvi, December 20, 2015).

[336] This incident has been narrated and recorded several times by Chamela and others as an example of the programme's achievement in impacting gender and caste relations. The basic narrative stays the same with variations in exactly what Chamela says in response to the headman's refusal to let her touch the handpump.

eating and drinking. At the end of the training the same men did *dandavat* (touching feet to show respect) to Aitwariya and company. It was a huge deal. (Kuckreja, interview April 17, 2017, New Delhi, emphasis added)

Chamela and Aitwariya's cases are useful in analysing the nature of entanglements between the categories *anpadh* (education), *achooth* (caste) and *mahila* (gender). The charge of being anpadh was brought up in two ways. While the 'problem' of illiteracy was applicable to males as well, what complicated the issue here was that learning technical skills got attached to apparently innate gender characteristics, discussed earlier. That women do not have a scientific bent of mind and lacked attributes like rationality, abstraction and precision is a well-rehearsed and critiqued argument,[337] but in reality women and girls continue to be kept away from subjects like maths and science and women are over-represented in so called 'nurturing' professions like teaching and nursing. The women we are discussing were rural and illiterate, making their entry into this 'type' of work all the more inconceivable.

However, in the rural context I am discussing, the question of who can or is allowed to do what kind of work was not simply a gender question and was one of caste as well. As is well known, the caste system is hierarchically stratified around work: different caste groups are assigned different occupations based on a system of graded inequality. Those who must perform the 'dirtiest' work lie outside the caste system and were formerly considered 'untouchables' (now Dalits). The Dalit women who were trained as handpump mechanics mostly belonged to the Chamar jati, who, as mentioned earlier were 'traditionally' leather workers and skinned dead animals and tanned hides. Such jobs are considered 'unclean' and the people who do these jobs are regarded as 'polluting' and must therefore be shunned. [338] Therefore who can do what work was certainly not an issue of aptitude or suitability as is routinely argued by upper castes.[339] Illiterate untouchable Dalit women were considered supremely unsuitable for the job of handpump mechanics.

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[337] The complicated relationship between gender, science and technology has long been debated within feminist studies and by educationists. See Sharon Crasnow, "Feminist Perspectives on Science," *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition).

[338] For a collection of theoretical essays on humiliation see, Gopal Guru, *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (New Delhi: Oxford India, 2011).

[339] Upper castes invariably bring up the issue of 'merit' to counter pro-reservation policies to discredit Dalits as unworthy, unmeritorious and to proactively prevent Dalits from getting white-collar jobs.

Several other informants reported to me that the phrase *roti-gobar karne wali mahila* (women who make rotis and cowdung pats) mentioned by Chamela was repeatedly used to insult and to humiliate mechanics. *Gobar* (cowdung) signals dirty work and *roti,* women's unskilled domestic work. All rural women typically perform these unpaid tasks however when this phrase was used to stop Dalit women from handling the handpump, gobar acquired a specific meaning—it was assigned to the 'dirty' work that low-caste women are made to perform. Besides roti-gobar work, Chamela was also labelled as someone who does *lakdi ka kaam*: collecting and selling firewood. As mentioned earlier this work, done only by Adivasi and low-caste women, is considered low-status and morally tainted work. Thus as Chamela and others tried to move beyond the limits of the caste-determined work assigned to them, they were constantly reminded of their 'low caste' status by defining them in terms of the 'degraded' work she does and must do.

In the extract above Chamela describes how she struck back. While she was prevented from touching the handpump used by the upper caste pradhan, the handpump that she was asked to repair was surrounded by filth. The deep irony of this was not lost on her. When Chamela finally repaired the pump she did not forget to rebuke the pradhan nor did she clean the filthy handpump. In a different narrative version of the incident Chamela says, "You pride yourself on being upper caste, but your handpump is so filthy. We may be lower caste, but our handpump is much cleaner than yours. Why, even we find it difficult to drink water from your handpump".[340] In these interactions Chamela not only establishes herself as a woman capable to technical work but also questions the basis of her so-called achooth status: What polluted the water the upper castes drank? Was it her ascribed achooth identity or was it the filthy upper caste handpump?

This censure also challenged mainstream development discourses around water and sanitation that focus on 'cleanliness' without addressing deeper structural and social issues. While the exact words exchanged between 'untouchable' Chamela and the upper caste pradhan change slightly in the many versions in circulation, the narrative always ends with Chamela rebuking the pradhan for bringing up her gender and caste status, asking that the pump be cleaned the next time she is called, and with her being offered tea and a charpai to sit on by an upper caste male pradhan in full public view.

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[340] Mahila Samakhya Banda and Nirantar, "More Than Skills," 42.

The binary between the dirty/'low' caste work and clean/ 'upper caste' work also reflects the division between mental and manual labour that is emblematic of the caste system, and becomes the point of contestation in Aitwariya's case. Manual labour (unskilled and unclean) is performed only by the so-called lower castes. The rationale for this is often traced back to the *Manusmriti*, which says that the *shudras* (low-castes) sprang from the legs of the Creator and hence are deficient in terms of the capacity to think. Along with low-castes and untouchables, women too are beyond the pale of formal education. Such ideas are firmly embedded in the local cultural ethos as well. "Women's brains are in their feet" is a popular proverb in my field area. According to Gopal Guru the ghettoization of Dalits into the manual sphere and being kept out of knowledge production results in loss of the confidence, imagination and creativity and is the historical baggage that they carry. [341]

When Aitwariya repaired handpumps she was doing technical work, but it was still physical work, even though it was not manual-unskilled work (like agricultural wage work that Dalit women normally perform). Becoming a trainer on the other hand allowed her to foray into the category of doing 'mental' work. This breached the rigidly policed boundaries of who can have access to knowledge; certain kinds of knowledge according to caste hierarchy are the exclusive preserve of upper castes, especially upper caste men. But in this case, the challenge is not merely about the right to access to knowledge but the right to impart knowledge. Upper caste men are traditionally the gurus or teachers. For the male upper caste trainees then, this was completely unacceptable to have the *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) relationship reversed in terms of both caste and gender.[342]

The male trainees on that occasion were compelled to accept the situation due to the intervention of Kuckreja, who wielded power as an educated upper-caste-class female programme-in-charge. It is equally true that the pradhan (and others like him) who opposed Chamela also knew that the forces behind the mechanics were formidable: the mechanics were being supported by a government programme, headed by upper caste

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[341] Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (Dec. 14-20, 2002), 5003-5009.

[342] A well-known mythological story (also locally recounted) from the epic Mahabharat— when Dronacharya the upper caste teacher of the pandava princes asks Eklavya a 'low caste' boy for this right thumb as guru dakshina (tribute) to ensure that he does not perform better than the prince—reflects the closely policed caste-based gatekeeping of the guru-shishya relationship.

educated people (both MS and Jal Nigam)—and this might have induced them to back down. However, ultimately the mechanics had the last word. Like Chamela's, this narrative too ends "triumphantly" with the male upper caste trainees accepting Aitwariya as their guru and doing *dandavat*—the action of lying prostrate or bending in obeisance in front of someone to physically and visibly demonstrate respect is an act that the less powerful usually perform in front of those more powerful than them or in front of a deity.

While the handpump trainings and the mechanics themselves have become exemplars of a certain innovative feminist pedagogy, the long-term transformation or outcomes of this intervention, both ideological and practical, are mixed. Aitwariya, for instance was not always able to hold her own amongst upper caste educated men in other situations.[343] Prema, another mechanic, lamented that the economic gains from handpump repair work were never enough for her or the mechanics to give up agricultural wage labour—something that might actually have precipitated wide reaching changes in subjectivity formation. The fact that younger Dalit women rarely came forward to be trained as future generations of the handpump mechanics women or that the initial trainees sought to train from their male family members to take on the work, also illustrates how the scope of the ideological shift desired in the trainings remained limited because it was not supported by enough material, practical change, or rooted in the complex structural realities of how caste is transacted. While initially, the partnership with MS and the Jal Nigam had a clause about hiring Dalit women as handpump mechanics post the training, this changed when the contract for handpump repair was shifted to the local panchayat, and MS functionaries had little control over the process of training or recruitment. Dalit women (most often still illiterate) were often not hired anymore, and even when they may have been, family dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law proscribed who would step out 'in the sun' to do this work. In some senses, the older generation of feminist trainees were ambiguous about the work that had gained them respect and even felt they had gained the right to keep the younger generation from this strenuous work—even if it was work that was not unskilled manual labour.

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[343] Aitwariya as a member of monitoring for a different water and sanitation project, despite the recognition she had gained, deferred to the upper caste men in the committee (Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2017).

From my researcher perspective too, I was able to revisit some of my own assumptions, having written an article presenting the project as a textbook example of addressing strategic and practical gender interests.[344] In retrospect, what I feel the analysis missed, was a deeper understanding of the women mechanics' experiences around caste. The problem was not a matter of an omission (as caste was discussed), but its conceptualisation as primarily a 'gender' project, ultimately led to the separation of gender and caste, the folding in of caste within gender, and caste being brought in primarily through the lens of untouchability. What the framework overlooked was the interlocking dynamics between caste, gender, work and knowledge and hence it neglected to point out a significant outcome: the newly reconstituted subject positions for Dalit women like Chamela and Aitwariya, which strongly came up as a response from below – that was both precarious and far-reaching. In retrospect Raka Ray's contention that women's movements are shaped by political fields—that are fields of power—and comprise wide range of actors is important to recall, and this experience further shows the importance of understanding the dynamics of local and contextualised fields of power, within which an educational or empowerment intervention is introduced.[345]

Despite limitations, the intervention's power lay in reflecting the huge distance that Dalit women traversed in changing their status from denigrated low-caste uneducated women—roti-gobar-karne-wali mahila—to becoming respected (wo)men: 'mechanic sahib' (sahib is commonly used to refer to men in respectable positions). The repeated recounting of incidents such as the ones discussed, served to renew and re-animate the new terms of engagement. Further, the complex and intertwined dynamics between caste, gender, work and knowledge and the reconstituted subjectivities for women like Chamela, Aitwariya, and others led to them changing their stance (and that of the feminist collaborators) about wanting to learn how to read and write.

IV. MAKING A DEMAND FOR LITERACY

The uneasy location of literacy within the processes of producing the new rural woman subject has been a running thread through the discussions thus far (see chapter 1). We

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[344] Mahila Samakhya Banda and Nirantar, "More Than Skills," 32-33.

[345] Raka Ray, Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

have also learnt how pedagogic strategies were continuously devised to circumvent the use of literacy in educational interventions. Despite these efforts, literacy (or its lack) had a way of re-inserting itself into the discussions. In the previous section we saw how the label 'illiterate' was attached to caste and gender and deployed to cast Dalit women as being unworthy recipients of technical knowledge. The handpump training unsettled that construction, and a new female Dalit figure emerged who could learn and teach technical skills without being literate.

Paradoxically, the pedagogic interventions of handpump training, the foundational feminist training and processes of collectivisation leading up to it, eventually steered women towards seeking to learn how to read and write. The symbolic power of literacy as well as its functional advantages became starkly evident to this group of Dalit women who had embarked on processes of refashioning themselves.

Literacy, State and the Dalit Feminist Subject

One particular event was frequently referred to as having sparked women's interest in literacy, and is worth recalling:

> Rambai, a sakhi from Dandi village, took an application for the installation of a new handpump in her village to the block level office. The clerk at the office wrote out a receipt acknowledging the application. Not being able to read Rambai *mistook* this for the administration's acceptance of the demand. She conveyed this to the women at the village meeting. The news of the sanction spread. Rambai was lauded for her efforts. Finally when the mistake was pointed out it meant a *loss of face* for her. Rambai was now convinced that it was *not enough to be informed* about government schemes and procedures… Rambai was one among a growing number of sakhis who felt that to be effective interveners they needed an additional skill – literacy. [346] (emphasis added)

Why did Rambai's narrative fall back on familiar tropes—that of an illiterate being made a fool of—regarding the need for literacy despite the careful construction of powerful alternative images of the illiterate rural woman subject as knowledgeable and empowered? What meaning did a 'loss of face' specifically hold for Rambai and her

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[346] Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "Educational Strategies for Women: A Case study of Mahila Samakhya, Banda," in *Women Reading the World*, ed. Carol Medel-Anonuevo (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute of Education, 1996), 38-39. This incident was also reported by some informants as well.

companions?

The scenario described in the narrative above is a familiar description of the plight of illiterates. Only, Rambai was no longer just another illiterate woman. Rambai represented a cohort of Dalit women who had been initiated into processes of self and social transformation outlined in the previous sections. She had participated in the trainings and was active in the mahila sangha. She and other sangha members had confronted the upper caste landlord when he was illegally ploughing her land.[347] That action had been met with reprisals and had yielded nothing in terms of regaining her unlawfully occupied land and had been Rambai's first experience of oscillating between states of empowerment and disempowerment. The pushback to her sense of newfound empowerment came from upper castes, the site of confrontation was in the community and the fight was over a coveted resource—land. Noticeably Rambai's illiterate status was not foregrounded in that encounter though it could not have been too far from the surface as historically the illiterate and socially disadvantaged have frequently been cheated through fudged land-records.

Despite the setback Rambai had continued on her journey of refashioning her identity by participating in various MS-led pedagogic processes. Two critical elements of that process—information and self-confidence—had instilled in her a sense of her own empowerment, and had also set her apart from other rural women in general. Armed with both, she had led women into the local bureaucrat's office to demand rights on behalf of her community, only to be 'misled' by the powerful official. This was a failure that thwarted her own chances of emerging as a leader for her community.

In these circumstances, a refashioned female Dalit subject through information and self-confidence proved inadequate to deal with influential, male, upper caste officials

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[347] Informants recounted to me how frightening and sobering an early confrontation with a powerful upper caste landlord in Rambai's village had been. MS functionaries were having a meeting with the women's samooh when they saw that the upper caste landlord ploughing sakhi Rambai's land over which he had taken *kabza* (illegal occupation). Rambai and the newly formed women's samooh members, seething with anger and brimming with confidence decided to act. They ran into the field to stop him. A heated altercation in the middle of the field ensued. That night the landlord's men ruthlessly beat the women and their families. When Kuckreja and her MS colleagues rushed to the police station to register a case they were ignored. It didn't matter whom they were or that they represented a government programme (Kuckreja, Interview, April 17, 2017; Rajkumari, interview).

representing the state as here (il)literacy was foregrounded in the mode of interaction and the environment in which the encounter took place. Moreover, her public humiliation was not just her own, as she was representing a group of Dalit women. Rambai and her companions were angry and embarrassed at having been deliberately misled, leading to a loss of face, relegating her to her original status as a powerless Dalit woman. The clue to unravelling this particular feeling of loss of face lies not just in an illiterate Rambai's gender identity, as the narrative suggests, but also in her caste status. It is of course noteworthy that Rambai's caste status or that of the officials is not mentioned in the narrative though the reader has probably inferred something of the dynamics at play.

The style of the narrative above matches vignettes commonly found in adult literacy documents produced by government and other agencies where invariably a single dimension of a person's identity is used to explain experiences of illiteracy. As most adult literacy programmes target women, gender relations and identities are foregrounded. Even when other identities are taken cognizance of, they are rarely factored into the analysis of the particular forms and meanings that illiteracy takes, reflecting the unmarked universality of liberal feminism that informs such accounts.

Two interconnected issues of gender and caste may explain why what appears as a relatively humdrum incident would result in a change of heart towards literacy, while the other incident in Rambai's life (possibly more dramatic) did not. The first relates to the relationship between (il)literacy and Rambai's Dalit identity and the second, to her taking on public roles which entailed engaging with state institutions. In dominant discourses, illiteracy is stigmatized and pathologised, and stigmatizing discourses apply to all illiterates but take on specific meanings when considered in terms of histories and contexts of specific communities. Thus the expression being 'made a fool of' when unmarked in terms of caste as in the narrative, fails to convey the depth of the experiences of inequality and indignity and its embodied nature that such encounters signify for Dalit women.

Like Rambai, numerous Dalit women I spoke with testified to being kept out of school in their childhoods, of their children still facing discrimination within the school system, of being cheated out of their land after putting their thumbprints to documents they didn't understand and becoming enslaved for generations due to debts for which they had no records. Even today, the gap in literacy rates between SCs and the general population, and between SC men and women persists nationally and is even starker in

my research area (as we read in the introduction and earlier in this chapter). Thus, even while, the Dalit women you have encountered in this chapter like Rambai, Chamela and Aitwariya were building their identities as empowered, knowledgeable women, through means other than literacy, the power the act of reading and writing held could not be wished away. The authoritative power of literacy was reinforced with every humiliating incident that recalled historic injustices.

Petitioning the State in Fresh Ways

While submitting petitions to the government was certainly not a new tradition, for Dalit women to make this demand independently and for a community resource rather than for a personal benefit was not a conventional practice. The import of this struck me every time I visited the block office with my informants or to gather information. I always came away realizing just how overwhelmingly male-dominated the block office premises were, where the exercise of 'power'—caste, class and gender—was palpably visible and visceral. Comportment, physical appearance, clothes, and the confidence with which people navigate the space are identifiable signals of an individual's resources of power and influence—or the lack of it. Upper-caste men were mostly dressed in white kurta-pajamas, with a long red *teeka*[348] (mark) on their forehead, often seen sitting astride a motorcycle outside the buildings with a shotgun slung across their shoulder or that of an accompanying henchman. They would stride into offices and people made way for them. In contrast Dalits had none of these accoutrements and appeared almost as interlopers in that space. The few women present were always accompanied by males.

Imagine therefore, Rambai and the group of Dalit women she was leading, negotiating such a space nearly twenty years ago. Dalit women like Rambai, who had altered their sense of self through the processes of feminist training, and through their actions they were making themselves 'visible' to the state in new ways. They were occupying public spaces where, by taking on new roles and subjectivities they were also challenging important power structures, symbolically and physically. This was a completely different act from simply petitioning the state as a disempowered supplicant, requiring a completely different language and comportment. Their refashioned selves did not wish to slide back into accepting the 'normal' illiterate Dalit woman image.

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[348] A mark worn by a Hindu on the forehead to indicate caste status or a particular sect.

What we see happening in the incident above is something different to what Scott suggested in his well-known book—*Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*.[349] According to Scott, in order to resist 'public transcripts' of the dominant the marginalized use strategies like rumour, gossip, etc. to counter dominant hegemonies. In Rambai's case the opposite had taken place, where the 'oppressed' had specifically focused on organizing a visible event by taking on 'public' scripts belonging to the dominant group. Moreover, it is a representative of the dominant group who used 'hidden' means (subterfuge) to subvert a 'public' transcript. Rambai's desire to reposition herself in the public domain, as someone other than a labouring woman, required taking over public transcripts. This, she learnt, was not easy.

The pushback to Rambai's new role came via an apparently simple non-violent act by the upper caste official, which nonetheless had the power of bringing back the sense of stigma, shame and inadequacy. It reinforced the fact that information, self-confidence and other skills could not replace the basic tools of literacy and education, which the powerful classes and castes had control over. Thus the authoritative and symbolic power of literacy kept inserting itself in the process of re-fashioning the Dalit woman subject. Dalit women now had information, but their progress to claiming 'educated' selfhood was still blocked.

Demanding Literacy Interventions in Chitrakoot

The turn towards literacy precipitated by a demand from 'below' warrants a brief revisit of initial positions regarding literacy held by the three main protagonists—the state, feminists and women (see introduction and chapter 1) as the women were not the only ones who changed their stance. To recap, the statist position would be to insist on literacy as a normative 'good' and an instrumentality irrespective of whether women want it or not. Feminists initially opposed the introduction of literacy while MS—a state-feminist hybrid of sorts—proffered a different viewpoint by insisting that the demand for literacy classes should be made by women first (see chapter 1).

According to reports, during MS's first few years in Chitrakoot women did not express any 'need' for literacy and "in meeting after meeting women would say, what will

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[349] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985).

we get out of studying? We would rather plough our fields, at least we will get grain to eat."[350] Kuckreja recalled, "Literacy was a non-issue. I don't even remember people discussing girl-child education." The MS Chitrakoot team's change of heart towards literacy came from the impetus of several women like Rambai, Chamela and Aitwariya, who had started negotiating with the state individually and collectively. The 'mechanic sahibs' were increasingly reluctant to be seen using their *angootha chaap* (thumb print) as a signature. Angootha chaap is both the image of a thumbprint as well as a derogatory descriptor commonly used to describe illiterates. Putting one's thumb impression instead of signing is an immediate giveaway of a person's illiterate status. Particularly troubling is the fact that the ink takes days to wash away and represents an indelible stigma.[351] Prema, a handpump mechanic said, "*acchha nahin lagta tha baar baar puchna*" (it did not feel good to keep asking [my male colleagues to write for me]. [352]

There were practical considerations as well. When the handpump mechanics team secured a contract after a difficult negotiation from the Jal Nigam to maintain the handpumps of Manikpur Block, mechanics had to fulfil various record keeping requirements—spare parts stocks, visit records etc. The usual practice of devising creative strategies to circumvent literacy failed.[353] These were enormously time consuming, often inaccurate and did not meet Jal Nigam's required standards. A combination of practicality and an expressed need from Dalit women to continue their engagement with claiming self-hood, turned Kuckreja, who had been a 'literacy sceptic' all along into something of a 'literacy-advocate'.[354]

A similar challenge from 'below' resulted in a turnaround within the WDP a few

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[350] Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "Educational Strategies for Women," 37

[351] A line in a motivational literacy song goes like this – *Yah kalik hata do maharaj, mora jiya padhne ko chahi* (Remove this black ink stain O lord, my heart desires to learn to read). See Cody, "The Light of Knowledge," 25-67.

[352] Prema, interview.

[353] Strategies to avoid writing included creating registers with a page for every village where images of the spare parts were drawn and mechanics put tally marks against the ones that they had replaced. Kuckreja recalled how the tally marks never matched what women were saying and with the physical stock of spare parts, and several other problems (Kuckreja, interview, April 17, 2017).

[354] Interview with Kuckreja, April 17, 2017. This has been seen as validation of MS's hypothesis that literacy should not be the first step in rural women's educational journey (see chapter 1). The evolution of MS's literacy initiatives across several states followed this script. Srilatha Batliwala and Vandana Goswami (eds.), *Women and Literacy: Conference Proceedings* (UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg and National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, 1996).

years earlier. In the WDP a strong insistence on working around literacy initially expressed by the feminist trainers was welcomed by the sathins but challenged by the state functionaries. Ironically it was the sathins own demands to be accepted as part of the government machinery that heightened these contradictions. Illiterate sathins feared that educational qualifications would be demanded before they could become part of the government machinery. There were also concerns that honorarium levels would differ based on literacy abilities. [355] This led to questions being asked within the women's movement as to why sathins who were "magnificent examples of a politically educated group in the sense of Jotiba Phule and Paulo Freire, continue to be regarded as 'illiterate', where literacy is defined in formal terms, and therefore not 'entitled' to the government job".[356]

While feminists continued to argue from this position, the unexpected fallout was the manner in which illiterate sathins ultimately changed the course of the literacy debate. At the state-level Sathin Mela in Jaipur in 1990, 700 sathins committed to taking the plunge to becoming literate. Jain who had once described literacy provision as a coercive force akin to family planning (see chapter 1) was quick to acknowledge the shift and subsequently actively promoted this new agenda.

These debates around literacy are not just pertinent to programmes like the WDP and MS but reveal how rural Dalit women's responses to literacy and the state in this instance, differed from those held by urban feminists. Jaya Sharma in her plenary address at the Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference in 2008 took the women's movement to task for failing to recognize literacy as a 'feminist' issue.[357] She also called the contemporary women's movement out for the class bias evident in its position on literacy. Sharma tellingly placed both the state and the women's movement on the same side of the debate—both de-prioritised adult literacy. According her, activists and women viewed the relationship between literacy and power very differently. She illustrated this by

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[355] In the WDP, feminists and state functionaries crossed each other, when the former insisted on doing away with report writing, rejected educational qualifications for sathin selection, in order to prevent creating hierarchies between sathins. Submitting written reports, the trainers argued would become "the work" and sathins would be drawn away from playing their role as rural women leaders, eventually becoming typical "paper-pushing government workers. See Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 12-19. Interviews with Sharma, March 21, 2016 and Jain, April 25, 2017.

[356] Chakravarti, "Rethinking Goals of Education," 229

[357] Jaya Sharma, Plenary Speech, Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference, Lucknow, 2008 (unpublished).

pointing to the example of illiterates being duped by shopkeepers, popularly used to motivate adult illiterates to join literacy programmes. Literacy sceptics counter this example by pointing out that literates could also be duped and not all illiterates are cheated. Sharma argues that there was "more going on" in this exchange, just as we could see in Rambai's example. Women want to occupy the same space as the educated shopkeeper/exploiter. Whether one could actually read and write did not matter, what did "was not the functional value of literacy but the perceived value of literacy both on the part of the shopkeeper and the women". She queried even more sharply whether educated interveners were afraid of losing the power they experienced when women remained dependent on them for their literacy needs. In that sense too, feminists and the state were on the same side, excluding poor women from an important site of power and privilege.

Thus compared with the feminist interveners, Dalit women were pushing for literacy, but were coming to the 'in and against the state' dictum (chapter 1) from a different location. While urban upper-class-caste feminists were anxious about being 'co-opted' by a patriarchal state, Dalit women, having historically been kept out of the state apparatuses or dealing with it from an extremely subservient position, wanted greater proximity to it and saw becoming literate as a means to achieve just that. They clearly wanted 'in' and it was not necessarily 'co-option' that they were worried about. Dalit women like Rambai, were making their public roles visible and in so doing were trying to change the nature of their engagement with the state and therefore their decision to embrace literacy was an expression of that. Whether it was to 'take-on' the state or 'get-in' Dalit women came forward in large numbers to join literacy classes. [358]

Not surprisingly, learning to sign their names was the first thing that women wanted to learn when they joined literacy classes. Once women learned to sign they made sure to publicly display this even if their literacy skills did not go much further. When Dhokhia was asked by an official to put her angootha chaap after she had cast her vote during panchayat elections in 1995 (in the days before electronic voting machines), she refused and insisted on signing. Being newly literate, she took a long time to sign, causing others waiting in the queue to taunt her. She continued regardless and when the official 'checked' her signature and declared that she had signed correctly, it established her

[358] Batliwala and Goswami, *Women and Literacy*; Nirantar, *Effective Practices in Women's Literacy and Education* (New Delhi: Nirantar, 2012).

'literate status' to the entire village, which included the upper castes.[359] The memory of this incident has stayed with her. For Pachiniya it was an incident at the local *thana* (police station) that she remembers.[360] She had gone to her local thana to register a complaint (along with other women) something she was doing for the first time. She made sure she was carrying a diary and pen and signed the register on entering. All the while her heart was beating really fast as she feared the *daroga* (police officer) would ask her to write the application herself. Pachiniya could just about sign, which she did. But it was important for her to establish her literate status at the thana manned by upper castes and a 'powerful' space that Dalits feared entering. Refusing to put their thumb impression marked an important shift in their status as Dalit women.[361]

From 1992 onwards, literacy efforts were rolled out and resulted in the creation of new approaches to literacy teaching and the creation of educational content. I discuss this in the next chapter.

Concluding Observations

Women's literacy and education programmes are typically presented as neutral interventions. This chapter, by tracing the entangled and embedded nature of education and feminist politics, argues that it is deeply political project. As MS, a programme imagined on a national scale by feminists and the state, took root in a local context many of the ideas rural women's education were transmuted, as frameworks from above met challenges from below.

Thus the initial feminist trainings developed on the basis of national and global feminist discourses led to the emergence of subjectivities and a rural feminist subject who was self-transforming, an agentive critical thinker and a member of a new collective identity that challenged social norms and took on new public roles. Despite the fairly radical ideological changes the content and pedagogy of the trainings enabled, these trainings were questioned as to their structural, material or practical applicability in the lives of the Dalit women trainees.

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[359] Dhokhia, interview.

[360] Pachiniya (Leader, Dalit Mahila Samiti), interviewed by author, Bhauri village, March 24, 2015.

[361] Providers of literacy programmes try to go beyond the signature. Signatures were used as proof of being literate (in various government records) when in fact women could not read.

Subsequently, the second pedagogic intervention began as a non-traditional skills training programme to alter strategic gender interests and stereotypical visions of women's work and was also embedded in the material needs of Dalit women. When it brushed up against deeply entrenched relations of gender, caste and knowledge it resulted in shaping a rural Dalit feminist subject. The challenges and longer-term outcomes of both these pedagogic interventions were deeply informed by the structural realities of caste and patriarchy, and while being transformative, also were mired in limitations related to how caste is transacted in a particular context. While these two pedagogic interventions were designed to foreground women's local knowledge and communication skills, by actively avoiding literacy—the authoritative mode of transforming dominant knowledge—it was in the encounter between Dalit rural feminist subjects and the state that the demand for literacy emerged, thus adding another layer to the evolving subjectivity of the rural woman subject, which we shall explore in further detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

(RE)FASHIONING RURAL WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITIES:
LITERACY INTERVENTIONS IN INDIA IN THE MID-1980s

"We [learners] know about our forests and trees… we know what sources of water we have in our village and the problems around us. All you [feminist educators] do is listen to us and give back what we have told you. What do you have to give us? Tell us what we do not know. You have told us nothing new in a week … we won't study this!"[1] (Adult learner, MSK, 1995)

In 1995, the adult women learners[2] who were studying at the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK hereafter)—an 8-month residential education programme being implemented by MS Chitrakoot —decided to 'strike'. They were dissatisfied about what and how they were being taught. They wanted instead, to gain knowledge that they did not already have—knowledge contained in mainstream school textbooks and knowledge that the feminist educators (who had designed curriculum) and the powerful in society more generally, had—powerful knowledge, so to speak.

In itself, the sentiment expressed in the above quotation may not have been terribly significant had it not marked a moment of rupture in the approaches that had been employed in the educational interventions that the women learners and feminist educators had participated in thus far. The statement appeared to contradict the earlier pedagogical work that the MSK (where they had been studying at the time) had built on, emphasising women's local knowledge and ways of knowing. Women learners, up until that point, appeared to have embraced such approaches.

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[1] Adult learner, MSK (1995), quoted in Malini Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," in *The Making of Literate Societies*, ed. David Olson and Nancy Torrance (Blackwell, 2001), 306.

[2] Adult education programmes typically use 'participants' and 'facilitators' instead of 'learners' and 'teachers' to distinguish themselves from formal school programmes. I am however using the latter terms as they reflect the power hierarchies inherent in such relationships which have a historical meaning that using alternative terminology does not always alter, as this chapter shows. I am using 'feminist educators' for programme partner Nirantar.

The 'student strike' at the time compelled the feminist educators to become self-reflexive and drastically change their plans for curriculum and knowledge production. The 'strike' resulted in a churning amongst the collaborators—learners and educators—and eventually led to the production of new curricular content and pedagogies for rural women.[3]

The event clearly had an enduring impact on the women learners as well. In 2015, two decades later, Besaniya, one of my informants told me that she had organised a 'strike' when she was studying at the MSK, and vividly described its circumstances to me. The event had remained important to her, as she had been able to mobilise other women and get the educated, more 'powerful' feminist educators to listen to them. But equally, what she also recalled to me as having being educationally valuable about the MSK in the intervening years was not restricted to the 'school' education that they had then sought.

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What should women be taught, why and how? These are abiding and largely unresolved preoccupations within education policy and praxis, which were brought centre stage when rural women associated with the WDP and MS asked to be taught to read and write (see introduction and chapter 2). I use the 'strike' as a motif to unravel these questions as it spotlights the complicated ways in which power relations and knowledge creation for subaltern women are intertwined. The 'strike' resulted in the creation of a new curriculum for a long-term education programme for rural Dalit and Kol women—the MSK. The essence of this curriculum is expressed in '*nayi batein*' (literally new talk, new knowledge), a term that MSK learners employed in a song they wrote to describe what they had learnt. Nayi batein, I show, reflects an eclectic mix of feminist, dominant and local women's knowledge that finally drew on the experiential knowledge of the learners, the liberal education of the feminist curriculum developers and mainstream school content. As discussed in the introduction, unravelling power dynamics within the classroom has been central to discussions regarding feminist

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[3] For earlier articles on this topic see Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy"; Malini Ghose and Disha Mullick, "Empowerment in Educational Processes: Feminist (Re)appropriations," in *More Powerful Literacies*, ed. Lynn Tett, Mary Hamilton and Jim Crowther (Leicester, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012), 147-163.

pedagogy largely in the western and formal education context[4] but has not been studied in the context of adult literacy in non-formal education settings in India.

I describe in this chapter how nayi batein came to be. The chapter traces, through what I believe to be a series of breakthroughs and in some cases turnarounds, rural Dalit women's relationship to knowledge, its production and the meaning it has continued to hold in their lives, as well as the contestations around power inherent in a collaborative processes of knowledge production that sought to be transformative.

MS's educational framework reimagined the rural woman subject as being knowledgeable and agentive, despite being illiterate (see chapters 1 & 2). This chapter shows how this transformative theory was itself transformed through an engagement with the field. It demonstrates how Dalit women's interests were incorporated in a very new way into the pedagogical programme, not least because of women's own interventions.

In Part 1, I introduce the feminist educators that embarked on this collaborative process with MS and the approaches to literacy with which they entered this project. Part 2 outlines the first pedagogic breakthrough: the development of the residential literacy camps that led to the expansion of the scope of rural women's engagement with knowledge production. Part 3 describes the second breakthrough: the production of a literacy primer with the involvement of women learners. This introduces a new vision of an empowered rural woman, one that assertively transcends the state prescribed framework of appropriate knowledge for rural women, and the image of an empowered woman it sought to produce. In Part 4, I discuss the third breakthrough where the learners' strike turns the previous processes on its head, eventually leading to the creation of 'nayi batein'—a new curriculum framework that both breaks with and incorporates earlier initiatives.

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[4] For a critical examination of power and subjectivity in elementary education classrooms see Bronwyn Davies, "Agency as a Form of Discursive Practice. A Classroom Scene Observed"; Davies, Bronwyn and Robyn Hunt. "Classroom Competencies and Marginal Positionings." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 15, no. 3 (1994): 389- 408.

I. EMBARKING ON A FEMINIST LITERACY PROJECT: PARTNERSHIPS AND APPROACHES

In 1993, around the time women like Rambai, Chamela and Aitwariya were demanding to be taught to read and write (see chapter 2), a new organisation, Nirantar[5]—that sought to empower women through literacy and education—was being set up in New Delhi by a group of five urban feminists. Nirantar's founding and the backgrounds its founders, including myself (see introduction) were tied up with many of the developments discussed in earlier chapters. For instance, Sharma and Bhog (see chapter 2) had worked with the WDP and had been instrumental in shaping its literacy strategies (next section). Naqvi (also chapter 2) like myself had been involved with MS. Mishra (see chapter 1) had organised agricultural workers near Delhi before joining Jagori, where we worked together on MS. Just prior to setting up Nirantar, Sharma and Naqvi had worked with the women's platform of the Total Literacy Campaigns in the 1990s (see chapter 1) and Mishra, Bhog and myself had worked at the National Institute of Adult Education, a newly-established (no longer operational) government institution,[6] set up to undertake research related to adult literacy and education. It was here that several ideas related to the production of literacy material and curriculum development involving learners later carried forward by Nirantar had germinated.[7]

When Nirantar's founders came together, the organisation's initial mandate was to develop 'empowering' educational content and pedagogic strategies especially for rural women, influence policies and theoretical debates based on praxis, and to produce feminist knowledge that reflected women's concerns—particularly rural women and those from marginalised groups. In its early years Nirantar's vision found synergies with MS, and close associations with Kuckreja, a like-minded feminist (see chapter 2), made the MS programme in Chitrakoot one of Nirantar's foundational terrains for experimentation.

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[5] For details on Nirantar see https://www.nirantar.net/

[6] The National Institute of Adult Education was started in 1991 soon after the NEP 1986 with a mandate to conduct academic research and design innovative programme. It was closed about a decade later due to various bureaucratic problems.

[7] Renuka Mishra, Malini Ghose and Dipta Bhog, "Concretising Concepts: Continuing Education Strategies for Women," *Convergence* XXVII, no. 2/3 (1994), 126-131.

It is worth noting that none of us, Nirantar founders, were trained educationists or literacy experts. Instead what our work built on was an understanding of concepts and debates that were in circulation in feminist and development circles at the time—such as 'conscientisation' and 'empowerment'—and of the complexities of rural women's lives and feminist organising through several years of immersive field work (see introduction and chapter 1).

My research methodology (see introduction), which combined reviewing adult literacy scholarship with conducting reflective interviews with Nirantar co-founders enabled me to retrospectively (re)connect many of the ideas that we had grappled with then, to theories of adult literacy and feminist pedagogy, which we may not have consciously done at the time. This process proved important for two reasons: it helped flesh out several terms (many of which later became buzzwords)—such as transformative education and empowering education—that Nirantar's founders frequently used, and it led us to re-examine many theoretical ideas (such as issues of caste) that we had been drawing on or dismissing, either implicitly or explicitly.

Nirantar's Understanding of 'Empowering' Education

I have previously reviewed the main theoretical approaches to adult literacy teaching and learning (see introduction) and will now briefly examine how these related to or shaped Nirantar's understanding of 'empowering education' at the time we embarked on processes of developing the adult literacy material and curricula described in the next few sections of this chapter.

The Competency and Functional Literacy approaches found a place in Nirantar's understanding primarily as cautionary tales. The Competency-based approach, which begins teaching adults the alphabets and skills of de-coding, did not fit with Nirantar's perspective, as we believed that adult rural women could not be taught to read and write through learning de-contextualised skills that replicated school-based methods and settings.

The Functional Literacy approach—which insisted that illiterate adults should become literate so that they could better perform their daily-life tasks as it increased efficiency, ensured greater participation (in development, governance or the economy, for instance) and improved social behaviour (such as by adopting better hygiene

practices)—was also rejected, because of its limited vision regarding the purposes of literacy, its failure to analyse the unequal structures that deny some adults the opportunity to acquire literacy skills in the first place, and most importantly, for its failure to acknowledge that illiterates were already 'fully' functioning adults.

Overall, the policy and discourse shift to the empowerment framework from the earlier WID approach from the mid 1980s onwards (see introduction) which Nirantar endorsed, also necessarily involved setting aside the instrumentalist goals of functional literacy or the neutrality of the skills approach. The liberal and humanist view of literacy, though critiqued for its welfarist and elitist orientation, implicitly found its way into Nirantar's articulation as a counter to the narrowness of the functionality approach—not least because of Nirantar founders' own (arguably elitist) educational experiences.

Unsurprisingly then, Nirantar primarily drew on 'transformative' literacy theories that broadly advocated using literacy not merely for functional purposes or for individual advancement but as a tool to turn a critical lens on women's lived realities and to challenge unequal and oppressive power relations (see introduction and chapter 1). The Social Literacies Approach—a part of the transformative approaches set—particularly appealed to Nirantar as it promoted literacy as a plural concept, and emphasized making visible local or indigenous literacy practices.[8] In keeping with feminist pedagogic approaches at the time, Nirantar was keen to build on women's existing knowledge bases and literacy practices.

Nirantar was certainly influenced by the critical literacy approach, popularly known as 'conscientisation' in India, which explicitly promoted literacy as a tool for liberation and social change. It was popular in liberal circles and actively used in elaborating the educational vision of MS (see chapter 1). Nirantar's conceptual framework was rooted in feminist approaches to literacy teaching and learning, which fell within the ambit of transformative literacy (see introduction). What this meant, broadly, was the following: using the interrogation of patriarchy as the primary lens to analyse women's subordination in the materials produced and in the 'classroom' practices adopted. In terms of knowledge production this meant demystifying 'official' male-

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[8] Years later Nirantar staff trained themselves in ethnographic literacy research methods advocated by the Social Practices Approach discussed in the introduction. See Nirantar and Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), *Exploring the Everyday: Ethnographic Approaches to Literacy and Numeracy* (New Delhi: Nirantar and ASPBAE, 2007).

dominated knowledge developed by male theorists (including Freire) and endorsing the epistemological validity of women's personal experiences. In the classroom this meant adopting pedagogic styles that interrogated the power dynamics inherent within 'official' knowledge, and building non-hierarchical relationships amongst students and between students and teachers. As we shall later see these very principles were effectively used by learners to question the feminist educators from Nirantar and revisit their assumptions and practice.

To summarise, I would retrospectively describe Nirantar's approach to literacy and education as it started working in Chitrakoot as the "Literacy as Power" approach. By this I mean we advocated interrogating power relations within all aspects of literacy programmes. As I have written elsewhere, Nirantar saw process and consequence as part of the same educational continuum and believed that that for women to feel empowered as a result of an engagement with education, they must be empowered within the educational practice.[9] And so Nirantar's work conceptually drew on critical and transformative literacy approaches generally, and feminist approaches to pedagogy and knowledge production specifically, as well as critiques of functional and competency based literacy approaches; however the experiential knowledge of the literacy work done during the WDP was even more significant. As there were no feminist organisations working on adult literacy at the time, much of Nirantar's work and conceptualisations evolved through experimentation on the ground.

In the following sections I will examine how some of the concepts and frameworks described above came to inform the nature of educational content and pedagogic interventions—namely residential literacy camps, a primer development process and a long-term educational programme (Mahila Shikshan Kendra, MSK)—that were developed as part of MS Chitrakoot's literacy and education programmes in the early 1990s. I will not only trace the evolution of these ideas but also the challenges that were posed during the process. As women began to enter the world of letters they embraced and (re)shaped many of the 'truths' about feminist literacy pedagogy that the feminist interveners were trying to establish through their field experimentation.

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[9] Malini Ghose, "Literacy, Power and Feminism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 17 (April 27 - May 3, 2002), 1615.

II. BREAKTHROUGH 1: THE RESIDENTIAL LITERACY CAMP STRATEGY

Adopting a feminist adult literacy approach in an environment where examples of such material and programmes were unavailable entailed developing new strategies for programme delivery, 'classroom' pedagogies and curriculum and materials development. MS Chitrakoot's first intervention drew on lessons learnt from WDP's experiments with the residential literacy camp approach.[10] A quick look at how this new approach to delivering literacy was originally developed is important to understand rural women's engagement with feminist knowledge production.

In 1990, when sathins demanded that they be taught to read and write (see chapter 1), WDP's feminist partners were compelled to devise a new strategy. They were aware that the prevalent model of teaching literacy skills through village-based adult literacy centres had not worked for rural women.[11] The strict purdah rules rural women had to follow restricted their mobility and their ability to learn. Learning at village centres in the full public gaze was difficult for adult women as they were ridiculed and frequently called away from class to attend to domestic chores. Their work rhythms outside the home followed agricultural seasons, making daily attendance difficult, during harvest time for example. To make matter worse, the government literacy primers and teaching-learning methods were didactic and alienating.[12]

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[10] Bhog and Sharma conducted a UP-state level training of the camp approach, which was quickly adopted by MS programmes and later by Nirantar. For examples of other MS literacy experiences see Batliwala and Goswami, *Women and Literacy: Conference Proceedings*; Nirantar, *Effective Practices in Women's Literacy*. Later, due to Nirantar and MS's advocacy efforts, camps were included in the adult education policy but implemented with little success (Government of India, *Saakshar Bharat*, n.d., 11). Government agencies failed to enrol women, largely due to a lack of trust between Government officials, women and the community, and their unwillingness to do the rigorous 'mobilisation' work required. According to Prashanthi, former State Project Director Andhra MS, where MS partnered with the Government, low enrolment was however attributed to 'cultural barriers' and women were 'blamed' for their lack of motivation, which fed into existing dominant narratives (Prasanthi, interview, February 26, 2016).

[11] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 14; Dighe, "Deconstructing Literacy Primers," 1559- 1561; Ila Patel, "Literacy as Freedom for Women in India," in *Literacy as Freedom*, ed. Namtip Aksornkool (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), 149; Purnima Gupta, "Literacy and Empowerment: Perceptions and Realities," in *Development and Empowerment: Rural Women in India*, ed. J. Arunachalam and U. Kalpagm (Jaipur: Rawat, 2006), 178; Mishra et al., "Concretising Concepts," 128-129.

[12] Dighe, "Women and Literacy Developments in India," 52.

Thus a completely new approach to adult-literacy teaching and learning—the residential literacy camp model (or 'camp model' for short)—was evolved through experimentation.[13] It built on the residential gender-training approach and was a response to a proposition that was apparently made by the sathins themselves. Sathins argued that away from home they would be freed from the demands of domestic and agricultural labour, giving them the 'head-space' required to immerse themselves into learning to read and write.[14]

The camp model comprised a cycle of three 10-day residential camps over a three-month period with follow-up classes at the village in-between each camp. By committing to this approach sathins communicated two powerful messages—that rural women have the right to learn, and women's own commitment to furthering their education which was demonstrated by their willingness to take on battles with their families and to invest time in an activity that would not necessarily bring them any economic gain. These acts of individual and collective agency reshaped prevalent images of the rural woman—as being disinterested in literacy and therefore retrograde—and were critical in building the WDP feminist interveners' own commitment to adult literacy, an issue that they had sidestepped (see chapters 1 and 2).

However, interestingly what did shape some aspects of the strategy were the sathins deep-rooted fears of failure that they would not be able to learn. The WDP trainers were taken aback when despite the sathins' resolve and even though they were feisty grassroots leaders, they uncharacteristically regurgitated local sayings like, "You cannot stick clay on a baked pot."[15] Such diffidence, my discussions with literacy trainers revealed,[16] had a different quality compared to women's reactions to other first-time forays into other uncharted domains of learning, such as the gender trainings or the handpump training programme. Learning to read and write carried the historical weight of generations of caste and gender exclusion. In addition, women were quizzed about

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[13] For a detailed analytical documentation of how the literacy camp strategy emerged, see Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*.

[14] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 13-14.

[15] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 5.

[16] Jaya Sharma, interview, March 21, 2016; Purnima Gupta (Senior Programme Officer Nirantar), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 18, 2017; Meena (Secretary, Sahjani Shiksha Kendra Lalitpur, former MSK teacher), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 20, 2017.

what they had learnt. And if they hadn't, they were ridiculed and not allowed to continue.[17]

Women's reactions and critiques of centre-based strategies were considered when developing the camp strategy and some of the hallmarks of this strategy—which set it apart as being a feminist literacy strategy, and would be carried forward in later interventions—were: [18]

(i) Curating a colourful learning space: festooned with posters and displays of reading material that demystified and reduced fears around the written word and yet immersed first-time rural women learners into the world of letters.

(ii) Setting up an alternative 'classroom' as a communal living and learning space that enabled group learning and a redefinition of traditionally held hierarchical spaces, relationships and interactions associated with knowledge transfer. This in particular was a continuation of the training strategy (see chapter 2).

(iii) Breaking the hegemony of the content and forms of official-authoritative-written knowledge—such as primers, which contained prescriptive information-heavy content—and to include 'texts' written by learners or texts co-constructed between rural women and educated urban facilitators, that built on women's experiential knowledge.[19]

What Rural Women Learners Want: Literacy Camps and the Content of Learning

The insights that emerged through the literacy camps,[20] particularly around what constitutes knowledge and rural women's interests and the embodied nature of power[21]

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[17] These incidents of women learners being 'tested' publically—even by young children—and being mocked were mentioned repeatedly by teachers and former learners.

[18] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 20-24; Gupta, "Literacy and Empowerment: Perceptions and Realities," 178-186.

[19] Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "Educational Strategies for Women,"39.

[20] The drawbacks of the camp strategy have also been documented. These included inadequate follow-up and hence relapse, drop out between camps, high-costs, and a high teacher to learner ratio requiring a large pool of trained teachers. See Mahila Samakhya and Nirantar, "Educational Strategies for Women," 39 and interviews with Purnima Gupta, Meena and Santosh (Vanangana Literacy coordinator), interviewed by author, December 12, 2015.

[21] The reprisals that women faced for coming to literacy classes and the importance of literacy classes as a supportive space to address violence, is under-researched in the Indian context but was referred to in several interviews: Gupta, Meena, Pushpa (Karvi, October 18, 2015); violence experienced by teachers within their homes, Anasuya (Dalit rights activist, former MSK teacher), Karvi, October 13, 2014, Poonam (Anganwadi worker, former literacy teacher), Karvi, May 24, 2015 and Avdhesh; testimonies in chapters 4 and 5; for western context see

embedded in the act of becoming literate were important for shaping rural women's self-perceptions and the perspectives of the literacy providers.

First, with regard to rural women's engagement with knowledge and its production, Srivastava and Sharma who conducted the first camp wrote, "The hunger for information is almost overwhelming."[22] The element of wonder that their comment conveyed was a reflection of the range of information and knowledge the women sought and the intensity with which they did so. This led to a new genre of short texts being developed during the course of the programme. The texts were just a few lines long, hand-written and often co-scripted with literacy facilitators, who mediated the complex transitions between oral and written modes.[23]

The vast range of topics and styles these 'texts' covered can be ascertained from the following examples: Ghisi Bai's 'Op Ed' piece expressing her viewpoint about the futility of the 1990 Gulf War, a piece of current news that had been discussed during the newspaper reading session held every morning; [24] Sakli's tongue-in-cheek narrative of being taught to ride a motor cycle by her husband; Norti's rejoinder to a report in a mainstream daily of a woman being asked to prove her fidelity by placing her hands in boiling oil; Parvati's piece expressing her sense of humiliation at being poorly treated at a Republic day function organized by an NGO and Manbhar's satirical story about the gender division of labour, which was later widely circulated.[25]

These texts had almost nothing in common with the development messages contained in prevailing literacy primers, nor with the more utilitarian purposes of the

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Horsman, "Moving Beyond 'Stupid'", Jenny Horsman, "Literacy Learning for Survivors of Trauma," *Canadian Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (1998).

[22] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 37.

[23] For discussions on the complexities of shifting from oral to written modes of communication and the complex intersections between politics of language, representation and knowledge, during the initial years of literacy work in Chitrakoot see Malini Ghose and Dipta Bhog, "Language, Orality and Literacy: An Experience of Making the Transition from Orality to Writing," *British Association for Literacy in Development*, 1993; Malini Ghose, 2002, "Literacy, Power and Feminism," 1616-1617; Nirantar, *Windows to the World: Developing a Curriculum for Rural Women* (New Delhi: Nirantar, 1997), 106-110.

[24] Every morning the headlines from the newspaper would be collectively read and discussed. In the evening a group of women would bring out their own handwritten broadsheet that commented on the mainstream news but carried their own stories as well. These traditions were also carried forward. Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, 37.

[25] Srivastava and Sharma, *Documentation of Literacy Camps*, See Ghisi bai, 68; Sakli, 16; Norti,17; Parvati, 70. A slightly modified version of Manbhar's story was later published by Nirantar in a primer for newly literate readers, Nirantar, *Bhasha ka Tana Bana* (New Delhi: Nirantar, undated).

Functional Literacy approach (see next section). These were deeply personal accounts that revealed women's opinions about events and circumstances around them. Further, the material that was developed during the literacy camps differed from efforts that fell within the ambit of 'Learner Generated Material': a genre of literacy material where adult learners were brought into literacy material production processes.[26] The move to include the 'participation' of beneficiaries in deciding development priorities became popular in development praxis from the 1980s onwards and was incorporated within the literacy domain under the broad rubric of 'participatory material development' or 'learner-generated material' (LGM). But such efforts, though considered an improvement over centrally designed literacy material,[27] gradually got limited to: following a set of guidelines, [28] asking learners to write based on pre-selected (mostly development-oriented) topics, or a tokenistic inclusion of learners in workshops. For the most part, LGM came to mean field-testing, where learners opinions were sought on texts written by experts.[29]

The immersive camp approach and the diverse texts created by the women learners during the camps loosened the tightly controlled boundaries of what is relevant and useful knowledge for rural women and how and who could produce such material:

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[26] For international examples of Learner Generated Material see McCaffery, Merrified and Millican, *Developing Adult Literacy*, 100-102 and 199-201; for examples from Nepal see, Clifford T. Meyers, *Learner Generated Materials in Adult Literacy Programmes as a Vehicle for Development: Theory and Practice in Case Studies* in Nepal. PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1996; for examples of student writing in the UK: Jane Mace, *Talking about Adult Literacy Education* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[27] In development circles, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools – such as generating maps, matrices, timelines and calendars to study local realities such as land and resource ownership, incidence disease, changes in cropping patterns etc. – began to be used as an alternative to traditional survey research methods (see introduction). In the early 1990s, Action Aid, an international NGO, combined PRA and Freirean methods to create a literacy approach called REFLECT. PRA tools were used to generate the vocabulary, reading texts and writing themes. REFLECT was implemented in several countries and received a lot of international attention. David Archer and Sara Cottingham, *Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques,* (London, Action Aid, 1996).

[28] Clifford T. Meyers, *Importance of Learner Involvement and the Process of Learner Generated Materials* (Nepal, UNICEF, undated).

[29] According to Shalini Joshi who participated in many such workshops organized by Government-run State Resource Centres, the environment was so contrived and power laden that the 'neo-literates' who were brought in hardly ever said a word. Shalini Joshi (Regional Programme Manager Meedan, co-founder Khabar Lahariya), interviewed by author, New Delhi, April 5, 2016. For an overview of the limits of adult literacy curriculum see Sadhna Saxena, "Looking at Literacy," *Seminar*, no. 493 (September 2000).

this was the first breakthrough in the evolving trajectory of feminist knowledge production being traced in this chapter.

In the next section we will further explore the 'empowered' rural woman subject that feminists imagined and sought to develop through the educational material they created. To bring this effort into relief I will contrast it with a similar project albeit one that was developed by the state.

III. BREAKTHROUGH 2: LITERACY PRIMERS AND RURAL WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITIES

As women's engagement with literacy picked up, MS's literacy facilitators brought up the need for structured instructional material—such as a literacy primer—to be able to better manage their classes.[30] This demand threw the Nirantar team, who were by then the resource group for MS Chitrakoot's literacy and education work, into a conundrum.

Being committed to locally generated material, the idea of developing a centrally produced standardised primer was problematic for the team.[31] Additionally, at the time they had no particular experience in primer development. Nirantar's hesitation in this case also stemmed from the 'weight' of what primers signified. Literacy primers are to non-formal adult education, what textbooks are to formal education. The content of literacy primers is considered 'official knowledge' and like textbooks,[32] literacy primers are 'ideological'. The keywords, texts and visuals contained in an adult literacy primer convey the attitudes and knowledge deemed 'appropriate' for adult illiterates by its producers. They also serve a socializing and acculturating function as they transmit cultural values and beliefs both overtly and covertly and have sanctity, as they are virtually the only texts accessible to adult learners.[33] Primers transmit messages to adult illiterates about what kinds of people they are and who they should aspire to become.

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[30] MS ran both literacy centres and camps.

[31] There is a body of thought and practise that rejects centralised expert-produced primers. See Rogers, "Improving the quality of Literacy programmes," 219-221; Archer and Cottingham, *Regenerated Freirean Literacy*.

[32] Michael Apple, "Cultural Politics and the Text," 2nd ed., *Official Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2000), 42–60.

[33] Dighe, "Deconstructing Literacy Primers," 1559.

Therefore, as Patel rightfully asserts, "who selects what is worth knowing and why"[34] becomes an important question to examine.

In post-independence India, adult literacy has largely been a state-driven programme (see chapter 1) and therefore the production of literacy primers has almost entirely been state financed and produced, with non-governmental efforts occupying only a marginal space. The dominance of state funding and the mass circulation of state-produced primers have, as Patel has argued, meant that the state has maintained "hegemonic control over knowledge production in adult education."[35] State-produced literacy primers have been critiqued fairly extensively;[36] however, as important sites that shape subjectivities of rural women—the 'targets' of most literacy programmes—their interrogation remains an on-going feminist project. Producing a primer therefore offered an opportunity, yet posed a challenge for the MS-Nirantar team.

In the early 1990s the Total Literacy Campaigns were being vigorously implemented across the country. Policy-level discussions around primer development within the government sector had been revived and a new pedagogic approach, the Improved Pace and Content of Learning (IPCL) was introduced by the National Literacy Mission.[37] The IPCL standardized the approach to literacy teaching and material production through a set of national guidelines[38] that aimed at improving the quality of primers and decentralising their production.[39] The 'improvement' was purportedly in

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[34] Patel, "Analysis of Literacy Primers," 89.

[35] Patel, "Analysis of Literacy Primers," 89.

[36] See Dighe, "Deconstructing Literacy Primers," 1559-1561; Patel, "Analysis of Literacy Primers," 89-96; Bhasin, "The Why and How of Literacy," 40-41; Kidd and Kumar, "Co-opting Freire," 27-36. The most common critiques of literacy primers included the following complaints: that they conveyed development messages, projected middle class values and ideals, circumscribed women to the domestic sphere and made invisible women's productive labour, reinforced stereotypical domestic roles and highlighted feminine traits (like self-sacrifice and docility), projected illiterates as ignorant and regressive whereas rural women would be only recipients of information and the 'reformer' figures educated, urban and usually male. That they simplified and de-politicised complex social phenomena like poverty, development and inequality and presented rural life as being harmonious, without any indication of social divisions like caste.

[37] Better quality content through the IPCL method was expected to sustain the motivation of learners, improve learning outcomes and the teaching ability of literacy volunteers. Government of India, *Handbook for Developing IPCL Material* (New Delhi: Directorate of Adult Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, 1993), 1.

[38] Government of India, *Handbook for Developing IPCL Material.*

[39] The IPCL guidelines stipulated content areas, technicalities such as word, sentence and text length etc. and approval processes (Government of India, *Handbook for Developing IPCL Material*, 102-109). Primers were published after being scrutinized by a national committee based on a standardized checklist. Giving a national committee final authority ran counter to the

three areas: the adoption of a critical literacy approach (the Freirean 'conscientisation' approach); the promotion of women's empowerment and equality; and the inclusion of local content in the primers.

Given this background, the team first considered adapting *Khilti Kaliyan*[40] (Blooming Buds)—a government primer produced using the IPCL guidelines–-with the express objective of promoting women's equality and empowerment.[41] *Khilti Kaliyan* had also been touted as a 'good' primer. However, on reviewing the primer the MS and Nirantar teams' found its contents antithetical to their vision of women's empowerment, as the analysis below shows, and went ahead and developed their own literacy primer: *Banda ki Batiyan* (Stories about Banda).

Banda ki Batiyan was written through a series of residential workshops organised between 1992 and 1993. The workshops brought together the feminist educators from Nirantar and local literacy facilitators who selected keywords and wrote the texts.[42] This process was quite unlike the state produced *Khilti Kaliyan,* which was produced by experts housed in specialised institutions.[43]

Khilti Kaliyan, a set of three literacy primers, follows 'Kamala's' life story, supposedly a prototype of the journey that a girl from a poor rural family traverses. It describes the gender barriers Kamala encounters and negotiates as she is transformed from 'victim' to 'empowered woman'. Kamala's childhood (or rather its lack) is the central theme of the first book. The second book is about the travails of Kamala's married life, motherhood and her makeover—to a modern literate woman—made possible by her husband. Book Three is about Kamala's forays into public life where she

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decentralized production goal of the guidelines (Dighe, "Deconstructing Literacy Primers,"1559). For a critical analysis of the IPCL guidelines see Saxena, "Looking at Literacy."

[40] Bhatnagar et al., *Khilti Kaliyan* 1–3, (New Delhi: Directorate of Adult Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, 1990-91).

[41] Bhog, interview, March 18, 2016.

[42] I have written earlier about the primer development process, especially the tensions that emerged between the rural women participants and the urban feminist collaborators during it. See Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 302-306. I also interviewed key informants who had participated in the primer development workshops: Bhog, March 18, 2016; Sushila and Meenakshi (Freelance Gender Trainer, former MSK coordinator and MS District coordinator), Karvi, April 25, 2015.

[43] Each state has a Government funded State Resource Centre that conducts training and produces literacy materials. Experts at these institutions who wrote the primers were predominantly male and upper caste, an observation based on by reviewing author names. MS, though a quasi-government programme developed its own primers for use within their programme. There wasn't a singular MS approach.

leads other women to bring about social change. [44]

Banda ki Batiyan is a single book. The primer's protagonists are Dalit and Kol women. The keywords and texts draw on the everyday life experiences of Dalit and Kol women, selected and written by them. *Banda ki Batiyan*'s production values are 'rustic': women drew its illustrations and it was screen-printed.

Both primers however, draw on the 'conscientisation' approach popularised by Freire, which, to quickly recap (see chapter 1), uses keywords or phrases, carefully selected to reflect learners' life-worlds and their issues, to teach reading and writing. For example the key phrase in *Khilti Kaliyan* (Lesson 4, Book 1), '*Kamala ka bachpan*' (Kamala's Childhood), is aimed at triggering a discussion on the unending reproductive work—sibling care, collecting firewood, tending the animals etc.—that Kamala must perform, which results in her not going to school.[45] The message of this lesson and others conveyed to women learners is to move beyond their difficulties and change their differential behaviour towards daughters and sons and to ultimately prioritise their daughter's schooling over domestic work. Learners simultaneously learn to read the letters that comprise the key phrase. In this way adults learn to "read the word and the world."[46] (see images below)

While both the MS and state-produced primers claimed to use the 'conscientisation' approach, include local content and promote gender equality, the two could not have been more different. The choice of key words and phrases—and therefore the content, intent and approach —of the two primers reveals the differing understandings of women's life-worlds, of social structures, rural women's relationship to knowledge and what constituted an 'empowered' woman. In examining these divergences, I also hope to show how feminists imagined the process of subjectification through education.

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[44] I reviewed the *Khilti Kaliyan* series, other Government produced primers, *Banda ki Batiyan* and other MS produced primers such as the MS Saharanpur primer, *Au se Aurat* ('W for Woman') and *Jagjagi* (Awakening) produced by MS Bihar.

[45] '*Kamala padh likh na saki*' (Kamala was unable to study), *Khilti Kaliyan* 1, Lesson 6.

[46] Freire and Macedo, *Reading the Word and the World.*
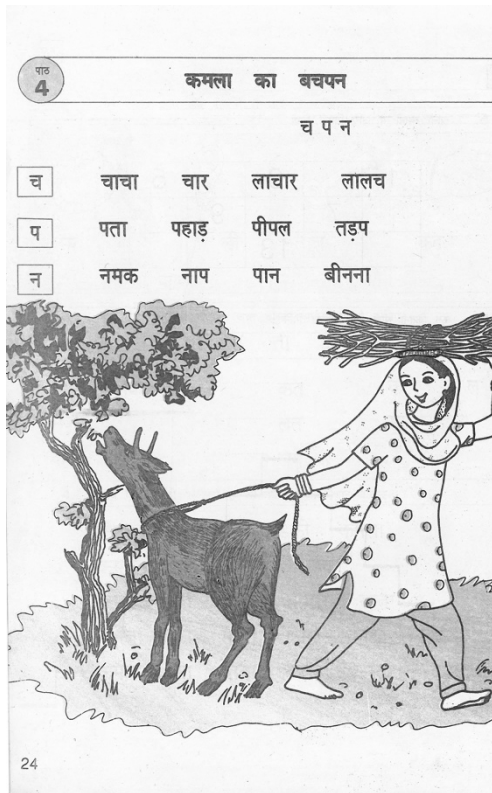
Fig 1. Lesson 4, *Khilti Kaliyan,* Book 1
"Kamala ka bachpan" (Kamala's Childhood)
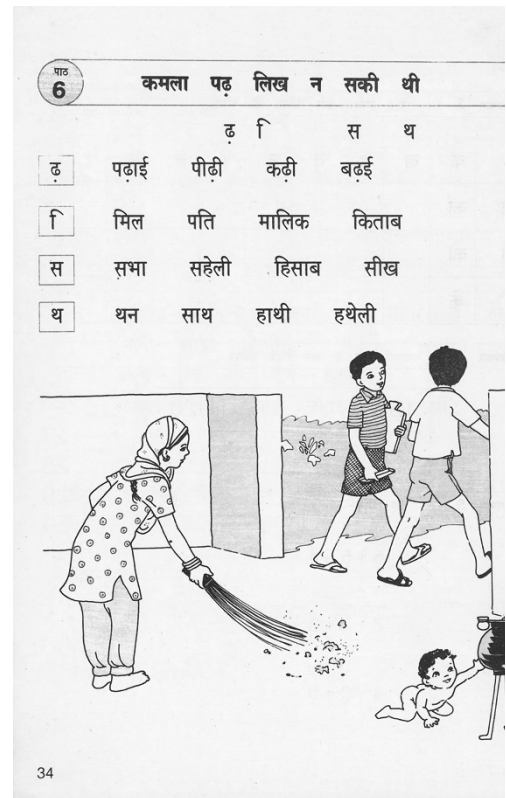
Fig 2. Lesson 6, *Khilti Kaliyan,* Book 1
"Kamala padh likh na saki thi" (Kamala could not study)
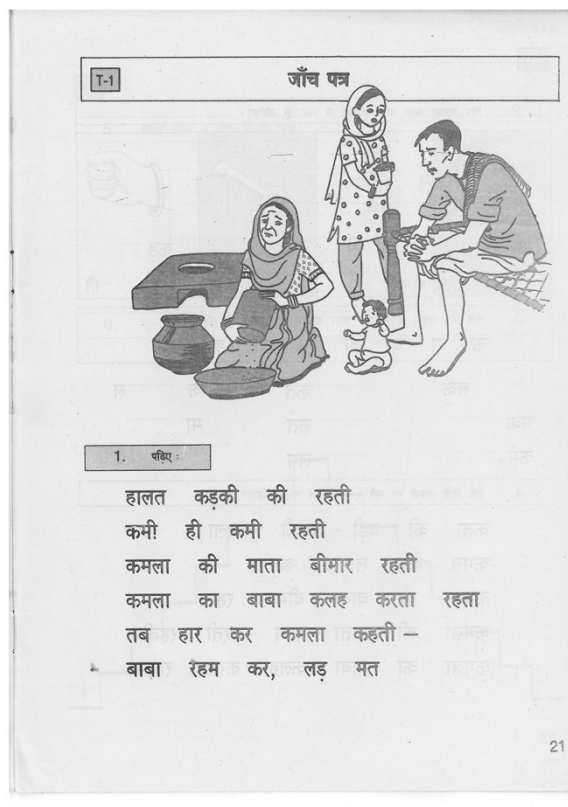
Fig 3. Lesson 3, *Khilti Kaliyan* Book 1
"Baba Ladta rehta" (Father keeps fighting)
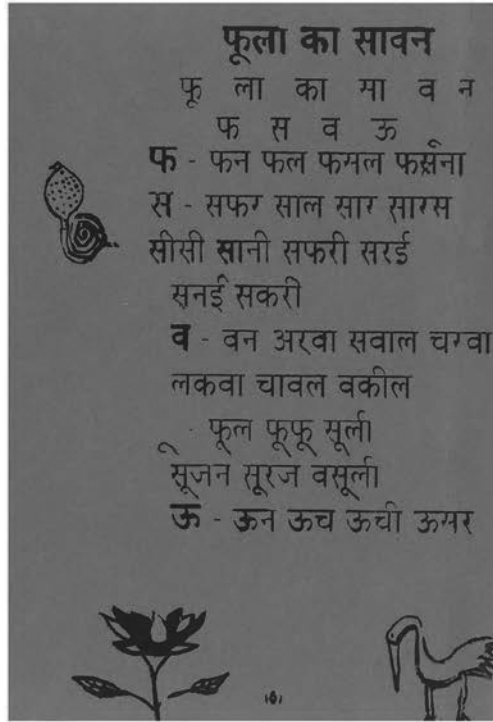
Fig 4. "Phoola ka Sawan", Phoola's Monsoon Season, from *Banda ki Batiyan*
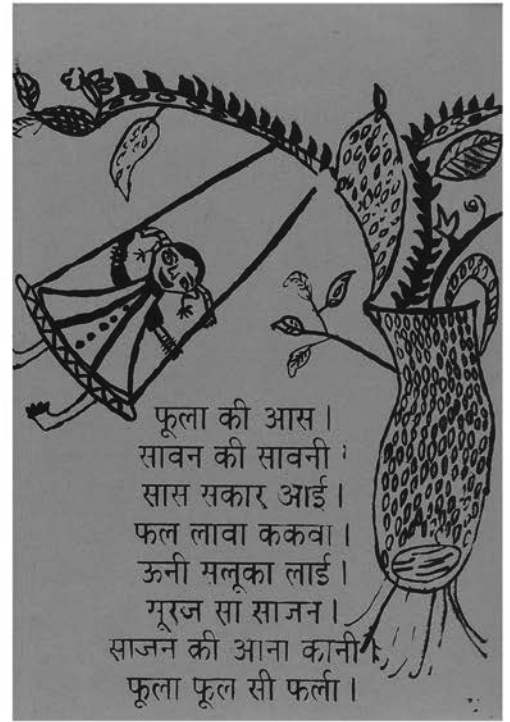
Fig 5. "Phoola ka Sawan" Facing page
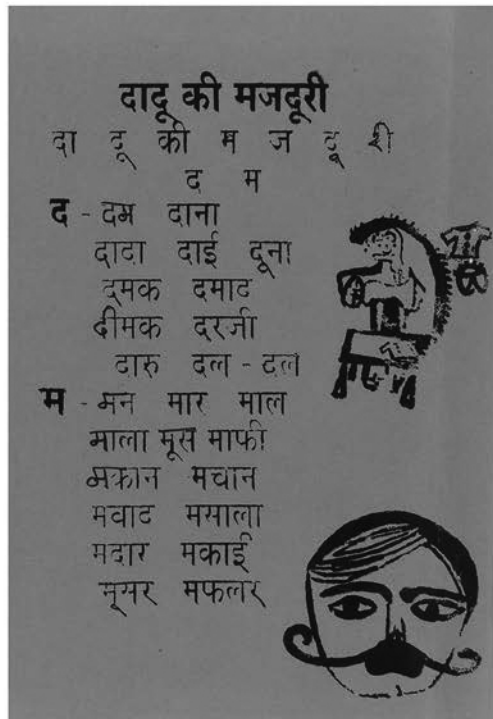
Fig 6. "Dadu ki Mazdoori", Labouring for the Landlord, from *Banda ki Batiyan*

Fig 7. "Dadu ki Mazdoori" facing page

Khilti Kaliyan and Banda ki Batiyan: A Study in Contrast

While there are several points that warrant comparison between the two primers I will restrict myself to engaging with the following questions: (1) How are rural women's lives and the 'local' depicted? (2) How are processes of gender transformation understood and sought to be activated (3) What is the rural woman's relationship to knowledge? (4) And how is an 'empowered' rural woman imagined?

In *Khilti Kaliyan* rural women's lives are presented as being steeped in problems and regressive traditions—of which women themselves emerge as both victims and perpetrators. In the lesson mentioned above, Kamala is denied an education during her childhood due to poverty and discriminatory gender norms that confine her to providing reproductive labour for the family. The messages that *Khilti Kaliyan* conveys—about the gendered nature of poverty, women's unpaid domestic work or denying girls an education—are important indicators of rural women's unequal status that must be repeatedly highlighted and addressed, but I would argue that when presented in the absence of any other images of rural women's realities these messages have the 'totalising' and enduring effect (not least because government-produced primers are mass circulated) of representing rural women only as backward or as victims. In *Khilti Kaliyan* all illiterate female and male characters uphold regressive social values and are resistant to change. And rural culture is synonymous with social evils, such as dowry, child marriage and superstition.[47]

In *Banda ki Batiyan,* lessons on poverty and oppression[48] are presented alongside accounts of friendship, humour and cultural life. The childhood story in *Banda ki Batiyan* is a humorous anecdote of a young girl who regularly steals milk from the kitchen every night and blames it on the cat, and how her mother tricks her and catches her out.[49] In

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[47] Kamala's father looks for a groom for 14-year old Kamala ('*Ab uski shaadi ki baat'* (It's time to talk about her marriage), *Khilti Kaliyan* 1, Lesson 8). He disregards all the reasons put to him about the pitfalls of early marriage including its illegality. Other chapters are about 'social evils' ('*Har kaheen dahej ki maang*' (Everywhere dowry is demanded), *Khilti Kaliyan* 1, Lesson 9).

[48] '*Tooti khaprail*' (Leaking roof), *Banda ki Batiyan,* Lesson 6.

[49] '*Kimariya dhara doodh*' (Milk hidden in a cupboard), *Banda ki Batiyan,* Lesson 7. *Kimariya* is Bundeli word for a small cupboard. The phrase and text is based on a true story shared by Sushila during a primer development workshop. When I interviewed her she narrated the story

another lesson, young girls are enjoying the cultural traditions of *sawan*—the monsoon season. Sawan in local and popular culture is associated with romance, songs and other cultural forms and this lesson breaks away from the usual development messaging that primers are replete with by alluding to these aspects.[50] Another lesson which describes sisters in-laws 'stealing' guavas together[51], also challenges stereotypes, as relationships between sisters-in-laws are regarded as being very fraught. Such lessons, that provide a more nuanced understanding of everyday lives and social relations, beyond some of the usual themes of poverty, development, discrimination etc. are not found in *Khilti Kaliyan* or in any of the literacy primers I reviewed.[52]

Another significant difference around the texts' construction of rural women pertains to the representation of rural women's work. In *Khilti Kaliyan* women work only in the domestic space, whereas in *Banda ki Batiyan* we see labouring women as protagonists. By making women's labour outside the home invisible, as in *Khilti Kaliyan*, not only is women's productive labour disregarded but in fact class and caste identities are erased as well, as labouring women in India typically belong to the so-called lower classes and castes. Moreover, this erasure represents an arguably middle-class imagination of who a rural woman should be, being projected by the state. While neither primer mentions caste explicitly, in *Banda ki Batiyan* this is revealed through the choice of key phrases and text. For example, a lesson portrays the oppressive relationship between the *Dadu* (local term for landlord) and women labourers.[53] Locally, Dadu can only mean an upper caste man and the woman is obviously a Dalit as only 'lower castes' use the term Dadu in this context (see visual below).

I turn now to analysing some of the differences in how an 'empowered woman' and processes of women's empowerment are presented. The first difference is with

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again, giggling all the while, 2 decades after the incident (Sushila, interview, Manikpur, December 12, 2015).

[50] *'Phoola ka sawan'* (Phoola's monsoon), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 4. Phoola is a common girls name in the area.

[51] *'Chal bhauji bihi todey'* (Come sister-in-law, let's collect guavas together), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 9. *Bihi* (guava) and *bhauji* (older brothers wife) are both local words.

[52] Initially, despite the orientation women chose similar keywords and a didactic style similar to that of *Khilti Kaliyan*, such was the hold of what is considered appropriate knowledge. These elements of humour etc. were brought in only after discussions in the workshops. See Ghose, "Literacy, Power and Feminism, 1618; and interview with Bhog, March 18, 2016.

[53] *'Dadu ki Mazdoori'* (Labouring for the landlord), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 5.

regard to the role of the reformer figure. In *Khilti Kaliyan*, Kamala's educated and 'enlightened' husband Ramesh is the reformer. Not only does he insist on a dowry-free marriage thereby saving Kamala's family from further penury, he subsequently also takes charge of Kamala's life. He protects her from his mother's constant nagging (the 'evil' mother in law) and her 'backward' beliefs and transforms Kamala from an illiterate meek 'victim' into a literate vocal 'empowered' woman.

Though Ramesh's character is cast to break the stereotype of a patriarchal male, ultimately it is patriarchal relations that are recast and reinforced.[54] A middle-class educated male is the agent of change; the illiterate female (her mother-in-law) is the obstacle to change; and Kamala is the subject of change. Kamala, a young woman in her reproductive years is to be moulded in her husband's vision, which is also the state's vision of what women's empowerment is.

Kamala's transformation is only possible because of her educated husband and the 'good' state that is endorsing such a vision. The other images of modern 'enlightened' women worthy of aspiration contained in *Khilti Kaliyan* are the nurse and the literacy teacher: both educated, middle-class women.[55] And Kamala, once literate and transformed, is expected to acquire some of the qualities they display: rationality, good behaviour and openness to adopting modern information and health care practices. Thus the process of knowledge flow is from educated males or educated females to illiterate women.

Banda ki Batiyan, in stark contrast, has no reformer figure or any middle-class educated characters at all. The images of 'change agents' are the rural women themselves when they question low wages[56] or try to address domestic violence,[57] or that of a handpump mechanic.[58]

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[54] The primers were written at a time when gender mainstreaming and developing gender-sensitive material was being undertaken within the school education sector as well. Critics have pointed to the limited nature of changes in school textbooks to address gender concerns, which apply to literacy primers as well. According to Bhog et al. the problem lies in the analytic frameworks used and therefore its implications for the remedies. Gender bias is typically defined in terms of non-representation of women and the promotion of stereotypes. Such frameworks present 'sex' as an isolated category operating within seemingly universalist norms (Bhog et al., *Textbook Regimes*, 6-9).

[55] '*Centre par daktari jaanch*' (Medical examination at the health centre), *Khilti Kaliyan* 2, Lesson 5; '*Kendra mein baat cheet*' (Discussions at the centre), *Khilti Kaliyan*, Book 3, Lesson 1.

[56] '*Dadu ki Mazdoori*' (Labouring for the landlord), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 4. A lesson in *Khilti Kaliyan* also deals with women's labour rights. In the text Kamala accompanies labouring women and confronts the contractor with information about the legal right of men and women

Another crucial point of difference pertains to how women's (dis)empowerment is analysed in the first place. Poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality are intertwined to explain Kamala's disempowerment as causes, symptom and outcome (see chapter 1).[59] Kamala's problems are caused by cultural rather than material or structural constraints. While illiteracy is the cause of the disease (leading to gender-discriminatory behaviour), an implicit message is that Kamala is 'diseased' and must be cured. The association of illiteracy with disease or its description as a scourge are common tropes in policy documents internationally and despite several critiques this powerful metaphor endures.[60]

Kamala by Book 3 represents this 'cured' woman. And Ramesh, a *pragatisheel* (progressive) young man is an idealised figure representing change, which he embodies in the primer by demonstrating that if the same opportunities are given to a *nari* (woman) as a *nar* (man), even she will move ahead.

By invoking culture as the analytic frame to understand gender discrimination, the underlying causes of gender inequality remain without a structural basis, and all the reader is presented with are its manifestations or symptoms. We are shown that Kamala's brother plays while Kamala is burdened with housework, but the gender division of labour, and its material basis remains unproblematised. Gender issues are thus presented as 'social evils', which are perpetuated by characters that are female, poor and illiterate and can be changed only through information and literacy. In the change that is advocated, the unequal systems and relationships remain intact.

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to equal wages. Kamala herself is not labouring, she tells the "contractor sahib" to agree to the women's demands or else they will be forced to go to his superior '*Shram ki samaan mazdoori*' (Struggle for equal wages for equal work), *Khilti Kaliyan* 3, Lesson 5).

[57] '*Ghar ka jhagda*' (A domestic fight), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 12; *Charchata dhong karen* (He puts up a pretence), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 13. *Charchata* is the local bundeli word for a duplicitous man.

[58] '*Mere haathon ki chudiya khanak gayi*' (My bangles jangled), *Banda ki Batiyan*, Lesson 11.

[59] This becomes evident not just from the content analysis of *Khilti Kaliyan* that I undertook but also from the introduction (Book 1) written by the Director General of the National Literacy Mission, where he writes that he is struck by (and laments) the starkly different childhoods of Kamala and her brother who are after all born to the same parents and have the same blood flowing through their veins. The only explanation he can find to solve this puzzle is *sanskriti* (culture). Gender inequality, he exhorts the reader, should be understood as a *rog* (disease) that must be tackled on a war footing. This diseased culture he insists can be altered and the disease (gender inequality) eradicated, by making women literate through a literacy curriculum that introduces modern information and mind-sets, such as *Khilti Kaliyan*.

[60] Alan Rogers and Brian V. Street, *Adult Literacy and Development: Stories from the Field* (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012).

This brings me to my final observation about how an empowered rural woman is presented in 'official' discourses. In *Khilti Kaliyan*, not only are the outcomes of social transformation presented as binaries—victim and empowered woman—but the progress from victimhood to empowerment is completely conflict-free. The absence of any analysis of power, whether in relationships or structures, results in simplistic resolutions of problems. In *Khilti Kaliyan* Book 3, Kamala emerges out of victimhood and from her depiction as a repository of regressive behaviour, to play a positive public role, challenging unequal gender relations. She does take on struggles but these are quickly resolved due to her new-found confidence and the power of information, which, when displayed, leads even the more powerful and villainous characters—such as the rich *seth* (business man) who threatens the women—to back down.[61] There are of course, no negative repercussions or backlash (like we saw in chapter 2).

In sharp contrast, in *Banda ki Batiyan* we see both conflict and messy resolutions (or none at all). One lesson, which describes a case of domestic violence resulting in the death of a woman,[62] is based on a real case where the MS activists intervened but were unable to secure justice. This opened up discussions on how patriarchal society only pays lip service to countering violence against women. In presenting the 'domestic' as a conflict-ridden rather than a completely harmonious space this lesson marks a key difference in the underlying politics of gender equality between the two primers.

Khilti Kaliyan, and by extension the state's policies, manage to depict empowerment as a conflict-free process in three ways: though the domestication of conflict, the removal of any structural understanding of gender and the projection of development as self-help, and finally by romanticising the role of knowledge. In the

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[61] Kamala tells women that they should start a small handicrafts business to contribute to family income ('*Udyog dhandhon ka gyan*' (Knowledge about business), *Khilti Kaliyan* 3, Lesson 2). Armed with information provided at the centre the women led by Kamala travel to city and secure a bank loan. When the seth (money lender) threatens the women they are not cowed down and prove their mettle, like when she raises the issue of women's right to equal wages as compared to men. She thwarts contractors who come to cut down a tree by hugging it – a throwback to an iconic strategy of a well-known environmental movement of the 1980s but used in a completely decontextualized manner ('*Vrikshon ki raksha* (Protecting trees), *Khilti Kaliyan* 3, Lesson 7).

[62] *Ghar ka jhagda* (Domestic battles), *Banda ki Batiyan,* Lesson 12. The incident took place during the primer development workshop and some participants left the workshop to deal with the case. See Ghose, "Literacy, Feminism and Power," 1618-1619.

social roles Kamala plays—as a daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law and eventually social worker—she is always quintessentially a good woman.

As Kamala moves from being circumscribed to the domestic sphere to playing an agentive public role, the conflicts and reprisals that such a transition would result in normally, as numerous testimonies by women have revealed (in the last chapter, for example), are reconciled by fusing the change agent role with the 'developmental' and the 'domestic'. Stepping out of the home entails no disruptions as it is for the good of the family and society. For instance, when Kamala wants to start a small business she confronts the seth who wants to stop her, and leaves her home and travels to the city, but her actions are legitimised in this narrative by her motivation: to augment family income. The women characters in *Banda ki Batiyan* on the other hand were already out of the home and working, they were labouring and not self-employed in a respectable business.

Even as Kamala is transformed from a victim into an 'empowered' woman, the nature of her transformation into a useful developmental subject allows her to be easily incorporated within the family, society and finally the nation. The good woman Kamala serves all three. While Kamala ticks all the boxes as an empowered woman the primers' 'real' intent becomes clear when read against the what is stated as the overall objective of achieving women's equality: "the sum and substance of writing on any topic should be that there should be no gender discrimination which puts women at a disadvantage in any field of development … [as] they are capable of contributing to nation building on an equal footing with men."[63] It becomes abundantly clear that it is not women's equal rights but 'nation building', that is prioritized, with the underlying assumption that women are somehow not yet contributing towards this project. A rural woman as a citizen in the making is a recurrent theme in adult literacy content. Kamala is always a citizen in the making

To conclude this section, I have chosen to compare two contrasting images of an empowered rural woman subject both produced in the early 1990s. As both primers use the terminology of empowerment, the contrast serves also to foreground what the feminist project of subjectification and empowerment through education looks like.

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[63] For checklist see: Government of India, *Handbook for Developing IPCL Material*, 6.

Kamala represents the 'official' imagination of an empowered woman and through her, the dominant understanding of gender equality and processes to achieve women's empowerment. *Khilti Kaliyan* meets all the criteria of gender equality proposed by the states IPCL guidelines and represents a face of the progressive developmental state. [64] In other words, the production of a good-woman-developmental subject (through the model of Kamala in this case) not only mirrors but also brings to life the good developmental state. Ramesh too represents the 'good' developmental state as he promotes the state's version of women's equality.

If we put together the different vignettes in *Banda ki Batiyan*, the imagination of the empowered female subject it projects is very different. The rural woman subject projected is grounded in the local, and this contextualises the meaning of gender and other social relations. She is a labouring woman embedded in social relations that are oppressive but is in a position to change them. She is a victim of domestic violence which she recognises is a violation of her bodily integrity, and objects to but isn't able to get justice. The new roles that women can play are depicted through the experiences of local illiterate Dalit women learning to repair handpumps. Here we see a different embrace of the modern—through technology—but it is not a conflict-free transition.

Content selection is critical for revealing what is deemed worth knowing and therefore what is omitted is equally telling. *Banda ki Batiyan* is not about development messaging and communicating 'ideal' female values. Unlike in *Khilti Kaliyan* the women represented in *Banda ki Batiyan* are creators of information and not passive recipients. The handpump mechanics—the Dalit women role models—and the readers of the primer are one and the same.

And lastly we see contrasting visions of who a rural subject-citizen is. On the one hand we have the good woman/Kamala, and on the other we have rural women who are cognizant and critical of social structures of power and able to connect information and knowledge about it in everyday life. We shall see in subsequent chapters how this travels from the pages of primers and curriculum into real-life contexts.

My intention is not to project *Banda ki Batiyan* as a 'perfect' primer, but to foreground that it reflects a completely different imagination of a rural woman subject that was produced through an interaction between feminists and rural women learners.

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[64] Government of India, *Handbook for Developing IPCL Material*, 6.

Involving subaltern women learners to create a literacy primer was more than symbolically important, as it not only resulted in a very different product but also took the exercise beyond involving women in limited ways to flesh out predetermined topics or replacing topics of 'national' importance with 'local' ones, as the IPCL had suggested. It was also different from earlier examples of women producing small texts during camps. As this was a primer it was producing knowledge that women deemed worth knowing and disseminating and which therefore embodied a different sense of power. The women I interviewed—those who had produced and learnt from it—remembered the content of the primer well, even those who may have forgotten how to read and write. As one woman told me, "It was the first time we saw ourselves in a book." [65]

IV. A REVOLT AND ANOTHER BREAKTHROUGH: 'NAYI BATEIN' AND THE MESSINESS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

By the early 1990s many of the rural women and girls who had attended MS's literacy camps and centres and were now playing leadership roles in their communities, expressed an interest in making longer-term investments in their education—beyond the time they were giving to learn at camps and centres.

To respond to this emerging need, the MSK was set up in Chitrakoot in 1994.[66] The MSK was a flexible need-based provision within the MS scheme and in Chitrakoot it was envisioned as an 8-month residential education programme for Dalit and Kol women and adolescent girls. Nirantar continued its close collaboration with MS between 1994 and 1997 to develop the curriculum, training and implementation strategy for the MSK.[67]

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[65] Sushila, interview, December 12, 2015.

[66] Mahila Samakhya, Government of India (Tenth Plan Document, n.d.), 10. According to the MS policy document, "Mahila Shikshan Kendras have been designed to create a pool of aware, educated and trained women who could play an effective role in development of educational activities at the village level. The Kendras should provide condensed, quality and gender sensitive education to adolescent girls who have never gone to school, school drop outs and adult women." The state-level MS teams were encouraged to design their own programmes to meet emerging educational needs of women and adolescent girls.

[67] This section draws on (i) articles I have previously written: Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy", Ghose, "Literacy, Power and Feminism", Ghose and Mullick, "Empowerment in Educational Processes: Feminist (Re) appropriations," 147-163, Bhog and Ghose, "Mapping the Multiple Worlds of Women's Literacy" (ii) other available documentation such as reports and learning material (iii) interviews with key informants such as with former

The team—comprising Nirantar members (including myself) and MS teachers and staff—sought to extend the literacy camp and the collaborative content development approaches described previously. However, designing the MSK curriculum threw up fresh challenges for us.[68]

Firstly, curriculum and material for a long duration adult learning programme appropriate for rural women was unavailable. On offer were basic literacy primers and post-literacy reading materials of the kind described in the previous section. Or else there were ad-hoc continuing education courses[69] and vocational training programmes. As Saxena points out, [70] the differences between school and adult education curricula are related to the social hierarchy of education, where mass education such as adult literacy is accorded a low status in socio-economic terms. Given the lack of policy commitment the adult education curriculum is publicly invisible and does not attract critical scrutiny by educationists. Vocational training was often included as a component of adult literacy programmes but as most such programmes taught domestic skills—handicrafts, pickle and jam making—that reinforced gender stereotypes regarding women's work and hardly

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MSK teachers: Meena, Anasuya, Meenakshi, Pushpa interview (September 9, 2015), Naina (Government school teacher, former MSK teacher), October 12, 2014, Sampat (Shikshamitra, former MSK teacher), Mau, April 26, 2015 (iv) and Nirantar curriculum development team members: Bhog, N. Sarojini and Mishra (see interview list). As I had been involved with this initiative I draw on my own experiences as well.

[68] To get women to leave home for 8 months had been an uphill task for MS. Kuckreja, who was the district coordinator at the time, was convinced that the literacy skills women learnt through camps and centres were too rudimentary to enable them to bring about long-lasting social and economic changes in their individual and community's status and put her weight behind the MSK (Kuckreja, interview April 17, 2017; Bhog, interview, March 22, 2016).

[69] By the mid 1990s there was a growing acknowledgement in policy and practitioner circles that the Government's post-literacy and continuing education programmes were not working, for several reasons including: the lack of a vision and curriculum to build on literacy and connect it to women's lives, paucity of reading material and libraries, poor training of volunteers and the lack of an institutionalized structure to support adult continuing education and the lack of political commitment to follow-through on the campaigns successes (see Patel, "Literacy as Freedom"). While the literacy campaigns of the 1990s have been fairly extensively written about, this was not the case with the post-literacy phase. There were a few innovative experiments that addressed the women, who had been the main participants of the campaigns such as in Pudukkotai district (Tamil Nadu) where the district administration trained stone quarry workers and introduced cycling for women learners as part of the continuing education programme. See Nitya Rao, "Cycling into the Future: A Report on Women's Participation in a Literacy Campaign in Tamil Nadu, India, *Gender, Technology and Development* 3, no. 3 (1999), 457–474; Venkatesh Athreya and Sheela Rani Chunkath, *Literacy and Empowerment (New Delhi:* Sage, 1996).

[70] Saxena, "Looking at Literacy."

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ever result in significant income enhancement (see introduction). These examples could hardly be drawn on as a source of curriculum material.[71]

Turning to school textbooks was ostensibly an option but one that the feminist educators regarded as problematic. Teaching the school curriculum was suitable for out-of-school adolescent girls wanting to re-enter the system, but was out of place for adult rural women for whom the disciplinary boundaries of formal education curricula and its relevance were at odds with their life circumstances. Further, the formal school curriculum was often critiqued for being irrelevant to the needs of rural children and a probable cause of the low retention rate among rural students.[72] While we reviewed examples of alternative curricula that addressed some of these drawbacks, these were all clearly intended for children.[73]

Thus, as in the case of primer development, the MSK curriculum development team decided to develop their own curriculum and explore new engagements with knowledge production beyond what had been possible at the camps and centres. We experimented with and built on the body of work that I have traced so far: we drew on participants' life experiences, interrogated the time-honoured power-laden relationship between teacher and learner, rejected conventionally-held hierarchies of knowledge, built skills of critical analysis that would enable women to question and possibly change the unequal power relationships they encountered in private and public spheres of their lives. Making women confident and developing a positive sense of self, remained an overarching goal[74] while learning to read and write was woven into the content.[75]

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[71] The provision for the MSK in the policy document was based on a short-term condensed course scheme for adult women that the Central Social Welfare Board had run for vulnerable women. This course focused on literacy and vocational skills, and had not been very effective. The MSK thus did not insist on a vocational component, though some state programmes did offer them (Ramachandran, interview). The Government-run Jan Shikshan Sansthan vocational training scheme, implemented through NGOs has been operational since 1967. Courses for women have typically reinforced gender stereotypical skills such as beautician training, tailoring etc. It was an important component of the Governments adult education programme. For the limits of women's income generation programmes within adult literacy, see Dighe, "Women and Literacy Developments in India," 53.

[72] Krishna Kumar, *Social Character of Learning* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989); Krishna Kumar, *What is Worth Teaching?* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992).

[73] For example, *Samajik Adhayan* (Series of Social Science textbooks for middle schools) and *Khushi Khushi* (Series of textbooks for primary schools) produced by Madhya Pradesh based NGO, Eklavya.

[74] Ghose and Mullick, "Empowerment in Educational Processes: Feminist (Re) appropriations," 50-155.

By now the above sounded like well-rehearsed principles of feminist knowledge production for rural women, however a week into the first MSK course we were greeted with an unexpected response from the MSK participants.

When Learners Had Other Ideas

> We [feminist educators] were stunned… were forced to shift gear, teaching became more information-oriented. Learners had an insatiable desire for information. We were doing a session on the movements of the earth – rotation, revolution, and the seasons, and before the session even ended we were questioned: "we want to know about the rain and how the monsoon reaches us. Why are you keeping this *hidden* from us?"[76]

This 'strike' that I began this chapter with, organised by learners very early on in the MSK course was bewildering for the feminist educators from Nirantar.[77] Learners did not come to class for a day! At the very least it contradicted women's earlier enthusiasm for writing their life worlds into literacy material. The learners' response to the painstakingly developed alternative curriculum for the MSK brought home to us the complicated relationship poor rural Dalit and Adivasi women have with mainstream knowledge and education and compelled us to revisit our assumptions.

On the one hand, women learners believed the mainstream education system had failed them in multiple ways: because the curriculum did not address their children's educational needs and the formal school-teaching methodology did not help them learn, and not least because it reinforced discriminatory practices.[78] Those who had participated in the literacy interventions so far knew how forceful the experience of bringing their subaltern identities and life worlds had been. On the other hand, the resistance from learners made evident that the education the women who enrolled at the MSK desired continued to be determined by what was taught in school, despite all its limitations.

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[75] For a detailed documentation of the curriculum content and development process see Nirantar, "Windows to the World."

[76] This incident took place in 1995, during the first MSK course. Quoted in Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy", 306.

[77] See Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 306-310.

[78] That the mainstream education system was failing Dalit children was repeatedly brought up during my interviews and during a workshop I attended with Dalit Mahila Samiti leaders (Karvi, March 22-23, 2015).

As I have written about the 'strike' elsewhere,[79] I was initially not looking to revisit it during my field research for this thesis. But I was compelled to do so when Besaniya, one of my informants, brought it up unprompted during my first interview with her. I had asked Besaniya, now in her 60s and an Anganwadi Sahayika[80] to recall her experiences of the MSK, and here's what she told me:

> "I don't remember too much, as it was a long time ago. People used to say *budhai – dai* (old lady) is going to study. I replied, *mujhe ruchi hai?* (I have an interest). There was a difference between school and the MSK. What we studied there [MSK] was *jankari* (information), *accha bura ka gyan* (the knowledge of right from wrong)[81], how we should talk. Didis (teachers) would teach [reading, writing and numbers] one session and give *jankari* in the next.[82] But we had to fight for this [inclusion of 'proper' learning]. I called a meeting [with the other women]. We wrote a letter to Arati Didi. We had not come for this [what was being taught]. Everyone signed. We put it in the *dibba* (box)[83]. For two days we stopped the *padhai* (studies). Arati didi came. We said, '*Padhne likhne aye hain. We know kisani.*' (We have come to learn to read and write. We know about agriculture.) Arati didi explained that along with *padhai likhai* (learning to read and write) this also is important. Try it! We finally agreed and started going to class.[84]

Besaniya's vivid recollections of the strike and what it continued to symbolise, stunned me as a researcher, as much as it had shaken me as a practitioner in 1995. What was equally confounding were the series of noticeable turnarounds in the learners' expectations and notions of knowledge that they described as worth learning.

The Promises of a Learning Space for Rural Dalit Women

As I have written earlier, and what interactions with MSK graduates reconfirmed, was that as a long-term, structured educational activity, the MSK had generated a set of

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[79] See references in footnote 68.

[80] Anganwadi is the commonly used term for Government-run pre-school centres as part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme. *Sahayika* is the post of the helper at the centre. Further discussed in chapter 4.

[81] Later in the interview Besaniya explained '*accha bura ka gyan*' or knowing right from wrong to mean fighting for social justice. This included standing up for herself and other Dalit women.

[82] By 'teach' she meant the session on Language and Math classes and by 'jankari' the rest of the curricular content.

[83] One of the pedagogic practices was that learners could drop notes into a 'letter box' about anything they chose to write about. These were read out during the morning assembly. Arati Srivastava was the MS District Person in charge of the MSK and closely involved in developing the curriculum, writing the material and in teacher training.

[84] Besaniya (Former sakhi, Anganwadi helper), interviewed by author, Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, October 15, 2015. (name changed)

expectations and power dynamics that were unlike the literacy camps and the primer development workshops. The women had fought against and broken several social norms, often at tremendous personal cost, [85] to leave home and came to the MSK (for an 8-month period, no less) with expectations of gaining mainstream knowledge. This was something they had not fully realised or at least articulated till they started classes. [86] However, having decided to make significant investments of their time and resources (in terms of wage labour lost) towards educating themselves, women knew intuitively that they wanted an education that took them beyond merely being literate, which is as far as they got to after learning at the camps and centres. Such a visible and fraught investment towards furthering their own learning had also put the women under constant scrutiny by family and community, as many of my informants reported.

While unable to articulate their expectations in terms of the specificities of educational content, women knew that what they sought had to be what the 'powerful' had access to: *padhai likhai*. [87] This was fluency in reading, writing and numeracy, and bookish knowledge—not knowledge about subjects like agriculture, which was what their lives were restricted to and accounted for their 'low status'. Agricultural work was manual and knowledge emanating from such experiences only took them back to their 'low status' position. [88]

Padhai likhai was what the powerful upper castes had and they, Dalit women, had been denied, and having access to knowledge that defined an 'educated' person, would be there for everyone to see. For Dalit and Kol women, this was an opportunity to redress a denial that was both personally experienced and of historical and collective significance.

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[85] The experiences of ex-MSK graduates and their struggles to come to the MSK are discussed in later chapters.

[86] Besaniya, like other former learners whom I interviewed, says later in her interview that she had no previous benchmark of participating in a long-term educational programme. What they knew was school education.

[87] In the mid 1990s women were operating within an overall environment where Dalits (see chapter 2) were embracing formal education as an important part of the upsurge in 'lower caste' political mobilisation and a way of rewriting their stigmatized lives, past and present. Dalits had strong critiques of the education system but less to say about the curriculum, as mentioned in the introduction (see Ciotti, "In The Past We Were A Bit 'Chamar'"). Critiques of knowledge have however been made by scholars and activists (Paik, "Dalit Women's Education").

[88] A former bonded labourer and now a BSP activist, told me that the upper castes actively encouraged Dalits and their children to stick to *kheti* (agriculture) or other manual work by falsely elevating these occupations and knowledge about these occupations, so that Dalits would themselves stay away from mainstream education (Ram Avatar (Local leader), interviewed by author, Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, December 11, 2015).

Women gained clarity of purpose once they actually started 'classes', and they expressed themselves by striking and putting a halt to the education that was being offered to them.

The predicaments of this complex situation are also revealed to us in the use of the word 'hidden', in the quote above. 'Hidden curriculum' is a phrase that has been used to critique the covert practices within educational systems that transmit dominant ideologies of the privileged classes, castes and gender.[89] These usually refer to values, attitudes, behaviours that are not overtly part of the official curriculum, but work to establish dominant ideologies and knowledge. However, in this instance MSK participants used it in the opposite sense: it was an overt plea to access dominant knowledge and its hidden forms. And the accusation of keeping knowledge hidden was against the very people who wanted to spare them from the hegemony of dominant educational system, which had not served them well.

Therefore, it was not just mainstream knowledge that the women were intent upon accessing; they also sought a sense of inclusion in the established practices and relationships of the formal school. These 'schooled' practices included the relationship between teacher and learner, where teachers have authority and expertise to determine the pace and content of learning and disciplinary regimes (see chapter 5).[90] These notions impacted the MSK ethos in interesting and paradoxical ways— routines like sitting in straight lines and prayers at morning assembly were introduced by participants, not the MSK organisers. Women, never previously having paid attention to their children's textbooks, went to the extent of scrutinising these to make sure that they were not being denied mainstream knowledge,[91] even as they complained that their children learnt nothing at school.

The story however did not end here.

Knowledge from a Different Standpoint

The disruption led us feminist educators to substantially revise plans and address what had seemingly become a standoff between school knowledge and alternative knowledge. Following the 'students' strike' and several discussions on 'power' later, members of the

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[89] The term 'hidden curriculum' has been used by radical educators such as Paulo Freire, John Holt, Ivan Illich, Henry Giroux, bell hooks and Johnathan Kozol.

[90] Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 308-309

[91] Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 307.

curriculum development team decided that the way ahead lay in enabling MSK participants to know and negotiate different knowledge repertoires, from the women's own standpoints.

The curriculum that resulted—I am calling it *Nayi Batein* (literally 'new talk' or 'new things')—was an eclectic but cohesive mix of a range of content and pedagogies produced through a negotiated and co-created process. Nayi batein was not the formal name given to the curriculum that was written;[92] it was a phrase was contained in the refrain of a song that the learners wrote in 1995[93] and was repeatedly referred to during my research, between 2014 and 2017.

I am using nayi batein to refer to a new kind of knowledge production—content and process—that emerged in the context of the encounters between activists and rural women as they reworked the MSK curriculum. Nayi batein was knowledge that came to include the content and pedagogies that neither the feminist educators nor the women had necessarily intended. I also interpret what meaning nayi batein continued to hold for women after they left the MSK and how they may have used it in (re)shaping Dalit women's positions as social subjects. [94]

Following the strike, the learning process that was adopted was far more structured. Clear learning goals—skills of reading and writing—resembling the literacy as skills approach, which Nirantar members had earlier avoided (Part 1 of this chapter) became an integral part of the curriculum.[95] However, we also developed an interdisciplinary framework around five thematic modules—of land, water, forest, health

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[92] In the end no curriculum or instructional material was formally written. A handwritten book of lessons (titled '*Jankari*' i.e. 'knowledge'), photocopied and cloth-bound, came closest to what can be called a textbook. The feminist educators had resisted producing anything that resembled a textbook. However, the women had insisted that they needed something to take back home. Teachers I interviewed recounted stories of how women had used the book to literally 'show off' their new knowledge (Meena, interview; Pushpa, February 6, 2017).

[93] Nirantar, "Windows to the World," 76.

[94] Interviews with one of the songwriters, Kanika (name changed), (Khabar Lahariya journalist, MSK student, Banda), March 23, 2014 and other MSK graduates: Surajkali (Vanangana staff member, MSK graduate), Karvi, October 17, 2015; Vimala (name changed), (ASHA worker, MSK graduate), Nanha ka Dera, February 2, 2015; Urmila (Vanangana staffer, MSK graduate), Karvi, October 2, 2015.

[95] Besides Language and Numeracy competencies the curriculum had a module called 'Analytical & Communication skills', which dealt with skills such as critical reflection (Nirantar, *Windows to the World*, i-v).

and society[96]—all issues that women's lives were embedded in. What the feminist educators insisted on was that the exploration of each topic would begin from women's experiences and contexts and then incorporate new 'mainstream' information.[97] As we, the feminist educators, were not trained educational professionals, we drew on our previous experiences—as literacy facilitators and gender trainers, our liberal education background and our theoretical and practical understanding of feminist politics—to design the curriculum. This was somewhat a different process to the trainings (chapter 2) where the emphasis was on building on information shared by trainees an approach that had to be reshaped due to the challenges discussed above.

Former MSK teachers and Nirantar members who had been part of this endeavour, remembered the curriculum development process as a relay race, where batons—in this case newly-developed educational material—literally changed hands. In Delhi, Nirantar members would create simply written material, which meant thinking afresh about mainstream knowledge they were familiar with but had not taught to rural women. They then travelled from Delhi to Chitrakoot armed with material, which we first taught the teachers. The teachers were women from the local community with basic educational qualifications. Much like the learners they too were unfamiliar with mainstream content and the new methods introduced. [98] The lessons were then re-

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[96] Several years later the 'water' thematic of the MSK curriculum was used in a policy document as a 'good' example of how to plan a curriculum that builds on lifeworlds of learners. See National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), *National Curriculum Framework 2005* (New Delhi, NCERT, 2012), 52.

[97] For the outlines of the thematic modules see, Nirantar, *Windows to the World*. The theme on land for instance had lessons ranging from plate tectonics, volcanoes and earthquakes—standard fare in any school geography textbook—to land distribution and women's land and labour rights. To ensure flexibility, teachers were trained to develop different flow-charts where units and topics from the different modules were introduced depending on how the classes were progressing. Teachers I interviewed recalled this process as being both exciting—as it gave them control over curricular content—and initially challenging (Meena, interview; Naina, interview).

[98] A significant aspect of the MSK, which I have not discussed here, pertained to the 'teacher' figure. In the case of the MSK, the social distinctions between the learners and teachers were minimal, whereas in the formal education system teachers were mostly from higher class and caste backgrounds to the learners. With regard to the formal system, advocacy efforts focused on reducing the social distance – in appointments, classroom practices etc. – between students and teachers. Ironically MSK experience sharpened this distinction at times. This was also fuelled by the MSK learners' expectations of receiving a 'school-like' education. For observations on the tensions over the teacher's position in classroom interactions see Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 308-309. Former MSK teachers I interviewed

worked based on this interaction and again after classroom observations. All my informants, whether teachers or Nirantar members, reported that they waited in fear and anticipation to see how women received the lessons they had developed, a feeling that I remember well.

Nayi Batein: A Lyrical Curriculum

<div style="text-align:center">

Sister, sister, learn new knowledge

Behena, behena, behena, Anpadh nahin rehna
Behena, behena, behena, nayi batein jaan lena

Sister, sister, sister, do not remain unlettered
Sister, sister, sister, learn new knowledge
(Chorus)

We used to know that the sun moves,
Now we know that the sun does not move.
The earth moves around the sun.
That's how we have seasons.
Winter, summer, monsoons, is because the earth moves
If the earth didn't move, how would we have day and night?

The earth has a stomach
In which *lava* bubbles [the *English* words were used in the original song]
When we have an earthquake
Seismograph informs us

[Extract from the song]

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At first this song appears to reflect women's fascination with snippets of new 'scientific' information and a simple rejection or replacement of indigenous beliefs with official knowledge—a turnaround in orientation as a result of the student strike in the direction the women wanted. However, I believe that something far more complex was taking

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vividly recalled how they stayed up all night studying the material and fearfully entered the classroom the next morning. They said they became confident after the 3rd MSK course. Many of the former MSK teachers now lead their own NGOs or work with the formal education system. Interviews with former MSK teachers: Meena, Pushpa, Anasuya and Naina (see interview list for details).

place which, to understand we need to go back to accounts of the classroom interactions and eventually to women's present perceptions regarding nayi batein.

According to teacher's accounts and reports, the lesson on earthquakes for instance began with participants explaining that earthquakes occurred when an angry snake god on whose head the earth rested shook its head.[99] Teachers (many of whom had only recently believed the same) took such views on board and went on demonstrate the 'scientific' explanation by explaining the earth's geomorphology through a model-making exercise.[100] Model-making is a standard part of school pedagogy and may appear 'childish', but adult women eagerly participated in and also accepted it as providing proof and for being logical. It led to them internalising the 'new' explanation being offered and they also retained the memory of this pedagogic experience.

However, during other classroom interactions the process of renegotiating schooled knowledge with existing world-views had not been as smooth. For instance, the class on establishing characteristics of living and non-living objects—again a standard topic in the elementary school curriculum—ran into trouble when teachers asked women to classify rivers either as living or non-living. The exercise placed the feminist educators (I was observing the lesson that day) and learners on opposite sides of a heated debate. I argued that rivers were non-living and despite providing all kinds of 'proof' and 'logic', learners did not agree to the proposition that rivers were non-living. Rivers to them were *devis* (goddesses), a matter of deep belief. Similar types of 'logical' explanations that had been successfully employed in explaining earthquakes—such as charts and models—did not make a dent in this case. Ultimately learners chose to hold on to both belief systems. They were comfortable with the explanation that rivers, like the Ganga, were formed by the melting snows of the Himalayas but maintained that after all the Himalaya was also 'Devi' Ganga's heavenly abode. What they were uncomfortable about was the classification system.[101]

The point that I would like to emphasise through these two examples is that the pedagogic 'encounters' through which the knowledge had been introduced and discussed at the MSK were critical to the 'insertion' of new knowledge into women's funds of knowledge and their subsequent retention. The complex routes through which

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[99] Meena, interview and Nirantar, *Windows to the World*, 143.
[100] Nirantar, *Windows to the World*, 84-87.
[101] Ghose, "Women and Empowerment through Literacy," 310-313.

knowledge had been negotiated during the learning process had a bearing on how it was incorporated within women's repertoires of what counted and was retained as valuable knowledge.[102]

Thus the phrase 'nayi batein' represented for me more than the 'what' (the content taught), it included the 'how' (pedagogy) through which it was taught and the process of negotiation between different knowledge system and ultimately its incorporation—not always in the way the educators intended, as in the 'river as living or non-living' example.

A Question of 'Appropriate' and 'Relevant' Knowledge: The Things that Stayed

Seeking to understand the meaning that literacy and education acquired through this educational process—the MSK and the interventions before it—and how it may have shaped who they became, I asked several MSK graduates questions regarding their recall of the curriculum and how they had used it (or not) since they had 'graduated'. I corroborated my findings with the results of a tracer study of MSK graduates conducted by Nirantar in 2009.[103] The tracer study to recap, sought to assess the impact of the MSK experience through a survey of 50 respondents—women and girls who had attended the MSK between 1994 and 2000 (further discussed in chapter 4).

From the data I reviewed, three 'types' of knowledge struck me as constituting the abiding core of nayi batein*: jankari* (information)*, mudda* (social issues) and *kahani* (story).

'Jankari'—the first category of knowledge (which Besaniya also mentioned) comprised a wide range of topics that finds a place in the formal school curriculum and can broadly be classified as 'modern', 'rational' or 'scientific' knowledge. Knowledge related to geography, biology,[104] history[105] and even information on administrative structures or laws and schemes[106] were also examples from this knowledge category.

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[102] This process of incorporation through 'encounters' between local and mainstream knowledge was important for all the different actors concerned. Such challenges as described in the living and non-living example were critical to the learning processes of the feminist educators and changing their perspectives as well (Bhog, interview, March 18, 2016).

[103] The tracer study had also asked questions about content recall and found that 17. 7% recalled Health topics, followed by Geography (14.5%), History (11.3%) and Legal information (8.1 %). See Joshi and Ghose, *Literacy and Women's Empowerment: A Tracer Study*, 130.

[104] While feminist health training at the time focussed on reproductive health the MSK curriculum included information typically found in biology textbooks. Former MSK learners still

The second content area comprised topics related to 'mudda' or 'issues'—in this context specifically 'social issues'—that had been integrated into each thematic (Besaniya refers to this as knowledge of right and wrong). My informants provided several examples, specifically those that pertained to gender and caste issues, such as discrimination in implementing gender-related laws like rape and dowry, though the specifics of the law weren't remembered. Some interviewees connected this to developing an understanding of *itihas* (history), not just dates and events, and its importance in distinguishing between 'fact' and 'myth',[107] which they found particularly important in demystifying the 'caste system': as a historical 'fact' from the 'myth' that branded them as god-ordained Dalits.[108]

A third type of content recalled, pertained to what informants called 'kahani' or stories (in some cases this was referred to as '*khabraein*' or news). Examples mentioned from this category included anecdotes and case studies that discussed gender issues, contemporary debates from newspapers or magazines.[109] Particularly appealing were stories about worlds beyond their own. This was 'general knowledge'—GK is a popular subject in schools—with a twist as it often led to discussions on social issues and therefore made real connections to learners' lives. This genre represented a continuation of the literacy camps approach, where participants were encouraged to read and write about topics beyond their immediate realities.

The most popularly recalled topics, such as those mentioned above, were always described to me in terms of the pedagogic method that had been used to explain it during the MSK. For instance, earthquakes, planetary rotation and orbits were recalled through the 'models' they had made; social issues were remembered through stories, role-

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remembered that the human skeleton had 206 bones. For details of the health thematic see Nirantar, *Windows to the World*, 55-57.

[105] For example Gandhi's salt satyagraha or Mughal architecture.

[106] Gender based laws (related to rape and dowry) and the procedure for lodging an FIR.

[107] 'Distinguishing history from myth' was a unit in the Society module (see Nirantar, *Windows to the World*, 46-48, '*Jankari*' (MSK study material, unpublished), undated, 177-180.

[108] The contingent nature of the distinction between 'myth' and 'fact' – on which the rational liberal education of the educators was based was revealed through these examples. While my informants had stated that they had learnt to counter 'myths' about caste with historical 'facts' (as in the example of the origins of the caste system, or about earthquakes), in the 'river' example, a belief in myth was upheld but placed alongside 'fact'.

[109] Such as, whether the Taj Mahal should be protected from damage by shutting down small industries (ref). Many of these items were from *Pitara*, a magazine for newly literate readers brought out by Nirantar from 1994 to 2001

plays, illustrations, group work and debates. Also included as part of content, were examples of pedagogy where learners had been asked to discuss, speak and debate.

This takes me back to the point of incorporation of knowledge, beyond the classroom and into real life, so to speak. In other words, the responses to these 'recall questions' revealed what women have valued and retained as appropriate and relevant knowledge for over two decades—information and narratives that, I would argue, have been important in shaping their subjectivities.[110]

For former MSK students, the first category—jankari (information)—served as markers of their own 'authenticity': as 'educated' persons who had acquired 'formal' knowledge despite studying at a non-formal education programme. It allowed them to join the ranks of those with formal educational qualifications. Women were often 'tested' to prove this. Many informants recalled that for several years after they had completed the course, educated men from their families and their villages would taunt them about having become '*masternis*' (from 'master' i.e. 'teacher') and even challenge them to prove that had knowledge! And women would often trot out bits of information to silence them. One former MSK student said that on one occasion she specifically used the term 'seismograph' (used in the song) to silence a detractor.

Some of the younger women who had joined mainstream schools after the MSK had been mocked for being older than their peers or because they may not have been as fluent in solving math problems in class. On such occasions they would strike back with jankari (such as about volcanoes) or just being confident and speaking or performing. Many recalled being called upon by their teachers to demonstrate lessons to the class through charts and models. Their new peers who had never had the opportunity of learning in this manner were impressed. As they could 'speak' they would lead all the school functions (see chapter 4 and 5).

However, while 'knowing' such jankari afforded them entry into the 'educated' category, the other two knowledge types did the opposite: set them apart. Knowledge on 'mudda' (social issues) enhanced their self-perceptions (and indeed public image) as socially aware women, something essential to developing their public personas as leaders,

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[110] Interviewees often responded to my questions through descriptions or with further narratives that did not necessarily reflect a fully developed understanding of the topic they were signalling nor was the information they provided always 'correct'.

whether they were leading organisations, trying to make a change within their families or jobs, or simply taking difficult and atypical life decisions (chapter 4 and 5).

The third category—kahaniya and khabrein (stories and news) that was categorised by 'non-essential' nuggets of information, projected them as 'women of the world'. It differentiated them from other 'educated' women in their milieu such as local social workers, female government employees and even teachers. It was often entertaining, 'superfluous' information they could show-off and that no one locally could really challenge.

Nearly two decades after they had graduated, former MSK learners effectively employed nayi batein as a body of knowledge that was neither a clear-cut endorsement of mainstream learning (as the student strike seemed to suggest at first), nor just knowledge of social and gender issues (as possibly would be represented by a feminist activist curriculum) or a simple validation of women's indigenous knowledge. Rather it was an amalgamation of different knowledge domains produced through a negotiated process—one could say a fourth form of knowledge—that had been critical in shaping their subjectivities as rural Dalit women—which we shall explore in further detail in the next couple of chapters.

Concluding Observations

Chapter Three traces the dynamic pedagogic journey undertaken during a collaborative venture—between feminist educators, the subjects of these programmes (rural Dalit women learners) and the local implementers (teachers)—within the ambit of a quasi-state-led women's empowerment programme.

The chapter pivots around a moment of fracture, reckoning and (re)connection: a 'strike' staged by rural Dalit women students of the MSK that revealed the complicated power relationships within which this particular project of knowledge production was embedded. The learners felt that they were being denied 'powerful' knowledge that would facilitate their entry into the ranks of the 'educated' and thereby serve in refashioning themselves. On the one hand, the strike displayed the convoluted nature of subaltern women's relationships with knowledge in general and mainstream knowledge in particular, the latter being something they desired but which also left them wanting. On the other hand, the strike forced the feminist educators to confront the assumptions of a

transformative approach—they believed sought to dismantle existing power hierarchies in knowledge production—with which they entered the project. Initially, Dalit women's aspirations to use 'privileged' education as a means of self and social transformation was a challenge for feminist educators working within the framework of feminist transformative education. However, the 'strike' unfolded a negotiated process of collaborative knowledge production. 'Nayi batein' the body of knowledge produced through this process included a range of content and pedagogic strategies: a diverse, expansive and heady mix of mainstream and local knowledge; useful and miscellaneous knowledge; facts and perspectives, scientific knowledge and an understanding of social structures, information on government schemes and social movements and strategies to confront patriarchy.

The strike also marks a moment where women like Besaniya who sought mainstream knowledge to change their ascribed status as Dalit women—unworthy to be recipients of education—subsequently recognised that this would not be enough. It was this 'exclusive' knowledge (exemplified by nayi batein) that shaped her and secured her the 'mainstream' job as an Anganwadi helper, as Besaniya herself did not get very far learning 'literacy skills' per se (see chapter 4).

The politics undergirding the empowered women created through nayi batein stood in sharp contrast to Kamala, the 'good-woman-subject' of the state-produced literacy primer, and the state's image of an empowered woman, and of gender equality. Ironically it was within the ambit of the same state that both imaginations existed, which is also testimony to the fragility of what is positioned as 'dominant' or 'official' knowledge.

In MS's definition of education (chapter 1), 'training' and 'literacy' represented the 'broad' and 'narrow' faces of education respectively. In trainings and in Freirean literacy approaches the end goal is to propel women towards taking action to change women's subordinate status. The literacy processes, however, as we have seen in this chapter, were far more open-ended. While the feminist educators followed Freire and paid attention to interrogating 'words', it opened them to reading their multiple meanings, which took them beyond reflecting critically on oppression alone. The feminist educators dipped into their own liberal educational experiences as well—at the insistence of the women). They were also compelled to include dimensions from

competency and functional literacy approaches, and while the Nirantar practitioners recognised the limitations of this approach, [111] (see introduction) it was a valid entry point, as women who were interested in becoming literate related to the concept of power as something lacking in their own lives and an asset of their oppressors – as expressed in the strike. On the other hand, Nirantar's practice was also informed by a view of power as a phenomenon of structured but mutable social relationships, in patriarchy for example, and as feminist educators this entailed self-reflexivity about their positionality and practices.

We shall see in the following chapters how the figure of an empowered woman imagined through a feminist educational programme was deployed, negotiated and given fresh meanings to, long after the women learners had graduated from the MSK course.

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[111] Ghose, "Literacy, Feminism and Power," 1615-1616.

PART 2

Between 1994 and 2000 around a couple of hundred women and girls went through the MSK programme described in chapter 3.[1] In Part 2 of my thesis, I trace and analyse the life histories of some Dalit women who participated in the educational processes in the mid-1990s: why they decided to embark on a journey of learning to read and write, what it has meant for them and how the subjectivities that were developed at the MSK were deployed during their life-courses, and the different ways in which they have tried to leverage their education to break new ground personally, socially, politically and economically. The next three chapters explore the entangled nature of their experiences using the two dimensions of the 'jaal' and 'judaav', a conceptual device I have discussed in the introduction.

To further contextualise the next 3 chapters I would like to briefly draw attention to three issues namely (i) the shifting terrain of educational discourses (ii) highlights of the metamorphosing institutional landscape (ii) cautionary steps I took in documenting the life histories.

The Shifting Terrain of Educational Discourses

The MSK was initially a provision in the MS policy document and MS state programmes were granted some leeway to design their own MSKs. The version of the MSK Banda programme developed collaboratively by feminist educators, a state-led women's empowerment programme and adult women learners received a fair amount attention at the time, which gradually dissipated from the 2000's onwards. While the reasons are many, I will highlight two important ones. The first pertained to the nature of it its dissemination. The MSK Banda experience was shared with other MS districts and states

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[1] Initially there was one centre located in Karvi for women and older girls. In 1997 a second centre (Kishori Kunj) in Banda district (Tindwari Block) for young girls was started. Records of MS Chitrakoot's early years have not been kept. I reconstructed fairly comprehensive lists of learners using the snowballing method with former MSK teachers, former learners and other local informants while doing the tracer study mentioned earlier. Recording that process became an important part of the tracer study itself. For a reflective account see Malini Ghose and Disha Mullick, "Looking Back, Looking Within: Reflections on a Feminist Research Study" in *Researching Ethically Across Cultures,* ed. Anna Robinson-Pant and Nidhi Singal (London: Routledge, 2016).

through workshops and fairly widely by Nirantar members,[2] however the lack of a formal written curriculum and instructional material emerging from it—which ironically was something the feminist educators themselves were reluctant to produce at the time, fearing unnecessary standardization and a loss of flexibility in giving local teachers the space to intervene—was retrospectively identified as a problem.[3]

Secondly and more crucially, by the early 2000s MS's overall strategy had shifted to focussing on girls' education, awareness-raising around gender and government entitlements, and institutionalising and registering the women's federations as independent entities—the latter was in anticipation of MS's discontinuation. The attention of national-level education policy moved towards the universalization of girl's education from the 2000s. Driven by the global Education for All (EFA) agenda and later the MDGs, and heightened by the spread and deepening of neoliberalism, where like microcredit in the case of women's empowerment, investing in girls' education was seen as the panacea for addressing a wide range of social issues (see introduction). The Government of India's flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan[4] (Education for All Mission) programme, launched in 2001, was mandated to "bridge gender and social gaps" in educational access and introduced various data collection regimes to track measurable indicators (such as enrolment, retention and school infrastructure),[5] which ultimately had

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[2] My own observations are that at the time, Nirantar as a newly formed a feminist education group was more interested in sharing the principles, conceptual framework, pedagogic approach and details of the tensions and negotiations during the curriculum development process, rather than formally writing the curriculum or 'textbook' equivalents. Later however, Nirantar used its MSK experience to develop educational material for adults. See for example, its health education series *Swastha ki Khoj Mein* (In Search of Health).

[3] Chandrakanta (Acting District coordinator Chitrakoot), interviewed by author, Chitrakoot, October 30, 2014; Meenakshi, Rita and Safiya (see interview list for details).

[4] Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was set up as a special "time bound" programme funded by international donors to achieve global Education for All and Millennium Development Goals. The SSA had four primary goals: 1) All children in school till the elementary level (2) Bridging gender and social gaps (3) All children retained in Elementary education (4) Education of satisfactory quality. In 2018 SSA was subsumed under the Samgra Shiksha Programme that brought schemes from pre-school to higher secondary levels under one umbrella.

[5] For instance, in 1995, a computerized school education management information system up to the Elementary level (District Information System for Education or DISE) was started by the Government of India (Ministry of Human Resources Development), with financial support from UNICEF and managed by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA). In 2012-13 this was converted to UDISE (Unified District Information System for Education) to combine elementary and secondary education. See Government of India, Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education. Since 2001, the NCERT and the Ministry of Education (GOI) conducts National Achievement

an impact on the nature of MS's work, as it was located in the Education Department, a tension that was never resolved (discussed in chapter 1).[6] MSK's objectives were realigned towards mainstreaming out-of-school girls and by the 2000s most MSKs followed the formal school syllabus and textbooks, though content on gender, laws and health was incorporated as 'add-ons' and pedagogically interactive learning was not abandoned.

On the one hand, the MSK's success with girls[7] led to it becoming the model on which the national level Kasurba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Programme[8] (KGBV)—another flagship programme of the Indian Government (2004)-–was designed, where MS believed it was able to fruitfully insert its experiential learning of working on the education of marginalised girls. On the other hand, MS got drawn into implementing the KGBV (in the districts where it was operational) and its educational mandate gradually narrowed to addressing the needs of the mainstream educational system.[9] This reassignment became crucial to the programme's survival but eventually also proved to be a constraint, according to some.[10] Eventually, the frontal focus on girls education

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Surveys every 3 years, that assess learning outcomes using standardized tests (in maths, Language, Science and social sciences) of children studying in Government and Government-aided schools for classes 3, 5 and 8.

[6] Smriti Singh (September 10, 2015), Ganga, Rita, Rahul, Sofia, Marsha at the UP level; and at the national-level, Mehrotra, Prashanthi, Ramachandran, Kalian Menon Seen (MS National Resource Group member and trainer, gender activist), New Delhi, August 8, 2015 (see interview list for details).

[7] Niti Saxena and Nishi Mehrotra, "Addressing Girls' Education" in *Cartographies of Empowerment*, ed. Vimala Ramachandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012), 199-236.

[8] The KGBV scheme provides access and quality education to dropout and out-of-school girls (in the age group of 10-18 years) from disadvantaged groups (SC, ST, OBC, Minorities and BPL) to ensure their educational transition from elementary (class 6) to secondary (class 10) levels (and upto class 12 in some states) levels. One residential school is provided for in every educationally backward block. Initially the scheme was for classes 6-8 but extended as it was deemed a success. See https://samagra.education.gov.in/kgbv.html

[9] Informants also stated that it became increasingly difficult to enrol adult women for an 8-month course, with no financial incentives. Some MS programmes shortened their courses for adult women and linked it to themes such as Panchayati Raj (for elected women representatives) or to prepare them for positions that were opening up locally within government programmes (Interviews with Prashanthi and Mehrotra).

[10] While at policy levels many MS associates welcomed the opportunity provided to MS to work on scale, by the time I was doing my fieldwork, several informants were uneasy about this shift away from women's education and empowerment and feared that MS was increasingly fulfilling the government's rather than women's interests, and losing its space to critique and innovate. Such issues were discussed at a national MS workshop on MS's future that I attended. Several participants spoke at length about the problems of collaborating with the Education

squeezed out the issue of women's education, which meant losing out on working along the continuum of women's and girls' experiences, while the greater centralisation and formalisation also resulted in the reduction of space for feminist engagement in education, within MS and beyond.[11]

An Institutional Chronology

The chapters of Part 1 show how the pedagogic interventions shaped new subjectivities but I have also alluded to how these impacted institutional arrangements and partnerships and shaped new ones, resulting from the evolution of conceptual frameworks and expansions into new areas of feminist engagement. The mutating relationships were both ruptures and new beginnings that resonated with the jaal-judaav dynamic (for a timeline of institutional changes see annexure 3).

In chapter 1, I have discussed how the initial partnerships between the local NGOs, the state-led MS and the feminist training organisation unravelled due to ideological tensions from above and below, leading to urban feminists and the MS-trained local rural feminists steering the programme. A second realignment took place in 1993 when a group of women, which included sakhis, handpump mechanics, some MS functionaries and MSK teachers, led by Madhavi Kuckreja, decided to establish the NGO Vanangana (Women of the Forest). The decision to set up a new entity was prompted by reasons pertaining to MS as well as the impact the larger political landscape had on framing grassroots feminist ideas. On the one hand, as the handpump programme grew in scale, what began as an educational pedagogic intervention could no longer be

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department, where they were formally located but because of their quasi-state status and an overwhelming identity as a women's empowerment programme, were not treated with 'respect' (Mahila Samakhya National Workshop, attended by author, Patna, July 27-29, 2015).

[11] Beyond MS too, while the KGBV scheme had been endorsed by education policy makers, scholars such as Sarada Balagopalan took feminists to task for abandoning a critical feminist evaluation of the scheme and ceding the task of determining the agenda of women and girls' education to the state. Balagopalan further argues that the KGBV strategy strengthened the assumption that children from disadvantaged communities must be removed from their community contexts to be able to get a 'good education', and thus shifts the blame for non-participation of poor children in education onto the family and community. Sarada Balagopalan, "Does Gender Exhaust a Feminist Engagement with Elementary Education?" in *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 9, no. 2 (July 2012), 319 – 325. According to Saxena the choice of residential schools as the preferred option for girls from marginalised backgrounds provides special inputs to only a chosen few, rather than improving the system, (Sadhana Saxena, "Is Equality an Outdated Concern," Economic and Political Weekly XLVII, no. 49 (2012), 61-68.

contained within that frame, as the Dalit women handpump mechanics saw this as an alternative livelihood option and not just a skills-training programme (see chapter 2). On the other hand, foregrounding women's caste identities and the issues that emerged also meant that the group outgrew the vision of a rural woman subject 'unmarked' by caste. The political churning and lower-caste caste assertions from the 1990s were critical in precipitating Vanangana's establishment.[12]

To begin with, MS viewed Vanangana's founding positively, but the two entities were ultimately unable to work together collaboratively. Tussles broke out over issues of 'turf' and growing divergences in perspectives on gender and caste issues, as Vanangana's work became increasingly 'political'. [13] It took on cases of violence against women that became high-profile and involved direct confrontation with the police, administration, upper-castes and political outfits.[14] In 2000 MS withdrew from Manikpur block, handing over the sangathan work to Vanangana, and MS moved its operations to other blocks. Vanangana's collectivizing work moved towards foregrounding women's Dalit identity and its intersections with gender, and the nature of Vanangana's pedagogic interventions changed significantly as they started undertaking campaigns on issues of caste-based discrimination and training programmes to build a political understanding on caste.[15]

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[12] Interview with Kuckreja, March 23 and 28, 2014.

[13] Interviews with Ganga, Rita, Smriti Singh (September 10, 2015), Varsha (Resource Person Banda District, Resource person State Office), Lucknow, February 8, 2016, Kuckreja (March 28, 2014), Avdhesh and other old timers of MS and Vanangana. Initially the MS national strategy supported the establishment of organisations that grew out of MS's work, as an indication of its success and as part of its sustainability strategy post its withdrawal. MS–UP's experiences in this regard were fraught. See Sangatin and Nagar, *Playing with Fire*.

[14] Examples of key cases that Vanangana took up were: The Ila Pandey Case (1999*)* involving a father who was sexually abusing his pre-teen daughter. As the father was a Brahmin, he had the support of upper-caste lobbies, including the Police and administration. Instead of arresting the father, cases were filed against Vanangana and senior MS members; the Suhagiya case (2003) concerned the custodial rape and assault of a Kol woman. This case too shook the police administration right up to the Lucknow; the Harishchandra Case (2002) involved a local BSP worker from Bhauri village who was murdered by upper caste assailants. When Vanangana took up the case it involved a shift in focus away from purely feminist issues. See Vanangana, *Striking Roots* (Karvi: Vanangana, 2014), 16; also discussed during focus group discussion in Bhauri village, March 24, 2015.

[15] The new pedagogic interventions included trainings on caste, and campaigns and public events on caste discrimination. See Vanangana, "Striking Roots," for an account of its organisational journey. See also Radhika Govinda, "In the Name of 'Poor and Marginalised'? Politics of NGO Activism with Dalit Women in Rural North India," *Journal of South Asian Development* 4, no. 1 (2009), 45-64.

From 2003 Vanangana facilitated a process of establishing the women's sangathan, which got registered as an independent organisation (Dalit Mahila Samiti) in 2012.[16]

In the meanwhile, MS went through an uncertain period after withdrawing from Manikpur block in 2000. The MS-state leadership was undecided about how to move ahead in Chitrakoot and the programme was abruptly shut down in 2000, [17] only to be restarted in in 2001.[18] When I was doing my fieldwork, the Chitrakoot district programme was once again in a precarious situation as a national-level policy decision had mandated that the older MS district-programme be "phased out".

In 2000 another institution began to be carved out of the literacy and educational interventions that took root in the 1990s (see chapter 3). One of the literacy interventions—a local broadsheet, *Mahila Dakiya* (Post (Wo)man), produced by newly-literate women—was initiated by MS and Nirantar as a way of sustaining women's newly acquired literacy skills and to make visible Dalit women's voices and experiences. As the broadsheet became popular, Nirantar and the group of Dalit women who had become invested in its production wanted to set it up as an independent rural journal and even sell copies, which was not permissible within the MS framework. In 2000, Nirantar and the Mahila Dakiya group collaborated directly to reconceptualise the broadsheet as a rural newspaper, named *Khabar Lahariya* (KL hereafter), training former MSK students as journalists. KL functioned as project of Nirantar till 2013 and thereafter it was registered as an independent rural media organization (see chapters 5 and 6).

The Minefields of Life Histories

As elaborated in the introduction, the life history approach seemed the most organic and useful method to revisit my area of study as a researcher. However, it also posed challenges many of which have been discussed in the literature as well. For instance, a frequent charge against narrative research methods is the apparent 'randomness' that results from the lack of a 'settled meaning', reflected in the multiplicity of ways in which narratives are gathered and (re)presented. This was definitely a challenge, as I negotiated and tried to make sense of the shifting narratives of the past and present that were presented to me. One way that researchers have taken this criticism on board is to

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[16] Jahnavi Andharia with the Anandi Collective, "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti," in *Building Feminist Movements and Organisations*, ed. Srilatha Batliwala (Toronto: AWID, 2008).

"articulate transparently how they have gathered and analysed the data,"[19] an approach that I have employed and elaborated in the introduction and in the chapters that follow.

Another slippery area relates to the interchangeable ways in which the terms 'story' and 'life history' are often used in doing life history research. I do however perceive an important distinction here. While I saw 'stories' as being an integral part of any research, I followed Bathmaker, when she says, "Life stories may be a starting point, the initial exploration of a life as lived, but life history grounds these stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context, and pays attention to social relations of power."[20]

This insistence on connecting life stories to social structures and relationships addresses another criticism—of over-emphasising the individual dimension. Life history methods have often been seen as a means to 'restore individual agency' and to shift away from the 'big stories'—such as Marxism and Feminism[21]—that stress how social and economic structures determine individuals' lives. But in doing so the danger of tipping towards individualism, and creating a 'fiction' of an isolated, self-sufficient individual always remains a possibility, and is a common theme in critiques of the neoliberal outlook, which often resorts to triumphalist narratives, of individuals pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. I thus held on to what Mills says about the political importance of not leaving the individual story as just that, as "personal troubles cannot be solved as troubles but must be understood in terms of public issues and in terms of problems of history making."[22] I found this a useful reminder to move constantly between the very immersive, often tragic, narratives of individuals, and the larger histories and forces they were all constantly being jostled about by.

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[17] See Sharma, "'Neoliberalisation' as Betrayal."

[18] MS-Chitrakoot was restarted through an UNDP-funded project on women and agriculture. This project got mired in allegations of mismanagement and corruption.

[19] Trahar, "It Starts with Once Upon a Time," 260.

[20] Ann-Marie Bathmaker, "Introduction," in Bathmaker and Harnett (eds.), in *Exploring Learning, Identity and Power*, 2.

[21] Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (London: Sage, 2001) quoted in Bathmaker, "Introduction," in Bathmaker and Harnett (eds.), *Exploring Learning, Identity and Power*, 3.

[22] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), 159 in Bathmaker, "Introduction," in Bathmaker and Harnett (eds.), *Exploring Learning, Identity and Power*, 12.

A third set of related complexities pertained to those life histories that have been repeatedly told, been written about or seen as 'successful' cases. As a researcher with prior relationships with my subjects, I faced this situation frequently during and after my fieldwork (the life histories in Chapter 5 and 6 speak to this). Benei's[23] reflections about her dilemmas while documenting the family life history of a 'successful' socially and economically mobile 'ex-untouchable' family in Western Maharashtra, who had 'moved up' from working as scavengers to becoming successful entrepreneurs in just a generation, were instructive. She comments that the 'subjects' repeated 'story telling' may have affected his world view and 'fixed' the family's mode of self-representation as 'ex-untouchables' (in this case the family chose to distance themselves from their Dalit status). She points out and I concur, "both types of history—the Great one and the autobiographical—are governed by the same assumption of a (life) course guided by meaning and success." If the notion of success is part of all life histories[24] (they may be more pronounced in some) she argues, that one should not get locked into the idea of verifying 'success' (such as by confirming facts or chronology of events) but to surface the disruptions in the narrative that become evident and to unearth the particular and intersecting reasons attributed to feeling this sense of 'success'. In her research, the narrator's sense of self-achievement was "tempered by philosophical doubts and reflections"[25] which he shared over time as she got to know him and his family better, and through participant observations, where she found that the notions of 'success' being emphatically spoken about did not always correspond with everyday practices. In fact I re-opened the 'successful' case study that I began the introduction with, and as chapters 4, 5 and 6 will show, this idea of 'success' was both embraced and contested by the subjects themselves.

A fourth concern relates to the issue of temporality—or in other words dealing with the 'passage of time'. Narrators choose from a variety of stories they could recount, and tell those that they want heard and written about. Thus, while narratives describe events, narrators also seek validation for these life moments and in doing so, may well attribute significance to particular events, which might not have been apparent at the

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[23] Benei, "To Fairly Tell."

[24] See Mahar, *Reinventing Practice in a Disenchanted World*, who make a similar point.

[25] Benei, "To Fairly Tell," 203.

time or ascribe meanings to previous events to explain present lives. As Trahar[26] explains, as researchers we can only document with certainty that, at the point of time of research, a narrator saw their past in a particular way.

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[26] Trahar, "It Starts with Once Upon a Time."

CHAPTER 4

"I HAVE WALKED ALL THESE STEPS":
DALIT WOMEN, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

> "I was an illiterate bandhua mazdoor. I have studied, worked as a dai, fought panchayat elections, built the women's sangathan, got a job and brought the ration dealership to my home. I have walked all these steps." (Besaniya, MSK Graduate, 1994)[1]

Several women who graduated from the MSK (chapter 3) went on to access lower echelon jobs within government-run women's development schemes. The jobs they held were mostly as Anganwadi workers (with the Integrated Child Development Scheme) or as ASHA workers (with the National Rural Health Mission).[2] Such posts are technically not 'jobs' at all. The women employed in such programmes are considered 'volunteers' not 'workers' and are paid an honorarium and not a salary. Such women workers occupy, according to one scholar, a 'grey zone'[3]: they fall between formal and informal workspaces, paid and unpaid worker status, volunteers and workers, and their social roles as 'women' and 'workers' is blurred. Recent studies[4] and media reports raise critical issues—like the ones listed above—pertaining to the troubled relationship between the state and women workers in such programmes. Anganwadi workers' unions have also been at the forefront of raising demands related to wages, working conditions and regularization within the workforce.[5] The agitations by the WDP sathins to get their

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[1] Besaniya, interview, October 15, 2015. All names of the protagonist and her family members have been changed. I spent a lot of time with Besaniya, her family and in the village and only the formal interviews are referenced.

[2] The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), a national scheme under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, is commonly called the Anganwadi programme and their workers Anganwadi workers or simply Anganwadi. ASHA, an acronym for Accredited Social Health Activist, is a community health worker appointed by the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

[3] M.S. Sreerekha, *State Without Honour: Women Workers in India's Anganwadis* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

[4] Sreerekha, *State Without Honour*; Rajni Palriwala and N. Neetha, *Paid Care Workers in India: Domestic Workers and Anganwadi Workers*, Research Report 4 (Geneva: UNRISD, 2009); Kavita Bhatia, "Community Health Worker Programmes in India: A Rights-based Review," *Perspectives in Public Health* 134, no, 5 (2014), 276-282.

[5] For example see website: All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers affiliated to Communist Party of India (Marxist). For a recent example: Abdul Alim Jafri, UP:

'voluntary' positions recognized as proper jobs, discussed in chapter 1, was an early example of the tensions between women—workers, scholars, activists—and the state.

On the ground however, these posts are thought of as quasi government jobs. And despite the problems that beset them, in the area I studied, securing such jobs is believed to be a pivotal achievement for Dalit women in improving their social and economic status and by extension that of their families and of other Dalit women. While the concerns listed above are tremendously important, not least because all my informants were part of agitations demanding better working conditions and other rights, I focus on a different and less studied aspect in this chapter. I analyse the strategies through which Dalit women secured these positions, as they provide telling insights into the nature of self-making that education afforded these women. The story of how women deployed literacy and education to reshape power-laden relationships of gender, caste and class, is broadly the subject of this chapter.

The life history narratives I present in this chapter also offer a significantly different lens to understanding the struggles for social mobility and empowerment of Dalits through education. The entry of educated Dalits into the sphere of employment has been a long-standing area of academic enquiry. For instance, studies have examined the limits and structural barriers of the market faced by Dalits in the sphere of employment and development recently in the context of liberalisation.[6] Other studies on

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Anganwadi Workers not Paid for 12 Months, Similar Situation for ASHA and Mid-day Meal Workers, *Newsclick* (April 25, 2022).

The local women union leaders I interviewed said their main demands were: regularisation of their jobs as Government workers, payment of regular salary not honorarium, proper remuneration for additional 'jobs', and regular payment of salaries. Rajni (Local union leader) interviewed by author, Banda, October 1, 2015, Suman (Local union leader), interviewed by author, Banda, December 7, 2015. In 2019 (All India) there were 13,02,617 (Anganwadi Worker, AWW) and 11,84,954 (Anganwadi Helper, AHH); the figure for UP was 1,73,518 (AWW) and 1,49,409 (AHH). Honorarium paid by the Central Government was: AWW (Rs. 3000, raised to Rs. 4,500 in 2019), AHH (Rs. 1500, raised to Rs. 2,250 in 2019). The UP Government provided an additional amount of Rs. 1000 (AWW) and Rs. 500 (AWH). Press Information Bureau, "Anganwadi Sevikas: Press Release, Ministers Response in Parliament," (New Delhi: Ministry of Women and Child, July 12, 2019).

[6] Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Newman, "Economic Discrimination: Concept, Consequences, and Remedies," in *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India,* ed. Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Newman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010); Clarinda Still (ed.), *Dalits in Neo-liberal India: Mobility or marginalization?* (London and New Delhi: Routledge, 2014); Alpa Shah et al. (eds.), *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

upward mobility have revolved around Dalit men as drivers of such processes.[7] And where Dalit women's experiences have been studied this has been largely confined to formal education.[8]

The role of non-formal education and the strategies that adult rural Dalit women have used to improve their social status has not received much scholarly attention (see introduction). Further, in the case of rural Dalit girls, a significant focus of scholarship has been to show how investing in girls' education enables upward mobility by organising 'better marriages'—above the natal family's class—where the aim of such marriages is to 'domesticate' Dalit girls and withdraw them from wage-labour. Whether such a trajectory has ultimately benefitted rural women has been the subject of intense debate (see introduction, also discussed later in the chapter).

In this chapter, by delving into the life histories of women who educated themselves and in some cases went on to insecure low-end jobs in government programmes, I discuss a different set of issues that my research revealed. I examine how education was leveraged by women and girls to seek employment—and not just to ensure that they 'marry-up' or to escape hard labour—and by so doing how they reframed the contours of their marriages, relationships with their natal families and, most importantly, sought to remake the image of rural Dalit women. I also show how complex and painful such processes of self (re)making have been for Dalit women who have driven social change and that the changes they brought about were contested and unstable.

'I am Trapped in a Web': Introducing Besaniya

Chapter 4 is centred on the life history of Besaniya, who the reader knows as the organiser of the 'strike' at the MSK (see chapter 3). It traces the important moments in her life: from the experience of hard labour to remaking herself as a 'new' Dalit woman through education, which helped get her a quasi-government job and also enabled her family's fortunes to improve. In the quote at the beginning of the chapter, Besaniya herself succinctly records the many important steps she has walked in her life.

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[7] Jules Naudet, "Paying back to Society: Upward Social Mobility among Dalits," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2008), 413–41; A.R. Vasavi, *'Government Brahmin' : Caste, the Educated Unemployed, and the Reproduction of Inequalities,"* 5.

[8] Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India.*

Besaniya used the conceptual metaphor of the jaal to explain to me how she saw her life trajectory (see introduction). She used the jaal imagery to explain how she wove many pathways of empowerment, and ironically also the sense of entrapment that resulted. While she elaborated the many impressive steps she had walked in her life she also declared to me on more than one occasion "*Mein jaal mein phasi huyi hoon*"[9] (I am trapped in a web).

In Part 1 of this chapter, I briefly set the context by sharing data from a tracer study of MSK graduates (also mentioned in chapter 3) and elaborating some of the key trends in the literature regarding gender, caste, education and work. In Part 2, I present Besaniya's life history. And building on Besaniya's and other life histories, Part 3 discusses the intergenerational strategies used by Dalit women to leverage their education to secure jobs, and empower themselves and their families. In Part 4, I elaborate the messiness of processes of upward mobility for Dalit women and discuss in particular the tensions between individual and collective empowerment.

I.   EDUCATION, WORK AND MARRIAGE

The tracer study of former MSK students conducted in 2012, which I was involved in designing and conducting, revealed some interesting insights regarding the relationship between education, marriage and work (see introduction). As part of the study we managed to contact 56 MSK graduates who had attended the MSK and Kishori Kunj between 1994 and 2000. The study methodology included two residential workshops (held in Chitrakoot and Banda) during which a survey and focus group discussions were conducted.[10] I re-established contact with several of them during the course of my doctoral research.

According to that study, a significant number (66%) of the MSK graduates enrolled in formal schools after completing the MSK course.[11] However, not all of them

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[9] Besaniya, interview, October 15, 2015.

[10] The workshops ended up being emotional reunions as well. See Ghose and Mullick, "Looking Back, Looking Within."

[11] These were mostly the young girls. Of these 11% enrolled in Class 5, 21% in Class 6 and 18% in Class 8. 16% did not mention the class at which they enrolled. Of the 56 MSK graduates who participated in the study 55% were Dalits, 7% Kols, 32% BC and OBC and 3% were from the General category. The age profile of the sample was as follows: Between 18 and 25 years (27%), between 26–35 years (19%) and above 36 years (10%).

could continue their education. Of those who enrolled in formal school, 14% dropped out before Class 8, 21% completed Class 8 (Elementary Education), 14% finished Class 10 (High School), 4% completed Class 12, 4% went on to College and 2% even managed an MA. The high dropout rate reported[12] and the fact that the largest group managed to complete only Elementary Schooling (Class 8) tends to align with available data. However, data does also show an interesting clustering at both ends of the spectrum: one group of girls (14%) dropped out soon after enrolling and another (a significant 10%) actually managed to complete Class 12 and go beyond that. The latter figure is noteworthy as the rate of enrolment of SCs in higher education still lags behind the national figure.[13] The struggles and strategies of women from the latter group to stay in the education system and later seek work despite being 'married off' are discussed in this chapter and the next.

The reasons provided for discontinuing education—20% reported marriage, 11% said economic constraints and 11% said family opposition—are also unsurprising, again however, the data provides two contrasting aspirations from education and its relation to marriage and work. 'Family opposition' was often euphemistically used to signal attempts to control young women's sexuality. And for those girls who managed to continue with their schooling this was an important issue that they negotiated (see examples later in this chapter and chapters 5). Still's study of rural Andhra Pradesh explores the connections between girls' education and sexuality and concluded that education is "risky business!" (see introduction)[14]

For one segment, the motivation to educate girls minimally was to arrange marriages, but not necessarily for upward mobility or to ensure their removal from

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[12] According to the Government of India's (UDISE) report, 2016-2017, the dropout rate of girls at Elementary level is 6.34%, which increases three fold at the Secondary level to 19.18 %. Disturbingly, the dropout rate has increased rather than decreased at the Secondary level, from 17.79 % in 2014-15 to 19.18 % in 2016-17. The figure further increases for girls belonging to SC, ST and minority communities. Nearly 68.21 % ST and 62.57 % SC children drop out by the time they reach upper primary level and 88.17 % ST children and 83.62 % SC children drop out by the time they reach secondary level (Ramesh Pandita, "Dropout Percentage of Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribe Children in India: A Decadal Analysis up to Secondary Level," *Journal of Indian Education* 41 (2015), 97-117).

[13] Gross Enrolment Ratio of SC and ST students at the undergraduate level was found to be 23 per cent and 17.2 per cent respectively, compared to the national average of 26.3 per cent (AISHE 2019-20).

[14] Still, "Spoiled Brides," 1119.

labour. 37% reported doing 'only housework' after marriage and this included working on their own or leased fields, and 20% still performed wage labour. For this set of girls, education did not become the critical lever to break through the structural barriers of poverty or other social barriers, as may have been expected after participating in a transformative education programme. Several informants I spoke with said that the MSK had enabled them to get a minimal level of education (pegged at Grade 8) that was necessary for their parents to arrange a 'decent' marriage that they hoped would provide their daughters some economic security.

The second trend that the data revealed, which I believe was more noteworthy and the focus of this chapter, was the fairly large number of women and girls' who had actually managed to find work—and many after marriage—outside of agricultural wage labour. 28% reported holding a job at the time of the survey. And of these, 16% reported working in NGOs, 12% in low-end government jobs and another 7% had set up small businesses. 41% reported having had a job at some point since they graduated from the MSK, a figure that was higher than the percentage currently holding a job. 36% reported that they were keen to seek employment and kept trying to find opportunities.

I did not conduct another survey but my assessment based on my field research is that the number of women and girls' in such jobs had gone up since I did the tracer study. Young women had continued their pursuit of jobs, often after a hiatus of some years, due to the restrictions that marriage and childbearing placed. Negotiating gender relations is the most difficult for young bahus and several had strategically bided their time before trying to seek employment again (see part 3 of this chapter).

This trend resonated with what MSK graduates had said they valued about the education they had received, years after they graduated. While only 7% directly mentioned access to jobs (though many actually sought this) and 9% cited access to further education as the greatest benefits from education, 48% said the most valuable benefit accruing from the MSK was greater confidence to speak to officials and confidence to travel independently and 32% reported greater awareness and information. These intangible 'benefits' fuelled women's abilities to negotiate, strategise and build networks to get jobs and make other life choices: in other words, this was how they remade themselves as Dalit women, as we shall see below.

It is this group of Dalit women that presented a thought-provoking counter and addition to the dominant narrative that linked women's education to better marriage prospects alone (see discussion in introduction). Despite the 'barriers' that marriage posed and because of the type of education they received at the MSK, some women were able to exercise agency—exemplified by the strategies they used and networks they built—to try and secure employment, though mostly restricted to jobs at the lower echelons of government programmes and NGOs, as this chapter will show.

This finding from the tracer study and what I show in the rest of the chapter does not completely align with prominent research on this theme. Ethnographic research on Dalit women's education and upward mobility suggests that a primary reason for educating girls is to ensure that they can 'marry up' (above their social class) and through such marriages the girls' natal and marital families also move up the status hierarchy.[15] To recap discussions in the introduction, where the literature shows that there are different perceptions regarding whether or not upward mobility has been beneficial to women or even the Dalit community. There are those who have argued that upward mobility brings in its wake greater patriarchal restrictions,[16] others have said that Dalit women have felt relieved to have the opportunity to give up hard labour,[17] and still others who have pointed out that upward mobility through education brings about intra-community differences and tensions.[18] As pointed out earlier this body of research has focussed on formal education.

What I am highlighting for my research cohort is that for the group of women who transitioned from non-formal to formal education and struggled to continue with formal education the attention paid to the education-marriage-domestication pathway by women's families and more pertinently women themselves was practically absent and they were most animated about seeking employment opportunities, precisely in the low-end jobs mentioned above, which they felt were within their reach. My findings therefore differed from Still's, who found no evidence of girls' education being seen as an

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[15] Clarinda Still, "Spoiled Brides"; Ciotti, "The Bourgeois Woman and the Half-Naked One."

[16] Berreman, "Sanskritization as Female Oppression in India"; Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*; Kapadia, *Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India;* Deshpande, "Assets Versus Autonomy?"

[17] Judith Heyer, "Dalit Women becoming 'Housewives'".

[18] Ciotti, "The Bourgeois Woman and the Half-Naked One."

investment for future employability—"Dalits envision female education as a route to a good marriage rather than a route to employment or equality, in a manner typically associated with the middle-class upper castes." [19]

In keeping with the call to read into contextual specificities, in the cases I studied—that is, women and girls who had participated in a non-formal education programme from the mid 1990s to early 2000 (described in the previous chapter)—the expectations that education leads to 'better' marriages, which in turn results in domesticity (a marker of upward mobility) where women are engaged only in status production work within the home was not what I observed. Though the relationship between marriage and education remained strong—if only as a disruption in women's educational aspirations—the rural women I studied strategised and sought to make their own networks and even realigned the contours of expected familial gender relations and marriage.

II.   SELF-MAKING: MILESTONES MARKING A LONG JOURNEY

Sava Ser Anaaj Ke Liye Kya Kaam Nahin Kiya Hai? (What Work Haven't I Done for 1.25 Kg of Grain?)

Besaniya spent much of her life as a bonded labourer. Like most women of this generation in her community she was very young, eight she reckons, when she was married and 'inherited' bondage. She remembers most of her young life as a relentless cycle of hard physical labour, best described in her own words:

> When I came here (Baghora village, her marital home and present residence) my father-in-law had nothing. Baba (her husband) had one *dhoti* and *kurta* (set of clothes). My grandfather in-law had two bighas of land.[20] One was in my *sasur's* (father-in-law's) name. But my sasur ran away from here to escape the *dabis* (intense oppression) of the *dadus* (upper caste landlords). Some dadu took *kabza* (illegal control) of that one bigha. My in-laws *karza* (debt) came on to us. My husband became bandhua and along with him I also became bandhua. I didn't know anyone. I didn't know anything."

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[19] Still, "Spoiled Brides," 1126.
[20] 1 acre equals 1.568 bigha.

What haven't we [Besaniya and her husband] done for *sava ser anaaj* (1.25 kg of grain)? The two of us looked after the Brahmins (upper caste landlord) cattle, did the weeding, prepared the fields, harvested the crop, threshed the grain, winnowed the grain and then stored it. The only thing we didn't do was to take the grain into the house.

After working all day, we got sava ser of *berra* (coarse grain). Together, husband and wife, we got 2.5 kgs. I would take that to our *jhopdi* (makeshift hut), in a corner of the field; grind it, and then cook. But we slept hungry. There was no time. We never came back before 9 or 10 o'clock at night. Maybe I managed a few *jhapkis* (short snatches of sleep). As the rooster crowed we would reach the fields again.

We were given one roti each from the Brahmanin (Brahmin landlord's wife). I used to give mine to the children. These rotis were made of wheat, so we cherished them. We sometimes got dal in an earthen dish.[21] My children were born as I worked. When I went to the fields, I used to take my child and the *khatola* (makeshift cradle) with me. As I cut the grain I would also push the khatola along. Our dabis was in proportion to the work we did.

Kuch Hilne Laga (Some Things Began to Shift)

Besaniya wept while she spoke to me about this period of her life. Despite the passage of time and her vastly improved circumstances, the memories of dabis were imprinted on her heart and body*,* she said. K*uch hilne laga* sometime in the mid to late 1980s, Besaniya recalled. That's when her landlord gave her a bullock and said, "Farm my land, keep a third of the crop and two thirds you give to me." Her landlord had moved from the village to the town and could no longer manage his extensive land holdings. This pattern of upper caste landlords allowing 'their' Dalit labourers to farm portions of their land for a share of the produce was slowly becoming common in the area at the time. Dalits today still predominantly lease land from upper castes—a system called *adhiya,* literally, half—where upper castes provide the land, Dalits the labour, and input costs and produce is shared on a 50-50 basis.

Over a period of time Besaniya took back kabza of her father-in-law's bigha of land.[22] She also got a bigha of land in lieu of the sterilisation operation she had done. She farmed the two bighas of her own land, leased some more and worked as a wage labourer

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[21] A local marker of untouchability. Besaniya, interview, October 11, 2014.

[22] Besaniya said that this was possible due to a combination of reasons – information about land rights through MS and help from a rival of the Brahmin who had taken kabza (control) of her land.

as well. Her sons gave up education and started working as *rajmistris* (masons).[23] Their wives did wage labour. Eventually, the family no longer slept hungry.

It was around this time that she got associated with MS. Besaniya was recruited as a sakhi and became part of all the activities and mobilisation processes of MS, described in chapter 2. "I started going out of the village and my mind opened, I learnt new things", she recalled. This was in sharp contrast to her acutely felt sense of the isolation and dabis she had felt while being bandhua, which several of my older informants echoed.

Like many of her MS peers she too was inspired to attend literacy camps. "I used to forgo my wages and go to learn how to read and write. It was a *badi cheez* (big thing) to do", Besaniya recalled. Besaniya was also a dai and actively participated in the MS-organised midwifery training programmes, the details of which she still remembered. These trainings, by validating her traditional skills, enhanced her status, in spite of daigiri being stigmatised work performed by Chamar women from the Dalit sub-caste to which Besaniya belonged (see chapter 2).

When the MSK programme was initiated in 1994, she enrolled. To participate in the MSK course Besaniya had to bargain hard with her family and even with the wider community, where she was the butt of ridicule. As a mother of three married sons and a grandmother, it wasn't easy to convince people about the value of going to 'school', that too a six-month[24] residential school, which meant abandoning her family and forgoing wages.

Looking back at that time, her oldest bahu told me that she had resented the additional burden of having to look after the extended joint family.[25] Rampal, Besaniya's oldest son said that even though the family had not anticipated any tangible gains accruing from his mother's education at her age, he had nonetheless tentatively supported her. This was possibly because he was getting connected with the BSP and because he remembered his own struggles to gain an education.[26]

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[23] As semi-skilled workers, masons in the village economy, have a better standing and earn far better than agricultural daily wagers.

[24] The MSK for women was a 6-month course. Later the course for younger girls was extended to 8 months.

[25] Interview with Besaniya's oldest daughter-in-law, Baghora village, November 18, 2015.

[26] He had trudged several kilometres to attend high school, though he eventually never made it beyond class 10. He considered working as a mason a better option than continuing with

Besaniya, as we know from the previous chapter, was very motivated about learning to read and write and had gained clarity that education and new knowledge was necessary for Dalit women to move ahead. When people sniggered and said, "look grandmother has picked up a schoolbag", she rebuked or ignored them. Besaniya herself hadn't thought that education would get her a job, maybe something *chota-mota* (small) if it was written in her kismat. But she was sure that being literate would help in other ways – provide her information and give her a new *pehchaan* (identity). "I knew I had to go. Everything is not about *paisa* (money)" she told me.[27]

Besaniya's life after she returned from the MSK both broke with and stayed tied to her past. She continued doing wage labour and midwifery but also strengthened her involvement with the sangathan (village-level women's collective) and stood for panchayat elections in 1995. Besaniya contested, campaigned hard and lost.[28] According to Rampal, his mother lost because "…the Pandits (upper castes) of the village could not stomach the fact that they would have to listen to a Harijan woman who had become *padhi likhi* (literate/educated), *chalan saar* (mobile) and *bahar vyvhar tha* (had outside connections)." To take on Besaniya, the upper castes propped up a Kori (a Dalit sub-caste) candidate[29]—a man who in turn fielded his wife as a proxy candidate as it was a reserved seat for Dalit women—who won. "Such machinations [by the upper castes] continue to this day", said Rampal.[30]

By 1997 Vanangana had taken over the MS programme in Manikpur Block and were organising women into sangathans at the village level and federating them. Besaniya played an important role in this process and also led the savings and credit programme

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formal education. Rampal (Mason, Besaniya's oldest son), interviewed by author, Baghora village, November 18, 2015.

[27] Besaniya, interview, October 15, 2015.

[28] The Panchayati Raj Act (1992) reserves 33 % seats for women with a sub-quota of seats for SC women. After its passage, women's groups across the country, including MS Chitrakoot started conducting training programmes to educate women candidates and support elected women representatives. For an account of Dalit and Kol women's experiences of contesting the 1995 UP Panchayat elections see Nirantar, "Of Women, Politics and Panchayats in *Participatory Pathways: People's Participation in Development Initiatives*, ed. Rajiv Balakrishnan (New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2007). [First published by Council for Social Development, 1996].

[29] Chamars are the most numerous and powerful Dalit sub-caste in the area and in UP and form the main support base of the BSP. Koris in my research area 'competed' with Chamars in various arenas and were resentful of their political clout.

[30] The issue of proxy candidates for seats reserved for women or SC's is reported regularly in the media. Rampal, interview.

that had been initiated. On the family front, the joint family separated. Besaniya's sons lived adjacent to each other but were trying to build the fortunes of their own nuclear families. Besaniya's oldest and youngest sons now earned well as rajmistris and the women continued doing agricultural work, but they now leased land.

Akhir Naukri Mil Gayi (A Job after All)

Life continued in this manner till 2006, when Besaniya landed an Anganwadi helper's position as part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). Launched in 1975, the ICDS is a national level Women and Early Childhood Care and Education Programme run by the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare. Popularly called the Anganwadi programme, it runs Anganwadi Centres (early childcare centres) in every village that are meant to provide hot food and some educational inputs for children between 0-6 years as well as a nutrition supplement for pregnant women.[31] The programme has a hierarchical structure and at the bottom are the village-level workers—the Anganwadi Worker (AWW hereafter) and below her the Anganwadi helper (AWH hereafter).

That Besaniya, an older Dalit woman with minimal education landed this job was much talked about in the village as the perception is that even these poorly paid jobs are usually cornered by upper castes who have *shiksha, paisa* and *pahunch* (education, money and reach).

I was unable to access caste-wise data of AWW & ASHAs at the Block and District level. But I often heard the allegation that such low-end Government jobs were being cornered by 'upper castes'. I conducted a small informal survey[32] covering a random sample of 53 women: 33 AWWs and 20 ASHAs in Chitrakoot and Banda Districts. Of the 53 women workers, the highest number belonged to OBCs (58%), followed by SC (22%) and General (19%). This informal survey revealed two interesting trends. First, these jobs were aspirational for Dalit women who were at pains to access them. Secondly, when Dalit informants referred to *unchi jati* (upper castes) snatching these jobs, they often meant any non-Dalit castes (77% in this sample) and not

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[31] AWWs are called on to perform a number of other duties like mobilising women for inoculations, conducting surveys etc. AWW's and ASHA workers have been raising the issue of their increasing workloads to strengthen their call for regularisation.

[32] Vanangana was conducting gender orientation sessions with AWWs and ASHA's in Banda and Chitrakoot districts in 2015. They assisted in gathering this data for me.

necessarily those caste groups that are traditionally considered 'upper caste'. The data pointed to an emerging 'competition' between Dalits and OBC castes, rather than upper castes as such, for these low-end jobs at the local level. Just as the Dalits had established networks within the bureaucracy in the 1990s and 2000s, when the BSP was in power in UP, a similar process could be observed with regard to the OBCs (particularly Yadavs) in 2015. The SP had been in power since 2012 and many Dalit informants reported an erosion of their networks within the bureaucracy and police.

Everyone I spoke to, regardless of caste or gender, agreed that no job, even a low-end one, was ever secured by making an official application alone. I heard several accounts of how such jobs were obtained: what *vyvhar* (connections) were used, how much money had changed hands, or how competing claims had been thwarted. [33] Being able to finally get 'the job' was indicative of the kind of power and resources that a family or community had and more importantly, was able to actually leverage.

Ironically, Besaniya secured the AWH job due to the Kori pradhan who had defeated her in the panchayat elections. The animosity between them had eased after Besaniya saved the lives of the pradhan's bahu and grandchild, during a complicated delivery.[34] To reciprocate goodwill, when the AWH position became available some years later, the pradhan nominated Besaniya. Besides returning a personal favour he knew that Besaniya had gone to the MSK and was literate and asked for her certificate.[35]

Even though educational qualifications are not required for the AWH position, having one always helps to strengthen one's chances. Besaniya's 5th class certificate had got burnt in a fire. She ran around and managed to get another one made (at a price of course) by using her vyvhar with officials in the Education Department, made over years of being involved with MS and sangathan related work. When I spoke to the ex-pradhan,[36] he simply stated that he had nominated Besaniya as she was *"saksham"* (capable) and therefore *"akhir naukri mil gayi"* (she got a job in the end).

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[33] *Vyvhar* was used interchangeably with *sampark,* which also meant connections or relationships. I will be using *vyvhar.*

[34] The pradhan apparently could not find transport to take his bahu to the hospital. Despite the bad blood between them, when Besaniya heard the commotion she rushed to his house and delivered the child at home.

[35] After the MSK course if women were interested, MS coordinated with the Education Department, so that they could take the Class 5 exam (Primary level) as private candidates. As the MSK began catering to girls this became a regular part of the programme.

[36] Interview with ex-pradhan, Baghora village, November, 2015.

As an AWH, it was Besaniya's job to open and clean the Anganwadi Centre (AWC hereafter), collect the children from their homes and bring them to the centre, cook the hot meals and drop the children back home. For this, she earned a paltry Rs.1500 per month. Despite the low pay, on getting the job Besaniya gave up being a wage labourer, which was a relief for her given her advancing years. And further, despite the low status work she did as an AWH, as a quasi-government 'job' holder, she got loosely linked to a different network through which she got information. The post also gave her another kind of recognition to that of being a sangathan leader. The AWH position brought her within the ambit of the *sarkar* (government) and enabled her to move into a different status category from other predominantly wage-labouring Dalit women in her village and area.[37]

Beta Ko Ration Dukaan Mil Gaya (My Son Got the Ration Shop Dealership)

Besaniya's status was further enhanced in 2012 when her youngest son, Pradeep,[38] managed to get the dealership to run the ration shop (officially called the Fair Price Shop) in Baghora village.[39] Locally the ration shop was simply referred to as '*kota*' and the person who ran the ration shop is called the '*kotedar*' (officially the Fair Price dealer). *Kota* is the Hindi transliteration of 'Quota', which references the share of subsidised grain and kerosene oil that ration cardholders are eligible to get. I will be using the terms ration shop and kotedar.

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[37] Even though AWH's did not attend the monthly ICDS meetings held at the block office, they got information about government schemes etc. through their networks with other AWH's and AWWs. During my fieldwork, all AWHs including Besaniya participated in the several protests that were held for regularisation of their jobs.

[38] Name changed.

[39] It is through the ration shop that subsidised essential commodities – mainly wheat, rice, sugar and kerosene oil – provided by the government's Public Distribution System (PDS), are distributed at the village level to bonafide cardholders. The PDS is a national level food security programme under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, and is jointly operated by the Central and State Governments. Started as a universal scheme the PDS was revamped in 1992 as a targeted scheme. Beneficiaries hold different categories of ration cards depending on whether they are above (APL) or below the poverty line (BPL) the official poverty line. The most vulnerable within the BPL category (such as destitute women and female-headed households) are given the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) card. The levels of subsidy are determined by the card one holds. In UP, ration cards are colour coded which is how they were referred to in the field. Activists with the Right to Food movement and scholars have been demanding that the scheme be universalised.

The levels of capital—economic and social—required to obtain the ration dealership from the government are much greater than that needed for a woman to get a low-end job in government programmes, such as the Anganwadi Programme or the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). In order to become a kotedar and subsequently be able to retain that position requires significant financial resources.[40] More importantly, the process of securing the dealership is opaque, requires connections, negotiation skills, political acumen, an in-depth awareness of bureaucratic procedures and money to grease palms: the kind of deep pockets and acumen that the upper castes in my research area seemed to have.

As caste-wise data of Ration Dealers is not officially available, I once again conducted a small informal survey in Manikpur Block.[41] Of 32 kotedars randomly surveyed 50% were upper caste, 22% OBCs and 22% were SC's (mostly Chamars) and 6% Kols. On the one hand, non-Dalit and non-Adivasi's held 72% of the ration dealerships and on the other Dalits and Adivasis were trying to muscle their way in and those who succeeded obviously held a certain status in the local context.

The corruption and inefficiencies endemic to the PDS system's operations, and its negative impact on the poor are extensively reported in the media and academic scholarship.[42] For Dalits however, the everyday practices of ration distribution, usually

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[40] A hefty security deposit has to be paid initially. Thereafter every month a significant sum of money has to be deposited by the kotedar (ration dealer) before he can requisition the grain from the Government godown. The kotedar recovers this money only after the grain is distributed to the villagers. Shivrani (see chapter 2), one of my informants whose husband is also a ration dealer, told me they deposited between 40,000 to 90,000 every month, depending on the quantum of supplies they requisitioned. Despite the locally held perception of profit, kotedars report a low margin of profit because of various costs, such as transport and bribes that they pay along the operational chain. Reported by local informants and see Abha Gupta and Deepak K. Mishra, "Public Distribution System in Uttar Pradesh: Access, Utilization and Impact," *Indian Journal of Human Development* 12, no. 1 (2018), 20-36.

[41] Vanangana assisted me in gathering the data.

[42] Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). A contentious problem on the ground is the politics around identification of beneficiaries. While I was doing fieldwork, new cards were to be issued through an online process. I heard several complaints about non-deserving beneficiaries being included in the BPL and Antodaya categories and genuine beneficiaries being excluded. According to a field study in UP 51.5% of the Antodaya cardholders are SC. So any form of corruption has the most direct impact on them (Gupta and Mishra, "Public Distribution System in Uttar Pradesh," 30). Others such as Dreze and Khera assert that the image of the dysfunctional PDS system is not borne out and argue for universalization. Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera, "PDS Leakages: The Plot Thickens," *The Hindu* (August 12, 2011); Reetika Khera, "India's Public Distribution System: Utilisation and Impact," *Journal of Development Studies* 47, no. 7 (2011), 1038-1060.

glossed as corruption, are also a strong reflection of discriminatory social relations. It is an important site where oppressive gender, caste and class relations are visibly and repeatedly experienced.[43] For example, Dalit cardholders reported that they were frequently given less than the sanctioned amounts of grain, sugar and kerosene oil, while it is the sanctioned amount that is recorded on the ration card, which being illiterate they cannot contest. Weighing scales are manipulated. The extra grain (not insignificant amounts when aggregated) commandeered by the kotedar is sold in the open or black market. Villagers have to go to the home of the ration shop dealer to collect their rations where Dalits are typically treated poorly. Women, who normally go to collect the rations, reported being abused and kept waiting but could not challenge male upper caste kotedars. Therefore, besides economic gains, having a ration dealership holds immense symbolic power, for the individual, family and community to which the kotedar belongs. Hence for a young Dalit man to even consider making a bid for the dealership was audacious.

The villages of Baghora and neighbouring Kothilihai share the same ration shop, the dealership for which Brahmans from Kothilihai had always managed to grab.[44] When sometime in 2011, corruption charges were levelled against the dealer and the ration shop was sealed and a new kotedar was to be appointed, a hectic process of parleying was unleashed in Baghora and Kothilihai. Baghora's upper caste pradhan called a meeting to discuss the issue, which was attended by the Dalits as well. Besaniya, who was present, recalled, "You know, it was a matter of prestige. When the Kothlihai Brahmin lost the dealership, he declared that it could not go to a Chamar under any circumstances. The kota was going outside our village again. Everyone said, 'Bring it to our village. Bring it to our community. Who can take it?'"

Pradeep, Besaniya's youngest son, threw his hat in the ring. Recalling that meeting he said, people were instigating each other. So I said, "I will take it."[45] The local word for instigation that he used was *hiska,* usually used negatively as a taunt or

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[43] Sukhdeo Thorat and Joel Lee, "Caste Discrimination and Food Security Programmes," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 39 (Sept. 24-30 2005), 4198-4201.

[44] Ration dealerships are allocated on the basis of population, so every village may not an exclusive ration shop. Baghora villagers resented having to walk to Kothilihai (a distance of about 2 kms) to collect their rations and walk back with heavy sacks of grain, a task that took women the better part of the day.

[45] Pradeep (Kotedar, Besaniya's youngest son), interviewed by author, Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, November 17, 2015.

instigation but it can also be used in a more positive sense of encouragement. Besaniya's son—brash, acutely aware of his Dalit status and quick to take umbrage against the slightest hint of casteist behaviour—represented a generation of young Dalit men in the area who wanted to assert their Dalit identity.[46] However, Pradeep perceived the hiska as both a personal taunt and encouragement addressed to him from within the Dalit community and as a taunt to the Dalit community.

As Besaniya explained to me, once her son had declared his intention to bid for the contract it was "*naak ka sawaal*" (literally, question of saving one's nose, a matter of honour) for the family and the Dalit community. Everyone (Dalits and upper castes) assumed Pradeep would fail: he had to raise money, get the endorsement of a majority of the villagers and take care of the bureaucratic procedures, something he was not familiar with. Pradeep was an 8th grade school dropout. Family channels were activated to raise the money for the deposit and other expenses.[47] To show the administration that he had the support of a majority of the villagers,[48] Pradeep embarked on a process that was akin to a panchayat election campaign, going house-to-house soliciting support.

Baghora is a mixed caste village. Dalits are in a majority, followed by upper castes (mostly Brahmins) and then OBCs (mostly Yadavs and Kurmis). Among the Dalits, Chamars are in majority, with significantly fewer Kori and only a couple of Valmiki households. Baghora's Dalit community did not necessarily take a unified stance on all issues.[49] Besaniya played a crucial role in mobilising the women and had also

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[46] Many young Dalit men I met were unwilling to accept discriminatory practices and wanted to make their presence visible in domains traditionally cornered by upper castes. However, the expression of Dalit male masculinity I saw was different from the aggressive masculinity of young Dalit men, described for instance in rapidly industrialising Tamil Nadu. S. Anandhi, J. Jeyaranjan, and Rajan Krishnan. "Work, Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village." *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 26, 2002): 4397-4406.

[47] Over a lakh of Rupees was spent. Besaniya's oldest son, pitched in. Pradeep's wife leaned on her natal family for a loan. I was told that Rs. 40,000 was the security deposit and the rest was spent on legal fees to get the stay order (filed by the previous dealer) removed, which required several trips to Allahabad. Bribes must have been paid too, but the family was reluctant to tell me about this.

[48] This is not a formal requirement but I was told that the administration insisted upon it in order to avoid confrontation and complaints later.

[49] There were tensions between the Dalit sub-castes in Baghora. Pradeep was not the only Dalit contender for the dealership. Besaniya's neighbour and sometime sangathan compatriot Shivkalia's son, who belonged to the Kori sub-caste was also interested. He too had attended the meeting and had been charged up by hiska only to be snubbed by the pradhan and others. His profile was similar Pradeep's. He was young, brassy and earning well as a rajmistri. He lived in Karvi to improve his economic standing but wanted a foothold in Baghora's politics.

accompanied Pradeep to meet the officials, as she was known at the Block office, she said. Her association with the sangathan women, who were from the main Dalit basti came in handy. Medhia, a sangathan old-timer said, "We had decided to support a Dalit. We knew Pradeep as Besaniya's son. So we signed the petition in his favour." Once Dalits lent their support to Pradeep, the Brahmins of Baghora—who knew they might not win the numbers game and as there was some rivalry between Brahmins of Baghora and Kothilihai—aligned with Pradeep. They also knew they would be able to call in a favour at a later date. In 2012 a young Dalit man was running Baghora's ration shop.

The fact that Besaniya's family was successful in working through multiple complexities did not go unnoticed. The ration dealership put Besaniya's family firmly on an upwardly mobile track. When I began interviewing Besaniya she was living with Pradeep's family and their house was one of the few *pucca* (concrete) houses in Hollakapurva, one of the three Dalit purvas of Baghora. The front room of the house was a well-stocked *kirana* shop (corner shop), which had grown after Pradeep became a kotedar. He had given up working as a rajmistri and his wife had withdrawn from agricultural work and was managing the shop. Besaniya's two other sons lived next door and while they may have appeared less well off than Pradeep, they were clearly more prosperous than other Dalit households in the village. Pradeep vociferously denied any economic gains accruing from the ration shop, although this seemed apparent to everyone else. Instead what he claimed was important was that "now people from every caste have to come to my *darwaza* (doorstep)… those who never came to our darwaza now come 10 times."[50]

III. INTERGENERATIONAL STRATEGIES OF NEW DALIT SUBJECTIFICATION

Besaniya's story is remarkable but is not necessarily exceptional as there were several women and girls in the MSK cohort who went on to get similar jobs, many of whom I tracked down and interviewed during the course of my research. In this section I focus

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Shivkalia ruefully told me that her son didn't get the dealership because, "*Chamaron ki marzi nahin thi*" (it was not the will of the Chamars). Shivkalia (Former sangathan member, Besaniya's neighbour), interviewed by author, Baghora village, November 15, 2015.

[50] Pradeep, interview, October 15, 2015.

on unpacking the strategies that women used and the differences between those employed by the older and younger Dalit women to build new subjectivities in their quest for social mobility.

The Older Generation: *Pehchaan*, *Vyvhar* And *Pahunch* (Identity, Connections and Reach)

The older women like Besaniya who never went on to access formal education used three terms: pehchaan, vyvhar, and pahunch to explain their journeys of social mobility. Vyvhar is used to describe social relations across the extended family and men also use it to describe business or work contacts. At first I assumed that these words were being used interchangeably, but as I delved deeper into the women's life histories I realised that these in fact represented distinct steps in a process of subjectification.

Pehchaan or identity production took place when Dalit women cast themselves afresh through their engagements with literacy and the broad-based education they received including gender training, their involvement with the sangathan, and other social campaigns. (see chapter 2) This educational process was exemplified in 'nayi batein' and the educational content and processes described in chapter 3. The education they received enabled them to build vyvhar outside their established kin and community networks. For example, Besaniya's sons I was told had built vyvhar through their work as masons. The educational processes the women had engaged in helped Besaniya and others build vyvhar outside their village and community—such as with the administration and the MS and NGO didis (see chapter 5). Pahunch or reach, referred to the process of converting pehchaan and vyvhar into some tangible results and often entailed having access to higher levels of power.

In Besaniya's example, the pehchaan she had built was recognised by the pradhan when he called her "saksham" (capable) and gave her a job. Ironically Besaniya's eldest son had used the pehchaan-vyvhar combination in his assessment of why his mother had lost the panchayat election. He invoked three reasons for this: because she was padhi-likhi (literate and educated), had *bahar vyvhar* (outside connections) and jankari (information). The connections he was referring to were to the MS officials and through them and the programme she had initially got pahunch to the administration. Later she leveraged her pehchaan-vyvhar-pahunch to access the administration independently as

well for instance to get her certificate reissued and to lobby for her son to get the ration shop dealership.

I discerned similar patterns amongst other women I interviewed as well. Shivrani, who was also a sakhi and dai like Besaniya, is another powerful example. Shivrani was illiterate, and her husband's educational achievements (he had a BA), made Shivrani feel inadequate. In the early 1990s she attended the literacy centre and several literacy camps where she persevered to become literate. She went to the MSK but only for three months, as her husband insisted she return. This has remained a permanent regret for her. "I see all my contemporaries who are now working. I know I could have got a job! I had the pehchaan and sampark, just not the *kagaz* (paper)."[51]

Unlike many other older women, who gave up with their literacy efforts after an initial burst of enthusiasm, Shivrani doggedly persisted. Initially she had insisted her husband teach her and when I met her, her school-going granddaughter was her tutor. Ultimately, reading and writing became a passion for Shivrani, which went well beyond winning her husband's approval. On the one hand she saw *likha pahdhi* (written work), as being essential for her role as a sangathan leader and for her work as a ration dealer and on the other she said loved reading stories![52] And despite all the odds she built her pehchaan as a literate, aware Dalit woman.

Shivrani was strategic and pragmatic. Unlike other dais in the area, she had not given up her practice. "I have stopped cutting the umbilical cord, which is stigmatised work. I have specialised. I deal with complicated cases, fixing prolapsed uteruses", she told me. Shivrani has a profitable practice as a 'specialised' dai.[53]

Shivrani used all the vyvhar she had built up—with the bureaucracy through her work with the sangathan, with the local health cadres and upper castes that she knows

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[51] I interviewed Shivrani multiple times and she repeatedly spoke about her literacy experiences. Shivrani, interview, December 18, 2015.

[52] On unannounced visits to her home, I found books she had collected from the literacy programme lying around on her *charpai* (cot) in her courtyard. She had several diaries and notebooks, which she carefully stored and I was able to look at.

[53] All erstwhile dais I spoke with were keenly aware and resentful of how caste and gender relations had been reinvented in the case of midwifery. On the one hand, Chamar women were shunning midwifery to escape caste discrimination and on the other, while Government policies discouraged home-based deliveries, the 'professional jobs' created, like that of the sarkari dai (government dai) and ASHAs, were cornered by the formally educated and non-Dalits. The 'professional' tag made the jobs acceptable and Dalit women like Shivrani lost out on paid work due to lack of qualifications and connections.

through her daigiri—to get her oldest bahu appointed as an ASHA. Shivrani had actively encouraged and paid for the education of all her bahus. All but one of them now have BA degrees. She has done this quietly—using the money from her dai practice and other monies she squirreled away—as her "*kanjoos*" (miserly) husband and her "*bewakoof*" (idiot) sons who don't understand the value of Dalit women's education had refused. In a context where the in-law family are most often loath to make such investments, Shivrani's actions were noteworthy. Her daughter-in-law told me, "I am an ASHA because of my *saas* (mother-in-law). Actually she is the expert and she should have had the job. I am fulfilling her dreams." [54]

Later, Shivrani and her husband lobbied hard (much like Besaniya and her son) and gathered the resources and got the ration dealership for her village. I witnessed her managing the ration shop, weighing the grains and keeping accounts, despite her husband's attempts to publicly undermine her by finding fault in her writing and account-keeping.[55] Some of the inaccuracies were deliberate as she tried to hide away some money for herself to do the things she wanted, like spend on her own health and pay for her bahu's and grand-daughter's education. There are many others like Besaniya and Shivrani (see case study in footnote).[56]

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[54] Interview with Shivrani's oldest daughter-in-law, Saraiyya village, December 18, 2015. According to Shivrani, her name had been nominated for the post. She thought about it and decided to nominate her daughter-in-law, as she wanted the job to remain in the family. She was younger and had the educational qualifications so could not be removed even if the requirements changed.

[55] The handwriting of newly literates is uneven, large and shaky – giveaways that they lack formal education.

[56] Keta (name changed) a widow from Unchadih, a remote village in Manikpur block bordering Madhya Pradesh is also an ASHA worker. Hers is an interesting case as it brought to the fore issues of sexuality that such endeavours at network building bring. After her stint at the MSK, Keta crafted relationships with the pradhan and various officials and had secured herself an ASHA's job. Keta said she learnt how to speak to officials during her time at the MSK. She had managed to build a pucca (permanent) house for herself. Keta is gutsy and well known in Manikpur and has used her connections to get her daughter a job as a private school teacher. I also heard whispers that some of the relationships she had built were sexual, something not uncommon for single women, especially Dalits in an area where there is a long history of upper caste men in sexually exploitative relationships with 'low caste' women (Keta, interviewed by author, Unchadih village, Chitrakoot District, August 31, 2016). For a similar case that explores issues of sexuality, women's empowerment and assertive Dalit women see Still, "Dalit Women: Honour and Patriarchy," 184-205.

The Younger Generation: Fathers and Daughters

The examples of the younger generation of MSK graduates presented a different strategy to Besaniya and her contemporaries, and were a striking contrast to the usual trajectory of education, marriage and domesticity—discussed in the literature as a reflection of upward mobility.

The two recurrent themes that came up in my discussions with the young women who had secured such low-end jobs and their family members, were about educational qualifications (or their lack) and vyvhar (connections). The latter was mediated through their natal families, particularly their fathers, and the connections they were able to leverage together to get them the job. This strategy that they used was atypical for the local context and in fact most of North India where once married, girls lose their claims on their natal families. But more importantly, in the cases I will discuss this relationship or partnership—not explicitly described as such— between fathers and daughters was troubled but built on reciprocated interests and was ultimately mutually beneficial as well.

Vimala's[57] story is a good case in point to illustrate how this relationship unfolded on the ground. A feisty 28-year-old ASHA worker when I met her, Vimala had studied at the MSK between 1997 and 1998. "You get jobs according to the level of your education. So I can't aspire for anything more than an ASHA's job," she told me. "Anyway it's good I got in when I did. Now there are many girls with 'unchi padhai' (high levels of education)."[58]

ASHA workers act as the interface between the community and the Public Health System. Amongst the many tasks she performs, an ASHA worker is expected to create awareness and counsel women regarding reproductive health issues, identify pregnant women, ensure that they are vaccinated, and take them to the hospital for delivery. ASHAs are paid a paltry amount for every target that they fulfil.

The competition Vimala perceived was from upper caste girls who had better formal educational qualifications due to historical advantages and financial means. And on the other hand were Dalit girls who had had the opportunity of accessing formal education from the outset, in their case either because their family had some resources or

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[57] Name changed.

[58] Vimala, interviewed by author, Karvi, March 2, 2015. I interviewed Vimala several times and spent time at her natal and marital homes—Nanha ka Dera (natal home), April 24, 2015; Gureh (marital home), September 30, 2015, October 14, 2015.

due to the expansion of schooling since the 1990s and 2000s.[59] MSK graduates who had made difficult transitions from non-formal to formal education, as we saw from the tracer study, had been unable to climb very far up the formal education ladder.

The information I gathered through the informal survey I conducted regarding the education levels of 53 ASHAs and AWWs, corroborated Vimala's perceptions. 38% of the women workers had BA degrees, followed by 25% who had Class 12 certificates and 21% who had completed Class 8. The percentage of Dalit AWW and ASHAs whose educational qualifications were at the Class 8 level was 50%. This was much higher than was the case for the non-Dalit castes. All the General category (upper caste) women had qualifications higher than Class 8. A significant 65% of the OBC women and 60% of the General category women had BA degrees. Though just a small sample, one can tentatively surmise from these findings that Dalits, who had entered this space of low-end government jobs had the lowest qualifications, which given the low level of Dalit women's participation in higher education, or unchi padhai (to use Vimala's phrase), could indeed mean they would be edged out, as Dalit women like Vimala were aware. Further, as mentioned earlier, the data hints at the fact that other OBCs and not just the traditional upper caste groups were presenting the greatest challenge.

As we have discussed throughout this chapter, while having educational qualifications—preferably unchi padhai—were necessary to secure jobs, they were definitely not enough. What was needed were networks and connections. Upper castes have traditionally had powerful connections in the bureaucracy and political establishment and Dalit communities have slowly built these over time. In rural UP, Dalit networks began emerging in the 1990s coinciding with the rise of lower-caste political mobilisation.

In many of the cases I studied, where young women had pursued some formal education, I noticed a pattern in their mode of making and leveraging connections. The male heads of the family, who had no formal education themselves, became local leaders of the BSP and developed 'political' connections as a result. Such men acted as 'netas'

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[59] Between 1950-51 and 1999-2000, Primary schools in India increased 3 fold (from 2,01,000 to 6,42,000); Upper Primary schools increased by 14 times (from 14,000 to 117,000); and Secondary schools increased by 16 times (from 7,000 to 117,000). Arun C. Mehta, Status of Secondary Education in India, New Delhi: National Institute of Education Planning and Administration (NIEPA), undated.

(leaders) in their communities: they promoted the BSP's agenda, but also built their image and personal clout by 'getting work done' for other Dalits and eventually helped other castes as well. A neta's work was mediating disputes, sorting out paperwork and accompanying villagers to the block office or tehsil to expedite their work there.[60] For their family members, they got schemes allotted or brokered jobs using connections built through caste and political networks. Sometimes they were paid money for their efforts, at other times 'payment' was banked in terms of future favours to be redeemed. This work was called *netagiri* [61] (Being a neta or leader).

Netagiri, according to Vimala and other informants, who represented this group, was their fathers' fulltime occupation. This is how Vimala described it: "Netagiri? You go and sit with people. My father roams around. He knows all the *samajik kanoons* (social laws) and legal ones. He advises people. He is also party ka neta (party leader). No *samajik kaam* (social work) can be done in his absence. When the Lekhpal[62] comes to measure someone's land my father is called." So, how then did these young women use their father's netagiri?

Vimala was the ASHA worker for the Dalit purva of Gureh village in Banda district, her *sasural* (marital home). She was a young girl when she came to the MSK. Her 'neta' father had not been keen on educating his daughters. It wasn't the *rivaz* (custom) he told me. Former MSK teachers I interviewed recalled having made several visits to Nanha ka Dera, Vimala's natal village, to convince him.[63] Finally, after much persuasion he sent Vimala to the MSK and was so pleased with the results that he quickly took on the mantle of changing the rivaz and actively promoted girls' education. He sent two of his other daughters and convinced his older brother to send his two daughters as well, and began petitioning the administration for a school in the village. Though he was politically active before he joined the BSP, he was suddenly able to see the connections

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[60] Locally described as *kagaz nikalvana* (literally getting papers out) or *paisa nikalvana* (extracting monies due, often from Government schemes).

[61] Sounds similar to *dadagiri* – a colloquial term used to describe actions of a bully.

[62] Lekhpal (formerly known as Patwari, which is also used) is a powerful Government officer who maintains village revenue accounts and village land records.

[63] To enlist candidates for the MSK courses, teachers and other MS staff would fan out into the villages where they worked to convince families, in particular male members to send their daughters to the MSK. Being a residential programme, this was especially challenging. The teachers often sought out community leaders as a breakthrough with them made mobilisation easier.

between Dalit awareness and girls' education, and the possibility of an image makeover for himself.[64]

After graduating from the MSK, and with the help of the MSK teachers, Vimala got admission in a local private school in Tindwari, about a 10 km bus ride away. She shone there. She led the assembly, performed on stage and was called upon to explain lessons to the class (see chapter 3). Vimala's father, despite having fashioned himself as a promoter of girls' education by then, and despite Vimala's protestations, got her married soon after she completed class 8. Vimala had been terribly angry, partly because she had wanted to continue studying and partly because she felt she was being made to marry 'below' her expectations.[65] After marriage, she negotiated hard and continued with her education—paid for in part by her father and her very reluctant husband. She finally gave up when she failed the Class 10 exam.[66]

At this point Vimala told her father that it was his responsibility to get her a job. "I had told my *babu* (father). You are not letting me study further. You got me married. Then you must make sure I have enough to eat. I will not go to *pardes* (literally foreign land) to work.[67] I will stay at home and work even if it is *choti si choti naukri* (smallest of jobs). *Mein arh gayi* (I became pig-headed), kept nagging him." [68]

Vimala made this demand because she knew her father had good contacts and eventually he was able to oblige her. He heard through his network that an ASHA position had opened in Vimala's sasural and called in a favour from the ANM (Auxilliary Nurse Midwife) there.[69] The ANM recommended Vimala's name to the pradhanin

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[64] Vimala's father was something of a political maverick. He had been involved with local politics from the 1970s, first with the CPI, then the Congress and then later the BSP. The BSP was for him the "best fit", he said to me. Naresh (Local leader, Vimala's father), interviewed by author, Nanha ka Dera village, September 30, 2015 (changed name). His case was not unusual. Kanika's father (see chapter 5) has a similar trajectory.

[65] According to Vimala her marriage was arranged because her husband was tall and as she was dark and scrawny her father felt it would be hard to find her a better match. Her in-laws wanted an educated girl and her father was able to pay a lower dowry. Vimala's mother confirmed this. Vimala's mother, interviewed by author, Nanha ka Dera, April 24, 2015.

[66] Other MSK graduates I spoke with also said that marriage had thwarted their aspirations for further education but also became a point of negotiation to be allowed to continue their studies after marriage and to secure financial resources for this either from their prospective sasural or natal families.

[67] Used to mean migration for (most often) manual labour.

[68] Vimala, interview, Karvi, 2.3.15

[69] ANM (or simply nurse, locally) is a professional position. To become an ANM requires undertaking a 2-year nursing diploma course after class 12. ANMs work at health sub-

(female pradhan). The ANM and the pradhanin were both Brahmins, Vimala was the only Dalit aspirant, and so the fact that the ANM vouched for Vimala proved important. There were others with unchi padhai and as there were no reservations for Dalits for this post, having 'proper' social connections proved critical. By brokering this job, Vimala's father both obliged his daughter and bolstered his neta image. He had also used the pehchaan, sampark and pahunch strategy.

Though Vimala was an ASHA worker assigned to her marital village, she didn't stay there much and spent most of her time at her better-off natal home. Her husband was mostly working in Delhi[70] and she was loath to pitch in with domestic and agricultural work at her in-laws. She was conscious of her status and asserted herself in her sasural by separating out her 'own' space: a small room and kitchen. Her 'modern' kitchen with a gas stove and shiny utensils stood out when compared with that of her sister-in-law, who cooked on an earthen *chullah* (stove). She didn't share her earnings with her in-laws and asserted that it was enough that she had raised their status in the village. Everyone knew the family and their house.[71] She has worked out her professional schedule such that she was available in Gureh on the days she had to make house visits or on inoculation days. She maintained her registers, attended meetings at the block office and had given her mobile number to pregnant women she cared for so they could call her in case of an emergency.

Vimala had also built an excellent relationship with the Dalit community she served. I accompanied her on her home visits and she was warmly welcomed into every home. The women were happy to cover for her in her absence. When I asked her why she wasn't writing down the information she was gathering during our visit, she said she was not in a hurry, as she knows every woman and every child and never forgets, it's

centres under a Primary Health Centre and perform several roles such as immunization, providing maternal, child health, family planning services and health, sanitation and nutrition education. ANM's are supported by four or five ASHAs and are considered superior in rank to them. Differences in remuneration are stark. At the time ANM's were earning between Rs. 25,000 and 37,000 and ASHA's Rs. 2,750, which with incentives could go up to about Rs. 5,000 a month. But as the incentives were not fixed this amount was not guaranteed.

[70] He did a variety of petty jobs (whatever was available): painting, construction, security guard and was driving a school van when I interviewed Vimala.

[71] When I went to Gureh for the first time I stopped at a kiosk to ask if someone could guide me to Vimala's house in the Dalit basti. I was asked for her husband and father-in-laws names, which I didn't know then. When I told them that she was the ASHA they all exclaimed that I should have said so earlier. A small boy was despatched to take me to her house (Field visit, Gureh, October 14, 2015).

never a problem. Vimala wears her Dalit identity on her sleeve and quite openly takes on her upper caste colleagues. "I don't keep quiet if my colleagues try and push me down either because of my education or caste. I speak up at meetings. Since the MSK, I wanted to be known."

Vimala's case was not an isolated one[72] (see extended footnote for another case study). There is an extensive body of scholarly work pertaining to 'broker' figures, but neta fathers stood out. The research has mostly looked at the following themes: the mediating role that 'brokers' play between 'blurred' state-society boundaries[73], corruption and political brokerage[74], how 'brokers' have facilitated their clients access to development goods[75] or resources such as land (and the tensions caused),[76] or helping slum dweller navigate the city.[77] Though I was not investigating the broker figure I do

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[72] Dipti's case (name changed) parallels Vimala's. In 1999 Dipti studied at the MSK, (after her father too had to be convinced to send her), joined the formal stream in Class 6, and after Class 8 (as there wasn't a good school near her home in Kothilihai), she and her best friend from the MSK lived at Dipti's maternal uncle's house in Banda District, where both girls continued their education till Class 10. At this point, Dipti was pressurised into marriage. Her father had in the meanwhile become a champion of girls' education, having independently maintained connections with MS, which he used to build his neta persona, much like Vimala's father. Dipti's marital family was *kamzor* (weak), so she too turned to her father and insisted he bankroll her education (which she pursued till the 12th) and then used his networks to get her a job as an Anganwadi (for which he also paid a bribe). Dipti sees herself as pioneering the trend in her family of investing in girls' education and employment and moving her family ahead. One sister is an ANM (nurse), another is an Anganwadi worker and the youngest, after completing a residential vocational training course (through MS) was working in a factory in Noida, just outside Delhi. Dipti's father told me that Dipti's experience had brought him close to a new world, and he had used the social connections and 'new thinking' to promote his daughters' education, to arrange good marriages and secure employment for his younger daughters, to build his persona (as a forward thinking Dalit man) and further his own political career. While I was doing fieldwork, he stood for panchayat elections, which he lost. (I spent time with Dipti and her family and conducted several interviews. Dipti's father, interviewed by author, Kothilihai, October 15, 2015; Dipti (Anganwadi worker, MSK graduate, interviewed by author, March 18, 2015).

[73] Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995), 375–402.

[74] Jeffrey Witsoe, "Corruption as Power: Caste and the Political Imagination of the Postcolonial State," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1, (2011), 73–85.

[75] Anirudh Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[76] Michael Levien, "Social Capital as Obstacle to Development: Brokering Land, Norms, and Trust in Rural India," *World Development* 74 (2015), 77–92.

[77] Lisa Bjorkman, "'You Can't Buy a Vote': Meanings of Money in a Mumbai Election," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 4 (2014), 617–634; Johnathan Shapiro Anjaria, "Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1 (2011), 58–72.

believe that the cases I have described would add to this body of research. My observations of the relationship between small time netas (the fathers) who acted as brokers and female family members (daughters) lie at the intersections of education, gender, caste and the family in the jaal of the ever-shifting public domain.

I found these examples noteworthy as they indicated a pattern amongst those who had accessed the kind of education described in chapter 3. Though the 'broker' figure here is also male, two distinct differences evident from usual trajectories of upward mobility where men play a role in catalysing the process are the dynamic and strategic relationships built for mutual gain between fathers and daughters, and how the male family members used their daughters forays into education to recast themselves as public figures (see chapter 5).

The fathers, when they sent their daughters to the MSK, were already dabbling in local Dalit political work, but they used this experience of educating their daughters through a part-feminist, part-state non-formal education programme, in strategic ways. They gained access to a different network of women activists and development officials, which they used to recast themselves as 'reformers', championing the cause of women's education. Their association with MS didis (teachers and staff) gave them a new status and eventually enabled them to avail other opportunities.

On the other side, many of the daughters also acted strategically and did not relinquish their claims on their natal family after marriage, as is usually the case. Many of the young women I interviewed were the first Dalit girls in their families and communities to get an education. As 'pioneers' they missed out on higher education opportunities or had borne the brunt of the restrictions of early marriages, which they resented, and so they leaned in in other ways to take from their natal families what some of expressed as their due. These girls as much as their fathers, have played a very important role in educating their siblings (see chapter 5).[78]

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[78] Many of my informants had paid for their siblings' education, from their own earnings or by hiding the fact from their husbands and in-laws, when they used household resources. In some cases, my informants invited their younger sisters to stay with them. They paid for their sibling's education and often in exchange for childcare, so that they could work.'

IV.   THE COLLATERAL DAMAGES OF UPWARD MOBILITY

Let's return to Besaniya's story. We had left her narrative at a point where it read somewhat like a straightforward success story. However, by the time I was spending time with Besaniya, she consistently conveyed to me a deep anxiety and a loss of self-esteem. Her tensions resulted primarily from her troubled relationships with her compatriots at the sangathan, her family and the Dalit community in her village. The strains were triggered around the very two things—her job as an AWH and her son getting the ration dealership—that had put her on the path to upward mobility.

By the time I was doing my research, Besaniya's relationship with the sangathan—an institution that she had been instrumental in building—was extremely fraught. She referred to her involvement with the sangathan in the past tense but also quickly rebutted any suggestion I made of a growing distance. She no longer went to sangathan meetings. She attributed this to a lack of time, a reason no one really believed. Besaniya still had a gruelling daily routine, which began at the crack of dawn. But it was unlikely that her schedule was any more punishing than when she worked as a daily-wage labourer. She had found time then to actively participate in the sangathan's activities.

For her sangathan compatriots, the strain began with Besaniya's inactions, which they believed helped prop up a dysfunctional AWC. The AWW—Besaniya's immediate supervisor— never came to the AWC nor did she distribute the supplies she received from the government. Hot meals for children and *panjiri* (nutritional supplement for pregnant women) were only intermittently provided. Besaniya however, dutifully opened the centre everyday and claimed that she challenged the AWW who only abused by her.[79] Villagers felt sorry for Besaniya but held that she covered for the AWW to save her own job and even possibly a share in the spoils. In the end Besaniya could do nothing about it and their children suffered.

However, a more recent and more volatile point of friction was on account of her son's handling of the ration shop. Villagers repeatedly told me that Pradeep was

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[79] The AWW was a young educated Dalit woman who routinely put Besaniya down whenever she tried to bring up issues with her. The slight that rankled the most was her referring to Besaniya as 'angootha chaap' (i.e. illiterate, literally 'thumb print'). Besaniya was reluctant to complain as the AWW would remind her that the programme had recently set an age limit that Besaniya had crossed (Besaniya, interview, October 11, 2014).

abusive, arrogant and corrupt.[80] Women alleged that the rations that they were denied for various reasons made their way to Pradeep's kirana shop and were sold in the open market. To them Pradeep behaved as objectionably as any upper caste kotedar and Besaniya did nothing to rein in her son.

The overt support that Besaniya apparently gave Pradeep also caused a rift in her relationship with her oldest son, Rampal, who himself aspired for upward mobility. Rampal by now had had established his sons in the rajmistri trade. He no longer allowed his female family members to do any kind of wage labour. He was determined to get his youngest bahu a job as an AWW. Rampal was not on talking terms with his youngest brother. He disapproved of his allegedly corrupt practices as a kotedar, not least because he had helped him secure the dealership. He disliked Pradeep's aggressive behaviour, drinking habits and the brawls he had with his wife and others. He was upset that Besaniya stood up for Pradeep, and said she should have known better, given her background as a women's leader.[81] Pradeep's behaviour, he believed, reinforced all the worst stereotypes that people had of Dalits. Instead of goodwill, the family and community was being heaped with disrepute, which directly impacted his political ambitions. Rampal had set up his middle bahu as his proxy candidate[82] to contest the Block Development Council (BDC) seat in 2015. Rampal (or rather his bahu) lost despite his own and his family's connections.[83] He bitterly told me that the many Dalit

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[80] Technically, ration is meant to be distributed on specified days, but in practice ration distribution usually extended over several days. Pradeep insisted on distributing rations only on designated days, which made it difficult for women, as they worked and couldn't always get away or were often unable to put together the money. He also didn't provide credit (allow people to pay at a later date), which was expected (upper caste kotedars with deep pockets were able to do that).

[81] Rampal and his wife felt they had picked up the burden when Besaniya was away at the MSK. They also didn't like the fact that Besaniya handed over all her earnings to Pradeep.

[82] The BDC seat (for Baghora and Kothilihai) was reserved for a SC woman which was particularly telling, as Rampal we know had been proud of the fact that his mother had contested on her own steam several years ago. An old sangathan hand won the seat. In contrast Rampal's bahu, who was in purdah told me she had not met anyone to solicit votes. Her father-in-law was doing that. He enlisted none of his family members to campaign for him, not even Besaniya. The Panchayati Raj system is a three tiered one – the lowest tier was the village panchayat (pradhan), followed by the Block Development Council and above that was the Zila Parishad (or District level body)

[83] Rampal had banked on Dalit support (Baghora was a Chamar dominated village) and his work as a mason had allowed him to build vyvhar across caste boundaries.

candidates[84] had split the votes, but more importantly the Chamars of Baghora had not voted for him because of his brother's unpopularity. More pertinently, Dalits were reluctant to make one family powerful. Indeed many people I spoke with told me that Besaniya's family had already cornered a quasi- government job and a ration shop; if the BDC seat—spoken of as a resource, not a post—also went to this family, they would become unstoppable.

A similar sentiment of wanting to teach the family a lesson is apparently what drove Baghora's Dalit community to orchestrate a campaign against Pradeep, which eventually cost him the ration dealership. I am recounting how the events unfolded as it reveals how the micro-politics of caste relations worked out.

It all began one ration distribution day, when a Brahmin villager had demanded that he be served first and Pradeep in his usual abrasive manner refused, saying that he would serve the customers in the order that they had come.[85] The Brahmin then abused Pradeep, who then apparently flung his card back at him (some said he tore it). The reprisal was swift. The Brahmins machinated with the newly elected Dalit pradhan, Lokesh, to teach Pradeep a lesson with a trumped-up complaint, a task made easy due to his unpopularity. Lokesh had won with Brahmin support and it was payback time. He called a meeting and Pradeep was told that the complaint would be withdrawn if he apologised to the Brahmin. Pradeep did this and even touched his feet. But that wasn't enough and the Brahmins wanted a public apology in front of the whole village. Pradeep refused, he was beaten up, the complaint against him was filed, an enquiry instituted and finally Pradeep lost the dealership. Besaniya had tried to intervene at various points by speaking to villagers and even apparently some officials, but it was too little too late as far as community was concerned. The last information I received was that the dealership had gone back to a Brahmin from Kothilihai. [86]

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[84] There were a total of 6 Dalit candidates contesting for the BDC post – 4 Chamars, 1 Kori and 1 Valmiki. The candidates included Dipti's mother (a proxy for her father) and Shanti, a sangathan woman from Kothilihai, who eventually won the election.

[85] In all the narrations about the incident that I heard his caste and not his name was used.

[86] Events unfolded over a period of time. I updated myself through phone conversations with Pushpa (January 1, 2016).

Women's Individual and Collective Empowerment

Besaniya's predicaments were embedded in the tensions between notions of individual and collective empowerment generated (see introduction) within three interconnected sites—the women's sangathan, the family and the Dalit community—and had ironically resulted from Besaniya's attempts at remaking herself, her family and the larger community of Dalit women.

Let's consider the sangathan dynamics. Could Besaniya have balanced the pressures of being a sangathan leader while holding a quasi sarkari post? Could Besaniya have been both an insider and outsider within the sangathan?

With regard to the ration dealership, villagers' disgruntlement with Pradeep's behaviour was extended to Besaniya. In the past, as a sangathan leader, Besaniya would have confronted the kotedar and tried to resolve such issues, but this time the shoe was on the other foot, as the allegations personally affected her. In both instances—the complaints regarding the non-functioning AWC and with ration distribution—she was unable to or chose not to address these and in so doing, the message sent out was that she was complicit in the alleged misappropriation and therefore no longer interested in the community's welfare.

Plainly, Besaniya found herself between a rock and a hard place. Therefore, a way out for her had been to throw the gauntlet back to the sangathan. She explained her position to me in this way: "It's not possible for me to do anything. Now I act thinking of *gaondaari*. Earlier I would just speak if I felt something was wrong. Now I have to weigh things before I speak. I have made them *jagruk* (aware). Now the younger women are educated, they should know. Why don't they speak?"

Was Besaniya simply passing the buck? There are two aspects to Besaniya's quotation above that I would like to draw attention to. First, Besaniya use of the term gaondaari—someone who looks out for the interests of the *gaon* (village)—innovatively. Gaondaari is infused with meaning when considered in conjunction with *duniyadaari* (or a worldly-wise person) who is inclined toward making strategic decision making for personal gain. Besaniya was making it clear to me that she was thinking of larger village interests (gaondaari) and not personal interests (duniyadaari*)* by 'rising above' all the dynamics, which prevented her from taking sides or actively intervening.

These however, were expectations that her sangathan colleagues still had of her, and by not fulfilling them she was a 'compromised' person. Her former MSK teacher also concurred. Besaniya, she said, used to be "*bejhijhak*" (without hesitation), "*joojh jaati thi*" (a fighter). There was a "*zameen aasmaan ka fark* (difference between the land and sky) between the 'old' Besaniya and 'today's Besaniya.'[87] But Besaniya did not see herself in this light. Instead she saw herself as no longer being impulsive and having a wider constituency to whom she was responsible. By invoking gaondaari, Besaniya was reclaiming her status as a person of public worth—and asserting that her sphere of influence was now beyond that of a sangathan activist.

However, Besaniya's eloquent plea of acting in the interest of gaondaari was at odds with her reactions to allegations against her son, the kotedar that I witnessed. During a night-meeting with women when the problems with the kotedar's behaviour came up, Besaniya fiercely denied all allegations, then provided an explanation. When women continued to argue she turned around and said, "do what you want, complain" and then finally she said, "if you complain I will support you." I observed other instances where Besaniya's responses followed a similar cycle of aggression, rational explanation and finally resignation. In the end, for Besaniya, the lines between gaondaari over duniyadaari, were far from clear and she clearly vacillated between the two.

A second reason for Besaniya's lack of remorse for her inaction was her belief that she had done her bit for 'the cause', by investing time and labour to make women of her community jagruk, and that it was now time for this educated generation to pick up the mantle. We return to the idea of intergenerational difference in perspective regarding education's purpose. Besaniya is implying that it is not that she is selfish, but that the present generation of women like the AWW—who is a young educated Dalit woman—are reaping the benefits of the labour and sacrifices of women like her.[88] Further she made it clear that it is not just her but the sangathan that had also been diminished over time. "Why isn't the sangathan *ek jooth* (united)?" she had asked her former MSK teacher during a visit.

Besaniya's observation was not incorrect. When I was conducting my research, the sangathan was barely meeting. Geeta, a young educated Dalit woman, who was a 'new

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[87] Conversation with Pushpa, Baghora, October 15, 2015.

[88] Several of my older informants expressed similar views. Especially pointing out that they had gained nothing economically.

generation' sangathan leader, frustratedly told me that it was impossible to get women together, even after several house calls.[89] They said they did not have time. Women told me that they didn't see any *laabh* (gain) in coming to meetings. By this they meant individual financial gain, which they apparently valued more than the gains that would accrue from taking up collective issues that enhanced the status and dignity of Dalit women, struggles they had earlier taken up.

The contentious dynamics between Besaniya and the women's sangathan have a certain resonance with the broader changes in the conceptualisations of empowerment within women's development discourses. By the late 1990s the neoliberal turn in the political economy had an enormous impact on women's development discourses (see introduction). Broad-based mobilisation work around women's issues, land, wages etc. had being been overtaken by the discourse of women's empowerment through micro-credit interventions by the 2000s, even in my research area.[90]

When I was doing my fieldwork, microcredit programmes were being run by a plethora of organisations—Government, NGOs and Corporate bodies—who had made inroads into practically every village. In Baghora, sangathan women were not only members of multiple microcredit groups, but young educated sangathan leaders like Geeta were even working for them on a contract basis.[91] This seemed to have dissipated the sangathan's energies and the enthusiasm for collective social issues seemed to have waned, though those who were working for these projects refuted such suggestions.

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[89] Geeta (Literacy teacher and sangathan member), interviewed by author, Baghora village, November 18, 2015.

[90] Vanangana had run a savings and credit programme but shut it down for many of the critiques about microcredit programmes laid out in the introduction. They re-evisioned the sangathan (renamed Dalit Mahila Samiti) to work only on issues such as violence against women, fighting caste discrimination, seeking government accountability and helping Dalit women to access entitlements and building Dalit women's leadership at the grassroots. When I was doing fieldwork the sangathan took up issues but the involvement appeared limited to a much smaller group of women leaders.

[91] The contract work that sangathan leaders did was limited and instrumental. They introduced the programme managers (who are outsiders) to the women and enlisted their membership. They were paid per task, much like the ASHA workers, for the number of women they enlisted or the number of meetings they conducted. Programme managers I spoke to told me sangathan women were ideal recruits as they have good contacts, are confident and mobile (discussed in the introduction). Munni, a former sangathan leader, who was working for such an SHG programme won the BDC seat defeating Dipti's father and Rampal (both fighting as proxies). She extensively used her contacts and goodwill during her campaign. Munni (changed name) (BDC member, former sangathan member), Bartarapurva, Chitrakoot District, December 18, 2015.

If one set of Besaniya's tensions was built around the notions of individual and collective empowerment located within women's development discourses, these themes also resonated with the intra-community tensions within the Dalit community. A common explanation proffered for various setbacks that Dalits faced was simply—*Dalit Dalit ka dushman hai* (Dalits are their own worst enemies). This was similar to a common patriarchal saying, *aurat aurat ka dushman hai* (women are women's worst enemies), used to explain problems between female family members, such as the troubled dynamics between mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-laws; or glossed as an explanation of violence against women, instead of interrogating women's location within the power dynamics of a patriarchal power structure.[92] In village after village where Dalits had lost panchayat elections, I heard Dalits blaming themselves for being jealous or selfish and for their inability to put community interests above individual ones. As with women, Dalits have limited space to exercise power and therefore attempts by individuals to get ahead are criticised viciously by members of the community.

Two useful explanations put forward by Rampal and Besaniya used the metaphor of the jaal to communicate how messy processes of upward mobility were for Dalits. Rampal said, "They understand *Behenji* (referring to BSP leader Mayawati). But at the village level they get caught in the jaal laid out for them." Rampal was making a distinction between Dalits' understanding of power at the macro level and its micro-politics. According to him, Dalits knew well the importance of gaining political and social power at the macro level and had benefitted from it. Since the BSP's rise, Dalits' equation with institutions of power such as the administration and police had changed dramatically. But in the micro context, Rampal argued, Dalits want to feel *apna-apna* (individual) power and make it visible to others, even if it meant aligning with upper castes or bringing down one's own family members.

Besaniya described her predicaments to me as feeling caught in a jaal. As she tried to change her circumstances or to move out of one set of problems by following one strand of the web, it resulted in her getting stuck in another. She had managed to escape hard labour and get a job, but that landed her in other problems. She educated herself to help her Dalit sisters but now they had turned against her.

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[92] This axiom is regularly interrogated during gender trainings (described in chapter 2).

For individuals like Besaniya, whose journeys of social mobility begin as both individual and collective endeavours, aligning with the sangathan's collective mandate of women's empowerment—that is putting collective interests above individual ones—eventually becomes difficult. It is always the ones moving ahead in the weakest communities who are called upon to sacrifice. The story of Besaniya's alienation from the sangathan was located in a larger story of the dissipation and disintegration of women's collectives as Dalit women are always scrambling to untangle themselves from the jaal. It was a small pie—whether a ration dealership or a low-end job and even educational qualifications—that several people were vying for.

I last spoke to Besaniya when her carefully built struggle for social mobility appeared to have unravelled. I asked her how she was feeling and if she was disappointed or angry. She thought about it for a bit and replied, "I was an illiterate bandhua mazdoor. I have studied, worked as a dai, fought panchayat elections, built the women's sangathan, got a job, and brought the ration dealership to my home. I have walked all these steps." [93]

Concluding Observations

In this chapter I have examined the relationship between Dalit women's education, empowerment and upward mobility, where access to lower echelon jobs within Government programmes for women have played an important role in improving the social status of a specific group of Dalit women. Women rather than men, as is usually presented as being the case, were catalysts of such processes.

Whereas dominant discourses—policy discourses, popular accounts, and to some extent academic literature—posit trajectories of upward mobility or processes of empowerment as linear and intrinsically stable, Besaniya provides an apt metaphor—that of a web—to describe the difficult nature of processes of social change. Her description of trying to change one set of circumstances only to be confronted by others, shows how processes of social change work on the ground and the dynamic nature of these crisscrossing social relations. The jaal metaphor also usefully calls into question narratives of upward mobility that isolate education from other social processes, where education, it

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[93] Besaniya, interview, October 15, 2015.

is believed, will independently break through various structures of power and empower women.

The life history narratives in this chapter have shown how the educational inputs that women received were crucial in creating new ideas of Dalit women's subjectivities and in devising two inter-generationally different sets of strategies to initiate processes of upward mobility. The older women established networks following distinct steps: of creating an identity (pehchaan) as literate, educated informed Dalit women, using that identity to build connections (vyvhar) beyond their family and community and ultimately using their identities and self-confidence to reach out (pahunch) and access benefits. The younger generation of Dalit women I studied, who were adolescent girls' when they came to the MSK, also used the education they received, strategically. They established a confrontational yet collaborative relationship with their 'neta' fathers – where both fathers and daughters tactically deployed themselves as 'pioneers in education'. One could call this a different kind of feminist consciousness, where the family as a site of unequal relations has been critiqued but also been strategically reinvoked.

This chapter shows that education and its use in securing social and economic advancement is a painful process for women from marginalised communities. The collateral damage of the empowering aspects of such mobility lay in the tensions between notions of individual and collective empowerment, with other Dalit women, within the family and the Dalit community more generally. As this chapter shows, the tensions can be explained by the limited room for manoeuvre that Dalit women have, and the intractable nature of social relations that kick in when they embark on processes of individual and collective social change, rather than discourses of jealousy that loop the problem back onto women or the Dalit community. For women, the pain is exacerbated by the loss of relationships that they experience within the family, but also in this case the new friendships that women like Besaniya worked hard to establish. Finally, the insider-outsider predicaments that Besaniya's position generated—Besaniya's case, her efforts at performing her sarkari role properly while simultaneously challenging an entrenched system—had proven disastrous for her self and public esteem and not resulted in any improvement in the circumstances either.

In the end, the story this chapter tells about the relationship between education that was feminist in content and pedagogy, and the process of individual and collective

self-making that it generated, was that it was neither a straightforward upward movement nor a freefalling nosedive, but rather (to use Besaniya's chosen metaphor), located within a complicated and unstable web (jaal) of intersecting social relationships.

CHAPTER 5

"MY HISTORY IS COMPLICATED"[1]
INTERGENERATIONAL NARRATIVES OF EDUCATION:
(RE)MAKING THE SELF AND FAMILY

In the previous chapter I used the experiences of a set of Dalit women who had secured low-end jobs with government-sponsored women's development programmes to discuss the complexities inherent in the relationship between rural Dalit women's education, upward mobility and social transformation. Their pathways and predicaments to seeking empowerment principally entailed negotiating and realigning an existing jaal—a web of power exercised through relationships, social structures and systems—within which education and the mainstream arena of government employment was embedded. An emic concept, the jaal aptly described the unstable and conflict-ridden journeys of rural Dalit women's self-transformation, and ultimately conveyed the protagonist's profound sense of entrapment that had ironically accompanied the impressive processes of social mobility she had catalysed.

In this chapter and the next I continue to explore the jaal as a conceptual framework to extend and deepen our understanding of the relationship between rural Dalit women's education and individual and collective empowerment while focusing on a different dimension of this relationship—its generative aspects. I will be discussing the processes of self-making through education followed by another group of women who channelized their efforts towards creating an alternative jaal outside of the mainstream, while also rigorously engaging with the latter.

The next two chapters revolve around the biography of one young Dalit woman, Kanika, who has made remarkable personal strides during her life course that not only enhanced the status of her family in substantial ways but also played a significant role in reshaping gender and caste relations and Dalit women's subjectivities within the public sphere.

Kanika's educational journey began in the early nineties, when, while still an adolescent, she repeatedly confronted her family, demanding to be allowed to study, first

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[1] Kanika (name changed), MSK graduate), March 19, 2014.

at the MSK (see chapter 3) and later to continue her formal education. In 2002 she started working as a 'barefoot' journalist with a local community-based newspaper—*Khabar Lahariya* (literally 'News Waves')—that had been initiated as a continuing education project for rural women by Nirantar and has since gone on to establish itself as a rural media organisation led by Dalit women like Kanika.

Using Kanika's life history as a base, chapters 5 and 6 focus on rural Dalit women as makers of a new jaal, which allows the metaphor to be read differently. I will highlight important points of judaav (attachment) between the strands that comprise the web that enabled the protagonist to make connections between her individual journey and larger processes of social transformation.

Over the next two chapters I discuss four such points of judaav, which also serve as a springboard to discussing larger issues, and in this chapter I elaborate the first two. In the first part of this chapter I look at the first judaav established between Kanika and the project of feminist education. She attained access to such an education through a process of struggle, but it eventually became a life-long passion and a vehicle for personal and social transformation. For her the process of self-making through education was not just about achieving formal qualifications, or simply economic mobility but about imbibing and internalizing feminist politics, leading to the second point of (re)connection: her relationship with her family, which was troubled but also critical to defining her personhood.

In Part 2 of this chapter I examine the contrasting and competing intergenerational narratives of education that emerged within Kanika's family. These narratives reflect three visions of social transformation through education—of feminist consciousness, Dalit consciousness and employment or economic mobility—and the encounters between them that result in the formation of different subjectivities, within one family. That these distinct educational visions, informed by different ideologies developed and co-existed within one family is revealing in itself, but equally powerful is how these divergent visions interacted with each other, were reshaped as a result and were used strategically by the different actors, leading to differing outcomes.

As in the previous chapter, the jaal as an analytic lens was provided to me by the protagonist of this chapter, when she described her journey of self-making as a series of new connections and re-connections. "I kept making new connections and the old ones

that had broken I tried remaking differently", Kanika told me. The connections she alludes to are to ideas, institutions and people she has engaged with during her life course, important both in her journey of self-transformation and to the larger project of social transformation as well.

I.   SELF-MAKING AND FEMINIST EDUCATION

"Mera itihas jatil hai" (My history is complicated): Kanika

I used to go *chup chup kar* (secretly) to the literacy centre started by MS in my village. My father did not approve. Being the eldest daughter, I had to do a lot of work. When I heard that the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK) was being opened in Karvi I badly wanted to go. But I wasn't allowed. You see, I was already married, but my gauna hadn't happened. I was married off very early. I don't remember much about my wedding, just that I was carried to my *jaimala* (garland exchange ceremony).

My parents said my in-laws should decide about whether I could go [to the MSK]. The didis [from MS] came and spoke to my father. He wasn't convinced. Finally, when he was out of the house I ran away with two girls from my village who were going [to the MSK]. There were rumours that they [MS] were taking girls there [MSK] for *galat kaam* ('dubious activities'). The centre teacher, Sunita, was from my community—that helped. Eventually we convinced my father and I stayed at the MSK. I learnt, I learnt a lot. It changed my life.

After returning [from the MSK] I desperately wanted to continue studying. I was *paagal* (crazy) about studying. My father said, 'If the desire to study further is being *jagrit* (aroused) in you, this must be curbed.' I again called Vanangana and MS to intervene. My father told them, 'you go and talk in Kalupur, her sasural'. If they [in-laws] are *raazi* (in agreement) then we [natal family] will also agree. Imagine, the didis even went to my sasural and after explaining to them a lot, they agreed. My gauna was to be delayed.

I studied in the 5th class in the village school. When I had to take admission in the 6th in Nai Duniya (next village), the *arranga* (tussle) started again. Despite everything [the agreement] they kept the date of the gauna at the time of my exams. My father said, 'We want to relieve ourselves of this *sar par bojha* (burden on our heads). We have given you enough *azadi* (freedom)'. Madhavi didi intervened again. Finally another *samjhauta* (compromise) was worked out. I will go to my sasural once, then I will return and stay at my *maika* (natal home) and study.

For classes 6,7,8, I walked about 4-5 kilometres to school. I got a small scholarship, and MS organized my books. I managed somehow. After the 8th I

went to my sasural during the holidays. I was studying in the 11th when my husband fell ill. Money was needed urgently. We used my stipend, took loans and eventually we went and did *mazdoori* in Punjab.[2] I lost a year [academic].

After returning from Punjab I started living at my in-laws. It was always tense there. No one understood why I wanted to study this badly. I was not treated well. But I had *atma vishwas* (self-confidence). I started doing part time work with MS and Vanangana. I met my present partner while acting in a street play for Vanangana.

I heard that KL was starting, and they were looking for MSK graduates to recruit. I joined KL in 2002. I didn't realize then what a big *kadam* (step) it was, that it was to become my life. I learnt so many new things – politics, interviewing, writing a news report. I started earning regularly. On the side, I did my BA and my MA.[3]

I can't say that I got educated because of my parents. But for other girls, *padhai ki seedhi chadhna* (climbing the steps of education) certainly started with me. When I started going to school, some girls from my village took admission. I was the first girl in my village to study in Inter-College (Class 12). I was the first girl to study in my family. Now all my siblings, all my sisters have studied. For their education my father spent money. He has sold land to educate them. Who knew that a Dalit girl from Kunjanpurva [natal village] would become a recognized journalist!

I have done a lot in my life, but I live with *asamanjas* (inner turmoil). The *jagah* (space) I should get in my family I haven't got that fully. I will tell you my *andar ki baat* [literally, 'inside talk'] some other time. *Mera itihas jatil hai, didi.* (My history is complicated, sister)[4]

From the narrative above I would like to draw attention to three facets of Kanika's remarkable educational journey—those of struggle, desire and danger—that make it a quintessentially feminist one. The process, both potent and painful, of educating herself, earned her a Master's degree but also facilitated her deep judaav with, and ultimately an abiding commitment to, the cause of feminist education.

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[2] While seasonal migration to Punjab to work as daily wagers and in brick kilns is common in this area (see chapter 2), none of Kanika's siblings or peers had done this kind.

[3] A common practice in the area is to take admission in a college where you only have to appear for the exams. Kanika was registered in a college in Attara, a town in Banda district.

[4] Kanika (KL journalist, MSK graduate), interviewed by author, Karvi, March 19, 2014. Interview edited slightly for length and clarity. In addition to spending time with Kanika and her family, I conducted several interviews with all of them. Only the relevant interviews are cited.

Education as Struggle

For women and the marginalized to express their educational achievements as an outcome of a process of struggle is not uncommon. There are however, two aspects of the narrative above that struck me as providing a different view. For one, despite being a paradigmatic example, the narrative doesn't belong to 'personal success against all odds' genre of neo-liberal accounts, nor is it solely a success story for the interveners, a common trope in policy and programme reports. It represents instead a collaborative venture between the protagonist and the interveners, where both were critical to fulfilling each other's agendas.

The second aspect is the long arc of struggle, covering many stages in the protagonist's life that the narrative conveys. Her struggles, which evolved as her aspirations grew, are represented as a series of acts of resistance and negotiation that were recalibrated as the nature of patriarchal relationships changed her life course and with it the exercise of power.

Power was exercised along three axes: by the protagonist, the feminist interveners and the patriarchal family, first her father and then her husband. An adolescent Kanika's interest in education was sparked when she entered the world of transformative adult non-formal education, first at the literacy centre and then the MSK. Here, she met 'powerful' didis who introduced her to new and powerful knowledge.[5] The tussle then was between a resolute Kanika and her 'patriarchal' father and leading the charge in her support was MS, which at that time represented a robust phase in the partnership between the state and feminists (chapter 2).[6] She repeatedly and strategically called on the didis and ultimately it was as much their tenacity as Kanika's that eventually wore the families down.

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[5] Page after page of Kanika's carefully preserved notebook from her MSK days is filled the names of didis written in the unsteady hand of a new scribe. As her skills improved she practiced writing short letters to them asking about their wellbeing, using the stock phrases new learners do.

[6] The mobilization strategies described above are not necessarily unique to this case. MS in its initial years intervened in the family space and addressed problems that such steps brought with it across its programmes. MS successfully created and responded to a demand for education amongst girls from marginalised communities. Many girls who participated in MS's programme went on to join mainstream schooling, drawing on the support of programme staff and the women's collectives. See Jain and Rajagopal, "Between Questions and Clarity"; Saxena and Mehrotra, "Addressing Girls' Education," 199-236.

Subsequently, as Kanika attempted to continue with formal schooling, she drew on her relationship with MS to help her negotiate with her marital family but also support her financially.[7] The lengths to which the didis went to ensure that Kanika could continue her schooling, years after she completed her MSK course enabled her to buck the trend of high dropout rates amongst Dalit girls, which are significant even today,[8] but more importantly, to build a long-term commitment to a common cause of promoting women's education. For many years Kanika was drawn upon to motivate girls (and their parents) to pursue their education.[9]

The strategies that Kanika describes are quite unlike typical educational programmes either state-led or alternative, as they dipped into power bases of both. Normally, a government education programme would stop at 'awareness raising' about education's value: typically messages highlighting developmental rationalities against traditional practices such as early marriage. In the case of a failure to convince the family, the blame would be shifted onto the family or community for being 'backward'. Attempts to disturb the family structure would never form part of government strategy. In this case, the didis in their feminist educator avatar within the state programme stepped in, intervening directly within the family space but keeping the interests of the protagonist/subject front and centre. However, they avoided a head-on confrontation with the patriarchal family structure and negotiated with the 'patriarch' instead, working with and around him to achieve their goals.

As Kanika declares, her father understood the power of the didis who at that point represented both elements of the state-feminist partnership (see chapters 1 and 2).

But so did she. Kanika tapped into this power-laden process by humanizing a distant relationship with an abstract state by breaking it down into people whom she

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[7] Kanika got information on scholarships available to SCs from MS. See Farah Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland: The Journey of a Newspaper* (New Delhi: Nirantar, 2007), 135.

[8] According to the Selected Educational Statistics in 1990-91 the dropout rates at the primary level (Class 1-5) for SC girls at 54.0% was 8% higher than the figure for all girls (46%). The dropout rate (primary) for SCs had come down but was still a significant 33.1% by 2005-06. It was still far higher than the figure for all girls (21.7%). For SC girls, the dropout figures for the secondary level (Classes 1-10) was as high as 83.4% in 1990-91, and had come down by only 10% to 73.76 in 2005, which was still 10% higher than the figure was (63.56%) for all girls. Government of India, MHRD, Department of Education, Selected Educational Statistics (1991) and Selected Educational Statistics, September 30, (2005).

[9] Kanika's story has been covered by the popular media and included in other studies as well (Saxena and Mehrotra, "Addressing Girls' Education," 199; Naqvi, "Waves in the Hinterland," 135-137).

could relate to independently and differently. One face of power was the 'outsider', the feminist, upper caste, urban, educated district coordinator, Madhavi Didi. The other was the 'insider', represented by Sunita, the literacy centre teacher, who belonged to her own Dalit community. We see here a different iteration of the insider-outsider combination that I discussed in chapter 1, working on the ground to mobilise Dalit women to access education. It is also a strategy that Kanika imbibed. As a journalist she still connects with women like Sunita, who are often her 'sources', even as she maintains close contact with the elite-urban didis personally and professionally, and building such relationships became part of the institutional imagination and arrangements of KL as it evolved (see chapter 6).

As Kanika got more embroiled in handling the challenges of her marital home, including going to Punjab to do wage labour, she called upon the didis far less. She told me later that at that point in her life she was trying to 'adjust'—an instruction given to all married women—to her 'new' life at her in-laws and to curb any desires that did not fit in with those expectations. But ultimately she revived her relationships with the didis when she realized that rather than fight to extract the money she needed to pay for her education from her husband, she would rather fight for her right to earn it. She eventually started learning to become a journalist, which marked a return to her exploration of feminist education, albeit in a completely new way (see chapter 6).

Thus while her testimony strongly communicates the 'struggle' aspect of her personal journey, what we see unfolding in parallel is a process where confronting resistance, building new relationships and cementing support networks went hand in hand. Somewhere early on in their collaboration, Kanika's tenacity and her potential as an embodiment of what feminist education for rural marginalized women could be, was recognized by the feminist educators.[10] Kanika's description of her struggles to be literate and beyond thus also shed light on the other side of the process: the strategies adopted by feminist educators who were equally invested in creating rural feminist subjects.

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[10] Bhog, interview, March 18, 2016; Kuckreja, interview, March 28, 2014 and my own observations from that time.

Education as desire

The second theme that stands out in Kanika's testimony is her deep desire for learning as an end itself. In her adolescence, it stemmed from a strong feeling of being denied the opportunity to learn. She used to stand outside the literacy class listening to the lessons and once she joined the class, after Sunita the literacy teacher convinced her father, her excitement around the act of learning to read, write and engage with new knowledge grew quickly. "I obviously knew how to say my name" Kanika recollected, "but when I learnt the letters that made it, and connected the letters to the sounds, I got goose bumps."[11] Her intellectual exploration continued at the MSK.[12] She proudly claims joint authorship of the song that epitomized nayi batein, the eclectic curriculum taught at the MSK (chapter 3).

In school Kanika didn't fare well academically. Her math and language skills were not at par with her much younger peers who had been in the school system from the beginning. But like other MSK graduates she too shone in extracurricular activities, which made her popular. And besides the academics, she keenly imbibed the entire gamut of the educational experience, including building friendships with girls from varied backgrounds. I spent an afternoon reminiscing with Kanika as we went through a stack of greeting cards she had received from her school friends, dating back to the early 2000s.[13]

Despite the intensity of such memories, not much has been written about friendship in the context of rural girls, who are largely constructed as 'development'

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[11] Very young children go through these basic steps when learning to read. But when learnt in adulthood, such 'aha' moments hold a very different significance and are even remembered much later. Other women I interviewed shared similar feelings.

[12] Several informants I interviewed recalled how passionate Kanika was about wanting to learn. An anecdote shared a few times was about the time when she ran off to join the MSK. Apparently she wore a saree (rather than a salwar-kameez) to make her look grown up. The MSK, she had heard, was for older girls and as she was 12 she was not eligible. While Kanika wore a saree she forgot to redo her hairstyle! She arrived at the MSK with two pigtails and was hardly able to manage her saree. Her determination endeared her to the staff and she was given admission.

[13] She giggled like a schoolgirl and regaled me with the story behind the sender of each card. "Buying New Year greeting cards was a new trend then, naturally, there were no mobile forwards. Actually, those were not greeting cards but 'love letters' we wrote to each other." Indeed, most of the cards expressed undying love, some were signed in blood, and they were mostly written in the *shayari* form (rhyming couplets). Access to mobile phones has enabled Kanika to re-establish connections with many of her school mates, some of whom she has tried to recruit for KL (Interaction with Kanika at her Banda home, October 13, 2015).

subjects in policy and scholarship. Discussions around rural girls' education tend to focus on issues of enrolment, retention and learning outcomes, or on establishing girls' education as a strategic and worthwhile investment to solving a host of gender problems. Investing in 'girl power' or in 'girl rising' campaigns is how it is framed in more recent neo-liberal discourse, as mentioned in the introduction. While at school Kanika developed friendships with girls from other castes and classes, an opportunity she said she valued as much as the education she received, as village life was highly segregated. Schools continue to remain amongst the only places where children of different communities get to interact, as several young girls I spoke with testified.[14]

This tradition of sharing cards and letters, as many readers will recognize, resonates with schoolgirls elsewhere, and by participating in such practices, Kanika moved herself from being on the fringes—as someone who had been through alternative education—and carved herself a space firmly within mainstream formal education. And therefore, despite the challenges, she doggedly pursued her Bachelors and Masters degrees. For Kanika, being able to dip into both sets of experiences, their repertoires and practices became a crucial aspect of her self-making narrative. It goes without saying that her memories of learning to read and write and what drew her into becoming a life-long learner is completely at odds with the narrow, official functional literacy curriculum that was offered then and continues to be used with adults even today (see chapter 3).

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[14] Several of the younger MSK graduates who later joined school mentioned this in my interviews as well, as did the school-going daughters of Dalit Mahila Samiti members (Focus group discussions, Karvi, December 6, 2015). I did not explore this theme further, but it is under-researched in the fields of education and rural girls and women. The existing research in the field of schooling has tended to focus on issues such as the impact of friendships on learning outcomes, and therefore its use as pedagogic strategy. For example, a study of Bangladesh schools, Youjin Hahn et al., "Do Friendship Networks Improve Female Education?" (Bonn: IZA- Institute of Labour Economics Discussion Paper No. 10674, 2017 or in the US, Catherine Riegle-Crumb and Rebecca M. Callahan, "Exploring the Academic Benefits of Friendship Ties for Latino Boys and Girls," *Social Science Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (September 2009), 611-631. Research on friendship in Indian rural contexts within anthropology (which has focused on kinship) is emerging. For example, Jane Dyson, "Friendship in Practice: Girls' Work in the Indian Himalayas," *American Ethnologist 37*, no. 3 (2010), 482-498; Peggy Froerer, "Close Friends: The Importance of Proximity in Children's Peer Relations in Chhattisgarh, Central India," in T*he Social Uses of Friendship: An Anthropological Exploration*, eds. Evan Killick and Amit Desai (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 133-153.

Education as danger

Kanika described her desire to learn as *pagalpan* (madness). This wanton craving for something that was unlikely to yield any material benefit (at least it didn't seem that way initially) but for pleasure, an end in itself, and as a pursuit that was entirely focused around 'herself', made education a dangerous proposition for her family and beyond, as it had the potential for disturbing gender norms.

A woman's role in social reproduction and in maintaining the institution of marriage is so important to her identity, in a way that is both internalized by women and imposed on them. Therefore, to chip away at that pillar of patriarchy by developing a sense of self through the pursuit of education, expressed in terms of the self and pleasure, carries the potential of endangering the patriarchal order. Like the women who enter educational processes with desires of their own, the state and patriarchal families also have desires as to what education should yield for women, and this is perhaps best exemplified in the ubiquitous phrase 'Educate a girl and you educate a family and the nation'. This does not include building a sense of self that will make a woman 'self centred' and enable her to challenge established gender norms, much less embark on a journey of learning as an end in its self.

Similar arguments have also been made regarding women's sexuality, where sex for pleasure as compared to simply for procreation is seen as tremendously problematic, and a threat to the institution of marriage that needs to be controlled. Educational discourses on 'sex education' in Indian school curricula, for instance, strictly adhere to teaching biology, abstinence and instilling a sense of shame and fear. Indeed Kanika's contestations to get an education were centred on the institution of the family and marriage and at every stage the need to establish controls over her sexuality were expressed: either rationalized as a more general fear of girls being trafficked or her father's need to make sure that no 'untoward' incident took place before her gauna. Her father as the 'protector' therefore wanted to unburden himself of this responsibility and pass the baton of control safely on to her husband. As an underage but married girl, Kanika's educational fate thus oscillated between her father and husband's decisions. The negotiations expressed the imperative of controlling her sexuality, necessary to maintain the normative sanctity of marriage and the patriarchal family. Kanika's unbridled longing for education put her on a collision course with her family. Her father ordered her to

curb any growing desire for further education and later her in-laws questioned her constantly for similar reasons.

Indeed, Kanika's quest for learning and the kind of learning she participated in did prove to be 'dangerous', just as her family feared. While not in this interview, though she hints at it at the end, in later conversations she quite candidly talked about her tortured relationship with her husband and in-laws, which was particularly troubled because she was unable to have a child.[15] She was tormented and routinely called *banjh* (literally barren)—a pejorative term for childless women. Kanika herself was heartbroken at not being able to bear children and blamed her husband and in-laws for refusing to get her proper medical attention. She was not allowed to see a 'good' gynaecologist. Her in-laws refused to spend on her health, even though she laboured in Punjab to pay for her husband's treatment and gave her earnings to her in-laws when she started working. Moreover she constantly lived 'in tension' about keeping up with her studies, self-financing her education, which undermined the sense of self that she had nurtured. She later fell in love with someone else, and finally found enough courage to leave her marital home, started living with her partner and adopted his children. The tacit support she received from the feminist educators was critical to her imagining, considering and then acting to establish a relationship for herself outside of marriage.

These steps, extraordinary given the social milieu in which she was living, brought her into conflict with her natal family again and they strongly disapproved of her choice of partner and living arrangement. For several years, invitations to family functions were not extended to her partner or their children. It was only recently, she told me that she had started visiting her parent's home with her family. These parts of her narrative are difficult to accommodate within the construction of the official image of what the struggle for education should yield or what an educated woman should aspire for (chapters 1-3). And it is for this reason that Kanika doesn't dwell on it in the many interviews she has given. In this testimony too she only hints at it at the end, by indicating that her life is in *asamanjas* or turmoil. She later elaborated that she had used the term asamanjas to express a range of 'conflicted' emotions: inner turmoil, a sense of unease and an imbalance between her professional and personal life. The feelings of

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[15] See Bishakha Datta (Director), *Taza Khabar: Hot Off the Press*, 2007.

discontent and self-doubt that she expressed at the end of her testimony seemed at odds with all the milestones she has reached.

Kanika's dilemmas, I realized, were an outcome of the 'feminist' nature of her formative educational experiences (chapter 3). "I was taught to question", she told me. Her quandary at the time of this interview lay in two themes common in feminist politics: reconciling her *andar* (inner/private) and *bahar* (outer/public) worlds (see introduction) and the unpredictable and paradoxical nature of educational outcomes, which we have discussed before (chapter 1). Feminists have argued that education may further 'domesticate' rather than 'liberate' women, but the paradox of emancipatory education can apply to the woman herself, as the testimony above shows. Feminist education theories and praxis specifically seek to question traditional gender-power relations and dominant knowledge regimes (chapter 3), but in so doing not only is the idea of 'liberation' through education a potentially dangerous proposition for social 'order'—therefore something to be denied outright or curtailed—but it may well have dangerous implications for women themselves, who must consider the real possibility of giving up the security, status and privileges that come with the heterosexual marriage contract.

The full import of the nature and extent of Kanika's *asamanjas* or turmoil cannot be understood without considering the narratives of two influential figures in her family: her father, who features centrally in the narrative above as her main adversary and her younger sister, who had a sparkling academic career and had recently secured a coveted job as a government school teacher. Both these figures bring Kanika's life—or *jatil itihas* (complicated history) as she frames it—into stark relief and putting them into conversation with each other reveals the troubled but constructive dynamics between gender and education and how this can lead to a reshaping of gender relations within the family.

II.   EDUCATION AND THE FAMILY: FATHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND SISTERS

During the course of my research I had several conversations with Kanika's family members, but my first one with Ram Avtar[16], Kanika's father, regarding her education, took me by surprise. It went like this:

> Researcher (R): Kanika has been able to get to where she is today after a lot of *sangharsh* (struggle)
>
> Father (F): *Sangharsh? Kaise?* (Struggle? How so?)
>
> R: You know she had to struggle at every stage. Kanika never went to school initially … (Father interrupting)
>
> F: Ask her when she was stopped? (A little aggressively)
>
> R: The MS didis came many times to get your permission for Kanika to be allowed to come to the MSK … (Kanika interrupting)
>
> Kanika (K): When I wanted to go to MSK, when I wanted to go to school ... *kafi poochna pada.* (I had to ask a lot)
>
> R: … you got her gauna done after agreeing to delay it.
>
> F: *Mein majboor tha.* (I was under compulsion). When a girl gets married she becomes someone else's *zimmedari* (responsibility). They want their bahu (daughter-in-law) to act according to their *manmarzi* (wishes). Anyway this was all long ago. Are **you** satisfied with where she has reached?
>
> K (whispering): I told you he would not accept my story. He thinks he has got me to where I am. It's true he has compensated. What he didn't do for me, he has done for his other children.

Ram Avatar's firm denial of having opposed Kanika's educational aspirations in any manner reflected a starkly different perception of the journey we just read. Was it denial or a feeling of humiliation at being questioned by an outsider? Did he want to claim credit for Kanika's success, like she suggested? Was that all?

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[16] Name changed. Ram Avtar (Local leader, Kanika's father) interviewed by author, Kunjanpurva, Chitrakoot District, March 20, 2014.

"Jaan Bechna Padhe, Bacchon Ko Hum Shikshit Karenge" (Even if I Have to Sell My Life, I Will Educate My Children): Ram Avtar (Kanika's father)

> I grew up in Baghvara village, which is about 30 kilometres from here [Kunjanpurva village]. We have borne *bhaari kashth* (literally, heavy suffering or great suffering). We were bandhua. We had no *bheja* (brains), we had *moh* (attachment) and *dar* (fear) for upper-castes. We said, *haan, dadu-bhaiyya-raja* (yes, landlord-brother-king) and did whatever they told us.
>
> We [Kanika's parents] escaped and came here [Kunjanpurva] many years ago and started farming. Her family [Kanika's mother's] had some land. Around 1984-85 a *tofa* (gift) called Kanshi Ram ji came to us [Dalits]. He told us *bheja kholo* (open your minds). S*ocho* (think)! If they [upper caste] are *adhikaris* (officials), then *mein bhi* (me too).
>
> Upper castes would always tell us, *mazdoori karo* (do wage labour)*,* this is your work. You are good at it. We would nod in approval. It was the upper castes way of keeping the *manuvadi vayvastha*[17] alive. It kept us away from *shiksha* (education) and *naukri* (jobs), that too with our concurrence.
>
> I can't read or write properly. But I have sold my land to give my children unchi padhai. *Jaan bechna padhe, bacchon ko hum shikshit karenge* (even if I have to sell my life, I will educate my children). Land, you can buy anytime but there is a time for education.
>
> My younger daughter has got a sarkari job. They [upper castes] sit on my charpai. They [children] will all get jobs. You said I opposed Kanika's education. If she thinks I did something *galat* (wrong), ask her, if I have fallen short in fulfilling my responsibilities.[18]

If Kanika considered herself a pioneer for having opened the doors to education for her siblings and girls' from her Dalit community, her father also laid claims to that position albeit for very different reasons. His achievements related to the huge distance he had travelled from a being a bonded labourer with no bheja (brains) and under the ideological control of upper castes, to becoming an 'enlightened' person who had single-mindedly gone about ensuring that his younger children (after Kanika) were not just schooled but accessed unchi padhai (higher education).

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[17] Referring to a casteist mind-set derived from the *Manusmriti,* an ancient Indian text that lays out a strict occupational code to be performed by the four varnas of the caste system and is derogatory to women and 'lower' castes, explicitly stating that they are unworthy of being educated and should be denied access to knowledge.

[18] Ram Avtar, interview.

Much like the experiences of the other fathers I discussed in the previous chapter, Ram Avtar too had eventually moulded himself as a netaji (leader) and was referred to as such in his village. Like the other netajis, he also chose education as the site for reforming himself, family and community and through which he had acquired social status. But he had gone further and worked around and through his circumstances to prioritise 'education' as the long-term vehicle for social change for his family and he hoped, by example, for the rest of the community.

If 'feminist conscientisation' was the primary political project that informed Kanika's educational journey, then her father's was 'Dalit conscientisation', where undoubtedly gender politics played a significant, if unacknowledged role. His involvement with the political mobilization taking place amongst Dalits in the 1990s in UP built his awareness and self-esteem, through which he able to question his earlier acceptance of upper-caste oppression. Not only did he acquire a language for critique but also an agenda for action: on the personal front he turned towards education and on the public front he became politically active.

Kanika's educational story, her father reminded me, was in that dark past when he was majboor, so why dwell on it? Ram Avatar's pointed inquiry as to whether I was satisfied with the outcome of how his daughter had turned out, begged that question. Or more pertinently it implied that if we were discussing the transformations in his daughter's life why retain a static image of him? He had expected that his subsequent support to Kanika and her sisters would have erased any earlier 'wrongdoing' or 'ignorance'—opposing or disregarding education—much like the Dalit community's efforts in general to seek education and disassociate themselves from their past 'ignorant' status.[19]

In the two decades since Kanika's spirited sangharsh to get a toehold into the world of education, the economic conditions of her family and of the Dalit community, or at least the Chamar sub-caste to which she belonged, had altered dramatically (see chapter 2).[20] In UP the Chamars or Jatavs are considered the 'creamy layer' amongst the Dalits with the greatest access to education, jobs and political power. Kanika's family and

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[19] See Ciotti, "In the Past."

[20] While using Dalit avoids caste names like Chamar, which are used pejoratively, the 'umbrella' term obscures various sub-caste differences. I use Chamar when I want to signal the sub-caste status or when used by the informant. Kanika's father used Chamar, Anusuchit jati (or 'SC' the Government term), Bahujan and only rarely 'Dalit' in our conversations.

others like them—who are the subject of this chapter—were what I call locally emerging or aspiring entrants to the creamy layer. There were a few traditional pockets where Dalit families were more established and prosperous, [21] primarily because they had access to higher education and government jobs for a couple of generations.

When Kanika started her educational journey her parents were living a life typical of Dalit marginal farmers. The family lived in a kuccha (mud) house, as Kanika had often mentioned to me. But in 2014, I entered her natal home through an imposing metal gate that led me to not just any rural pucca (brick and mortar) house, but one with several rooms, tiled bathrooms, a modern kitchen with running water and other modern amenities like fans, cooler, fridge and TV. The 'grand' home symbolised Kanika's natal family's entry into the rural middle class of the local Dalit community.

The family's fortunes had changed when Kanika's mother inherited land from her brother (Kanika's maternal uncle). The story goes that Kanika's *mami* (maternal uncle's wife) had eloped with another man, leaving him heartbroken. He vowed not to remarry. Her uncle had no brothers or children, and without additional hands, he was unable to work the land on his own, and was scared that the powerful Kurmis[22] in the village would take kabza of his land. So he called his two sisters and their husbands to come live with him, and eventually left them his land, about 10 bighas each. Kanika's parents grabbed this opportunity to escape the life of bhaari kashth they were living in, even though for her father it meant being a *ghar jamai* (literally house-husband). And so Kanika's parents came to Kunjanpurva, where they, and later Kanika their eldest child, worked hard on the land.

Kunjanpurva, once a sleepy Dalit habitation on the fringes of Kasahai, a mixed-caste and Kurmi-dominated gram panchayat, had over the past couple of decades become a bustling peri-urban settlement, seamlessly merging into Chitrakoot town. The urbanization had had important implications for the socio-economic mobility of Dalits in the area: Land prices had soared, so selling even small amounts of land had brought in some money, close proximity to the city had allowed Dalits (especially Chamars) to move away from stigmatized occupations and find alternative work in the city and they gained access to 'good' private education.

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[21] Two villages that I came across (Bhauri and Raipura) had a large number of such Dalit families, where many were in Government employment.

[22] An OBC or middle-ranking caste.

Kanika's father began selling off parts of his land mostly to finance his children's education, but later also to pay for his younger daughter's marriage and to acquire the trappings of modern middle-class life. By the 2000s, Kanika's family and other Dalits in the area were moving away from agriculture. Rapid urbanization, failure of development schemes, drought lack of irrigation facilities, and low yields had also made agriculture unviable.[23] Her father and brothers unanimously said that any future in agriculture was bleak.[24] The family now owned a small plot of land and leased land only to take care of the family's food requirements. Kanika's mother, along with hired labour did most of the agricultural work, with a little help from her husband and none from her sons or daughters.

I interviewed several young Dalit men who echoed similar sentiments of wanting to move away from agriculture and wage labour, preferring to work in the city for varied economic[25]and social reasons—mostly to escape caste oppression in the village. However, unlike Kanika's family and others like them, who had gradually moved into the local nascent upwardly mobile strata and saw education as a way forward, many Dalit boys I spoke with had in fact dropped out from school between Classes 8 and 12 and migrated to work in factories in Gujarat, farms in Punjab, or as plumbers, masons, security guards in Delhi, Lucknow and even as far away as Pune. They aspired to move up from seasonal to more permanent migration, and from performing menial tasks to doing more 'specialised' jobs such as becoming supervisors or contractors.

Ram Avtar's growing clout in the area was also due to his association with the BSP from its earliest days. Politics was not new for him—he was earlier a member of the communist party but had left because "*apna party ban gaya*" (our own party was formed), a trajectory similar to that of Nirmala's father (chapter 4). As a loyal foot soldier of a fledgling party he travelled to many parts of UP to attend meetings, organised local meetings and played a role in local Dalit politics and establishing his connections. He had

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[23] Omar Rashid, Drought pushes farmers to the brink in Bundelkhand, *The Hindu*, April 26, 2016; Dheeraj Mishra, "Dried Wells, Broken Dams, Distressed Villagers Define UP's Multi-Crore 'Bundelkhand Package'", *The Wire*, October 25, 2021.

[24] During my fieldwork, a drought and later hailstorms had ruined the crops and led to indebtedness amongst Dalits in the area, proving their point. Manoj (Kanika's elder brother), interviewed by author, Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, March 21, 2014.

[25] Reasons ranged from the lack of other employment opportunities, the need for cash for survival, to repay debts or for things like paying for siblings' education, sister's marriage, house improvements, purchase of agricultural equipment for their family's health emergencies.

also listened closely to Ambedkar's discourses on using education as a way forward for Dalits. In this he was different from other Dalits in the area, where awareness about Ambedkar's teachings was quite low,[26] unlike in Maharashtra where a strong Ambedkarite movement had taken place. Thus investing in education wasn't only an economic decision for Kanika's father, it was also a means to remake his own status and distinguish himself from other Dalits.

Imbibing education, not personally but through a kind of osmosis or by proxy via his children, allowed him to become a person of the educated world. Ram Avtar had a strong critique of upper castes but he also claimed for himself various 'respectable' traits of the 'educated classes', which being illiterate himself became extremely important for him to establish. He never resorted to *gaali galauj* (abusive language) or violence—stereotypes associated with Dalits—and to bring home the point, he dramatically said to me a few times, "I don't even abuse my *maveshi* (cattle)".

Kanika's entry into the world of women's empowerment and feminist education allowed her father to access a different circle of relationships and his *soch* regarding girls' education (see chapter 4) changed, unlike other Dalits who according to him "were living like ants buried in an anthill". As Kanika mentioned in her testimony, her father had understood the power of the didis, which was not simply the power of their caste and class positions, but the power of their ideas regarding girls' education. He was forced to interact with them repeatedly and his relationships flowered as Kanika moved through the different phases of her life. And certainly his attitude towards his younger daughter's educational choices did follow closely from Kanika's experiences, whether he acknowledged that or not.

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[26] Radhika Govinda, "Different Dalit Women Speak Differently: Unravelling Through an Intersectional Lens, Narratives of Agency and Activism from Everyday Life in Rural Uttar Pradesh," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of An Alternative Politics*," ed. Anandhi and Kapadia (2017), 218-245. In UP Dalits were more familiar with political figures such as Kanshi Ram and Mayawati (Harish S. Wankhede, "The Political and the Social in the Dalit Movement Today," *Economic and Political Weekly* (January 8, 2008), 50-57). Educated Dalit youth I interacted with were however aware of the broad strokes of Ambedkar's teachings and political positions.

"Humara Choice Tha, Ki Mein Sirf Padhoon" (It Was My Choice that I Only Study): Sunita
(Kanika's younger sister)

> Didi [Kanika] used to do *sara kaam* (all work). This was not for me. I did not like it at all. *Badi jati* (upper caste) children used to go on their cycles. I used to think I should also go like this [to school]. I studied in a private school in Karvi and I studied there from the beginning. *Humara choice tha ki mein sirf padhoon.* (It was my choice that I only study).
>
> My father also wanted me to study. I was very good in studies. It's like this. Those children who are *majboot* (strong) in studies, parents feel, *padhao* (educate them). From Class 1 till my B.Ed, I always got a First division, never a Second [division]. If I did *kuch kaam* (some work) at home, they used to scold me.
>
> There wasn't any pressure for my *shaadi* (marriage). When people asked, my father would say, '*abhi nahin* (not now) my *bitiya* (girl) is studying'. My father would say, 'My Sunita will sit in a helicopter. *Mein padhaoogna.* (I will educate her) She will get a naukri.'
>
> I did my B.Ed. and BTC (Nursery level Teacher Training Course) after I got married. No, there was no *manahi* (restrictions). In fact they [in-laws] wanted it, it was agreed. My father paid nearly a lakh [of rupees] for my B.Ed. course in a private college. My sasural said they didn't have the money.
>
> My two-year BTC course was in Shivrampur, nearly two-hours away from my sasural. So my husband and I rented a room there. I was also pregnant then. My older son was born while I was doing my BTC. My mother-in-law looked after my child, sometimes my mother. After that I did my TET (Teacher Eligibility Test). You know how difficult clearing that is. I passed on the first try. Soon after I got a job as a teacher.
>
> It's not like I thought that I must become a teacher. It was that I must do any *badi naukri* (any big job). I don't like *choti naukri* (small job). You know like *sanstha* (NGO) or any private job. I only wanted to do a *sarkari naukri* (government job).
>
> I am the first person to have a sarkari job in my family, and my sasural. You can call it 'luck', you can call it *mehnat* (hardwork), you can say *sabka ashirwad* (everyone's blessing). Everyone is *khush* (happy).[27]

Is it possible that the family has a third pioneer? Sunita, like her older sister Kanika, and her father, certainly thinks of herself as one.

The three narratives reflect varied inter and intra-generational perceptions and aspirations regarding education, particularly girls' education, but equally shifts in lived

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[27] Sunita (Kanika's younger sister, Government school teacher), interviewed by author, Gobarhai School, Chitrakoot District, March 20, 2015). Name changed.

realities and changes in social and economic relations that the women and their families have forged. The narratives evidently showcase three differing political visions of education that emerged within one family, as well as the tensions and contradictions between them, but on closer examination what stands out is what results when these ideological stances are compelled to engage with each other.

Kanika's father's narrative foregrounds his awakening of caste consciousness but the role of girls' education in reshaping caste relations is crucial. Despite his difficulties in accepting Kanika's version of her educational journey, her entry into the world of women's development and feminist education allowed him to crawl out of the anthill where other Dalits were buried and access a different circle of relationships and soch, and reinterpret his past position regarding Dalit girls' education. The remaking of his Dalit identity is realized through his daughters and their educational achievements, rather than his sons, whose higher education he had also invested significant amounts in but was yet to see any results from.

Sunita's account of her educational journey couldn't be more different from that of her sister Kanika, who is just five years older than her. Both sisters 'chose' education and zealously pursued it but under very dissimilar circumstances and towards different ends. Kanika's political grounding lies in a feminist vision, where her Dalit identity gets sharpened as she moves into a world of work, not traditionally associated with rural Dalit women (see chapter 6). Her sister on the other hand simply sought to excel in education and acquire status in the traditionally accepted way: she is after all the first person in her Dalit family to secure a coveted badi sarkari naukri.

What must strike the reader upfront when comparing the two sisters' narratives is the glaring absence of sangharsh in the younger sister's account. While Kanika fought to exercise her choice—her desire to study—in Sunita's case there isn't even a hint of any kind of sangharsh except her personal aspirations to succeed academically. Further, the major 'barriers' to education that Kanika had to 'sangharsh against'—resources, work and marriage—were actively 'removed' to enable Sunita to realize her aspirations and 'choice' of doing *sirf padhai* (only studies). We have discussed the changed economic circumstances of the family that brought in the resources, and I will now focus on the changed perceptions and realities around work and marriage and the different meanings and contestations that the project of gender and education threw up.

Work, Gender and Caste: Implications for Education

The three testimonies from within one Dalit family bring different connotations of mehnat and its relationship to education into sharp focus. Kanika's father as a bonded labourer had been resolutely kept away from education by the powerful upper castes. Work for him was bhaari kasth and his politicisation sharpened his awareness around caste oppression, of the educational denial he had experienced and gave him a language to speak out against the discrimination he had experienced. He channelized his changed economic circumstances towards investing in education as a means to seek upward social mobility for his family.

The nature of the work Kanika had to perform lay at the intersections of her gender, class and caste identity at a time when her family wasn't well off, and her educational prospects restricted. Thus while on the one hand the family had made an intergenerational shift from labouring parents to children who were no longer labouring, Kanika, unlike her siblings, shared her parent's memories of hard physical labour.

The contrast in the nature of work performed by the siblings and its meaning and implications for education is worth dwelling on:

> K: I was the oldest and a girl, so I had to do the work. I know how to do all work – *kheti, paani, lakdi, lipai-potai, khana, chara* (agriculture, water, firewood, food, fodder). I used to walk 2 kilometres, bring back a huge load of clay, and plaster the entire grain storage area myself. During *katai* (harvest) I used to work for daily wages. I carried loads equal to my height. You couldn't see me, just the load (laughs). These people [siblings] don't know how to do any of this work. They are now used to all the *sukh-suvidha* (happiness and material comforts).

> R (Researcher): Who does all this work now?

> K: My mother, mazdoors for the heavy agricultural work. My father chips in. There is no need for *lipna potna* (plastering) in a pucca house. You don't need firewood, there's gas. There is tap water, so no fetching water.

> R: Do your brothers work?

> K: No they are all studying. They help out sometimes but don't work on the land. They hope to get jobs. My parents don't tell them to work either.

> R: And your sisters?

> K: They do household work. But they too are focusing on studies.

The interaction above reflects a pattern typical of the emerging upwardly mobile Dalit (especially Chamar) families[28] I interacted with in the area, which included freeing the younger generation, including girls, from having to labour, making strategic decisions about reaping the benefits of investments in education, a rejection of physical labour by the younger generation and an increased burden of physical work on the older generation of women.

The narratives we have read so far show that unlike in Kanika's case, where education was an interrupted journey and always a 'part-time' activity combined with having to do paid and unpaid work, all her siblings have had a seamless private school education.[29] As required of a Dalit girl from a labouring family Kanika worked both inside and outside her home. According to her mother, Kanika had to 'learn' to do all this work in preparation for her role in her sasural, which we know she performed for several years. Kanika's situation fits with the macro picture of the labour participation rate (in wage and domestic labour) amongst Dalit girls especially in the age group 5-19 years.[30]

Things were different for her siblings. Riding on the family's better economic position and her sister's struggles, Sunita has a very different educational trajectory. Moreover, the two influences in her life—her father and her sister—provided her with both the opportunity to access education but also shaped her views regarding education and work: her dislike for physical work and her ambitions to get a 'badi sarkari job'.

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[28] This may not be the case amongst landless Dalits. Mehtrotra's study of Eastern UP found that educated Dalit boys and girls were moving away from physical labour. However, this did not mean that more schooling for girls had led to access to higher education or jobs (Mehrotra, "Subsiding Capitalism and Male Labour," 251-254).

[29] Kanika's two other sisters have retraced Sunita's path. They attended the same private school. When I interviewed them they were attending college in Karvi and contemplating possible next steps – definitely acquiring further professional qualifications, most likely in the 'teaching line', and no immediate plans for marriage.

[30] According to NSSO data (rounds 50, 55 and 61) the work participation rates of SC girls is high (second to STs) in the 15-19 age group, registering a sharp increase from the figures in the 10-14 age group: In the 15-19 age group SC girls' participation in casual labour is 15% (up from 2.5 % in the 10-14 age group) and domestic work including gathering, collecting etc. is 36.8% (up from 11.4% in the 10-14 age group) and participation in education drops to 27.5% (from 72.3% in the 10-14 age group). Dipta Bhog, Saswata Ghosh and Disha Mullick, *Secondary Education in the Context of Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan: A Desk Review* (New Delhi: Nirantar, undated, unpublished), 7-8 and 127-128.

The position she held in the family by being 'exceptional' in studies is striking, and not atypical. She was spared even household work as the family's efforts were geared towards making sure she had an unblemished academic career and had the time for *tayyari* (preparation) to get a badi naukri. In order to fully reap the future benefits of the significant investments that were being made in their education, girls like Sunita needed to be freed from doing agricultural work, and the talented ones from household work too. Sunita's potential to get a 'good' job was spotted early and allowed her to bargain for a life with a minimal domestic workload, both in her natal and marital home.

I would like to draw attention to Sunita's reference to the minimal household work she did as 'timepass', which is extremely telling and critical to defining her subjectivity as a young well-educated, employed middle-class Dalit woman, and as being different from other Dalit women and working-class women. Her withdrawal from domestic work was different from other Dalit women who have had some education and with some upward mobility are able to trade doing both domestic and manual labour for only domestic labour. For many of these young women, domestic work is relentless as it entails a range of tasks from cooking, cleaning and childcare to looking after the animals and fetching water. Sunita's younger sisters are not as lucky (and probably not seen as being as talented) as their sister and still cook, clean and wash clothes for the entire family, as they study.

Sunita's usage of 'timepass' also reverses its meaning in the way it is used by other labouring women. Many women who are engaged in home-based paid work (such as bidi making, embroidery etc.) refer to the backbreaking work they do as 'timepass', as wages from such work is extremely low, women don't see themselves as primary income earners, and the site of work is the home.[31] Not only does this bring into focus the complications around how women's work, paid or unpaid, is valued by women and society, this reversal in meaning—of reducing the importance of domestic work—is important in Sunita's case as it marked not just her escape from the drudgery of unpaid domestic work but her elevation to a situation where she is able to do only intellectual labour and no physical labour at all. By using 'timepass' she is not necessarily denigrating

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[31] Rajib Nandi and Ayesha Datta, *Bringing Visibility to the Home-based Workers in India: A Scoping Study in Delhi* (New Delhi: Institute of Social Studies Trust, 2018, unpublished).

domestic work but drawing attention instead to the value she assigns to being allowed to do sirf padhai.

In a contrasting example, Craig Jefferey's informants—educated young men in small-town UP—also use the phrase 'timepass'. But the sense in which Sunita uses 'timepass' is different.[32] In Jefferey's study 'timepass' connotes 'empty time': the time young men while away meeting at the teashop and gathering further degrees while they search for elusive jobs. Instead, Sunita juxtaposes domestic work as 'timepass'—the time and headspace that it opens up—with the mehnat required for intellectual labour. While 'timepass' is a light-hearted turn of phrase, Sunita takes her intellectual mehnat seriously. In her interviews she went into considerable detail about her single-mindedness, and all the mehnat she put in at each stage of her educational career. She prominently positions her intellectual mehnat to signal her status as someone unique and to articulate her identity, as different from her sister who has also achieved success, as a Dalit woman.

Unlike her father and sister Sunita does not openly discuss her political point of view as a Dalit teacher. She makes it a point to repeatedly mention her mehnat and academic successes instead. I read this as her way of countering the dominant and fiercely held discourses related to caste-based reservations in employment and education, where Dalit students who enter educational institutions are often painted as being less meritorious. That she is able to clear all her exams the first time around and always with a first division challenges this construction.

In the binary construction between mental and physical labour, we again see two depictions of Dalit women achievers. Sunita locates herself on the mental labour side and that defines her subjectivity. Kanika on the other hand straddles both. She is not ashamed of the physical wage work she did and has incorporated it as part of her story of struggle and success, of being 'strong' and 'hard' and not used to sukh suvidha like her siblings, and as being important for the larger good of advancing Dalit girls access to education within her own family and beyond. But equally, her embrace of her labouring past enables her to 'own' her caste status with pride, which she uses to connect with other Dalit women in her work as a journalist (see chapter 6).

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[32] Craig Jefferey, "Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India, *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010), 465–481.

However, an aspect of the story of the intergenerational shift in educational advancement that is hardly talked about is the impact on female work patterns on older women within the family. The narratives in this chapter show that the costs and benefits accruing from education are unequally shared between the women in the family. Kanika's mother like all the other women of her generation I interviewed had taken on (often single-handedly) the physical burden of agricultural work. The older women worked on their own fields, the fields they had leased, as agricultural wage workers, did all the ancillary agricultural work as well as caring for the animals, to make it possible for their children to study. Everyone in the family agreed that Kanika's sisters and brothers 'don't know' how to do this work. On the one hand this is an acknowledgement that agricultural work requires knowledge and ability and on the other, these are not skills that the children need to 'learn' anymore. Kanika's brothers readily accepted that they haven't learnt this work and therefore can only be expected to help out if required, unlike in Kanika's case where this was the work she was taught to do. Thus while becoming educated has resulted in freedom from physical labour for girls and boys belonging to the younger generation of this and similar upwardly mobile Dalit families, the older generation of women has taken on the additional burden – physical and emotional. In the area I researched, performing low-wage, backbreaking agricultural labour is increasingly becoming the lot of illiterate poor Dalit woman, a trend that has been documented elsewhere as well, but the complicated intra-family gender dynamics deserves more research.[33]

While Kanika's father revelled in being a netaji, Kanika's mother's response to the family's improved social and economic status was more tentative. She was clearly proud of her daughter's achievements and did enjoy the trappings of her home, especially as she was growing older, but she often seemed overwrought. She was not just overworked but also always anxious about whether the investments in 'education' would bear fruit for her sons. The family had sold off most of their land and agriculture was no longer an option. They were considering taking in boarders to supplement their income. One of her daughters did indeed have a sarkari job but not her sons, despite many attempts at appearing for competitive exams. Thus while her daughter had made it, she

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[33] Dalit women's increased workload and the reluctance of younger educated Dalit boys and girls with male migration in Eastern UP has been mentioned by Mehrotra, "Subsiding Capitalism and Male Labour," 250-251.

didn't see that many other 'successful' examples around her. Her younger daughter's achievement had been important in the family's efforts at building status but she now belonged to another family. Ironically, her sons appeared to be much like the young men from Jeffrey's research, endlessly giving exams and filling out forms. And in the meanwhile having sold off most of their land her "family was on the path to becoming landless again", she told me on the verge of tears one night.

Marriage, Education and Social Mobility

There are three critical lessons to be drawn from the noticeably different accounts of the two sisters. One is the place of marriage in determining educational possibilities, job prospects and upward social mobility, second, the role of women in catalysing processes of upward mobility and third, what the processes of upward mobility through education does to the institution of marriage itself.

Kanika, we know, was married off very early and once married she was a 'burden' her father wanted to offload. In her case, marriage came in the way of pursuing education, which continues to be the reality for a vast number of girls. By contrast Ram Avtar's younger daughter became his 'project', for whom marriage was delayed and carefully planned and education and employment were critical considerations. Through the sister's life experiences we see two contrasting ways in which marriage is positioned—as barrier and enabler—and strategically negotiated. In Kanika's case the primary mode of engaging with marriage was to oppose the family and struggle against the various restrictions it placed on her educational aspirations and then reject it, while in Sunita's it was the family that did the negotiating to ensure that her 'choice' for sirf padhai was fulfilled. In both cases, alliances were built but in one it was with forces outside the family, and in the other it was within the family and kinship networks.

Sunita's academic prowess enabled Ram Avatar to arrange a 'good' marriage for her that furthered his social contacts amongst a group of economically mobile Chamars. Sunita's father-in-law's profile is similar to her father's in making education a priority. He had worked as a painter in Delhi for several years, then graduated to becoming a contractor and even managed to get himself allotted a small flat in a resettlement colony in Delhi, a point of pride. During that time he kept applying for low-level government jobs (as his academic qualifications were only Class 8) and finally got a position—which

Sunita referred to as a choti naukri—with the railways in Manikpur. He too had invested in his daughter (Sunita's sister-in-law), Nirmala's education. When I met Nirmala she had just completed her Nursing Diploma, was applying for jobs and was staying at Sunita's natal home preparing for a competitive exam.[34] So when Nirmala described the relationship between the two families as "*dono parivar ghul mil gaye hai*" (the two families have mingled) this implied not just camaraderie but strategic support in furthering the social and economic prospects of both families. It had allowed Sunita to pursue her dreams of continuing her education and getting a 'badi' naukri.

In much of the existing research regarding the relationship between education, employment and upward mobility the focus is on Dalit boys, and not girls. Similarly, while the strategy of rallying around one family member with potential to succeed is not an uncommon one for families with limited resources aspiring for upward mobility, again it is generally men who are documented in this position.[35] Marriage does not occupy any place in most of these accounts. This is a gap my research addresses.

Further I need to point out that the insights from the research on young 'low-caste' men's education and employment carried out in North-western Uttar Pradesh have been varied. Some studies have pointed to low levels of success, such as Jefferey et al.'s study[36] in Bijnor district, which found that young Chamar boys who had invested in higher education had failed to find salaried employment leading to their disillusionment with the BSP's vision of Dalit empowerment. Craig Jefferey's[37] research in Meerut describes the low success of educated Jats (OBC) here in securing employment, despite which the draw of sarkari employment persisted amongst the upwardly mobile. On the other hand, Sudha Pai's work,[38] also in Meerut, shows that formal education has given Dalit boys a sense of confidence and access to urban service jobs. I draw attention to

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[34] Nirmala (Sunita's sister-in-law), interviewed by author, Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, March 21, 2014. Sunita's father-in-law had travelled with his daughter to exam centres as far away as Mumbai and was ready to make the necessary 'payments' to secure her a job.

[35] Naudet, "'Paying Back'"; Vasavi, "'Government Brahmin'".

[36] Craig Jefferey, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery, "When Schooling Fails: Young Men, Education and Low–caste Politics in Rural North India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005), 1-38.

[37] Craig Jeffrey, "Fixing Futures: Educated Unemployment through a North Indian Lens," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no. 1 (January 2009), 182-211.

[38] Sudha Pai, "New Social and Political Movements of Dalits: A Study of Meerut District," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2000), 189-220.

these studies to highlight the importance of detailed contextual studies and of fracturing the idea of a monolithic narrative.

In the relatively small circle of more recent upwardly mobile Chamar families I interacted with during the course of my research I saw a distinct pattern of Dalit (Chamar) girls pursuing higher education with great determination, as well as efforts to secure some kind of employment, alongside marriage. This is somewhat at odds with the macro data, which shows that Dalit girls' access to higher education is very low. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education Report (AISHE 2019),[39] less than 5 per cent SC/ST students are in degree level institutions and less than 9 per cent in diploma level institutions.

Let's consider a couple of other examples, amongst the several I gathered to further unpack how this process of negotiating education, employment, marriage and social transformation unfolded.

Naina joined the MSK as a teacher in 1994 as she needed to earn. [40] At the time she had only completed Class 8. Later, over several years she worked at acquiring the long-list of credentials required to be a teacher, for which she lived away from her family, leaving her daughter at her maika. I met Naina, now a headmistress at a government school at her home that she had bought from her earnings, in a middle-class colony in Karvi. She had just got her eldest daughter (who she had educated up to MA) married after an extensive search for a suitable match. The family she chose was one where "All the men have sarkari jobs. A job for my daughter is guaranteed. I haven't educated her to sit at home! I will contribute towards her further education if required."

Manisha's story is similar to that of Kanika, her best friend from school and now her colleague at KL. Manisha's parents were daily wagers till fairly recently. Being the eldest of six daughters Manisha was lucky to able to go to school.[41] Like Sunita, she

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[39] AISHE 2019, Ministry of Human Resources Development.

[40] Name changed. Naina (Government school teacher, former MSK teacher,), interviewed by author, Karvi, October 12, 2014. After the MSK Naina worked at Vanangana, who encouraged their staff to upgrade their qualifications by giving them paid study leave.

[41] Name changed. A private school had just been opened in her neighbourhood, by an upper caste retired principal, a neighbour, who convinced her parents to let her study. Being next door as a young mother Manisha, recalled that she would be called home from school to attend to her daughter. Manisha, (KL journalist), interviewed by author, Karvi, March 20, 2014; Manisha's mother (daily wager, homemaker), interviewed by author, Nai Duniya village, Chitrakoot District, February 28, 2015. I conducted several interviews with Manisha and her family members.

excelled in studies, was spared agricultural labour but not housework. Despite having an unblemished academic record she was married off when in Class 7. But like Kanika she negotiated and stayed at her maika and went to her sasural during the summer holidays, a pattern she followed till she completed her Class 12, by which time she was pregnant. Finally accepting that they would not have a son, and observing Manisha's determination and successes, her parents made sure all their other daughters had an uninterrupted education and were encouraged to seek jobs. One sister is an Anganwadi worker, and another an assistant schoolteacher, and both started working after they married, and none of the girl's husbands are the primary providers. Manisha played a big role in enabling this trajectory, including providing financial support after she started working.

My research revealed that upwardly mobile Dalit families had realized—based on a keen assessment of the external environment of changes in government legislations—that investing in their daughters' education was necessary to 'hedge bets' if they aspired to have an employed person in the family. For instance, I was told that the sarkari job market for girls, especially in teaching, might now be less competitive due to recent policies. For example, the Uttar Pradesh government reserves 50% of primary teachers posts for women.[42] The teacher-pupil norms laid down by the Right to Education Act (RTE 2009) has led to an acute nationwide shortage of (and hence demand for) qualified teachers.[43] The reality of low recruitment of government teachers, despite the RTE being a constitutional mandate, has not been a deterrent as the number of aspirants only increased. Monika, an informant's daughter who was pursuing her B.Ed. described the interest of young women like her in pursuing the degree as a '*leher*' (wave). Jobs were opening up and "*bhavishya mein kabhi na kabhi mil hi jayega*" (sometime or the other you will get a job). There is no age limit to get a job as a teacher. So you can try for many years".[44]

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[42] The Supreme Court in 2005 upheld a 2001 decision of the UP Government in this regard. Zee News, "SC approves 50% reservation for women in teacher jobs," May 6, 2005.

[43] K. Sandeep Kumar, "1.41 lakh Posts of Teachers, Headmasters Vacant in UP Government Primary Schools," *Hindustan Times* (April 14, 2020).

[44] Monika (Daughter of informant, B.Ed. student), Mau, December 11, 2015.

For those who can make it, a sarkari teacher's job offers well-remunerated secure employment[45] and has always been considered a safe and appropriate profession for women. [46] Feminists critique this preference for teaching and the overrepresentation of women in the profession as representing a gendered occupational stereotype. But for Dalit women—like Naina, Monika, Sunita and many others—late entrants into this profession, securing such a respectable job and breaking into the world of knowledge dissemination, the prestige it brought was of a different order.

The strategy of 'hedging bets' had apparently worked in Kanika's family where both her brothers were still struggling to clear any competitive exams required for a sarkari job, whereas her sister had moved ahead. For the plan—of seeking mobility through education and employment—to work, the girls' natal and marital family had to strategize jointly, particularly the former, if they were to partake of the fruits of their daughter's success after her marriage. A common north Indian saying, that a daughter is *paraya dhan* (someone else's wealth), reflects the deeply entrenched social assumption that once married, a daughter 'belongs' to her in-laws and that the natal family has no claims on their daughters' earnings from her labour nor can they expect her to do any care-giving work for them. Therefore natal families are often loath to support their daughters financially or otherwise, once they are married.

My research showed that even where the two family's goals appear aligned, the financial investments in girls' education after marriage fell disproportionately on the girls' natal family. In Kanika's case, despite the opposition to her education, she stayed at her maika to study, so they bore the expenses. In Sunita's case, her father paid a substantial amount for her B.Ed. course and continued to support her by providing childcare and bearing many of her health expenses. Manisha's natal family has financially supported her and her sisters after they were married, and Naina was willing to do the same for her daughter.

Sunita's father-in-law's contribution, on the other hand, was of a different kind but extremely critical. He permitted gender norms within the family to be loosened, so

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[45] After the 7th pay Commission (which revised pay scales of all government jobs), the monthly salary of a primary school teacher can go upto approximately Rs. 35,000 and Rs. 40,000 for an upper primary teacher. Anish Gill, "UPTET Teacher Salary 2022," (March 7, 2022).

[46] Amongst other things because it allowed women to balance work and home, and working with children came 'naturally' to them.

that the young bahu could pursue her education single-mindedly. In fact, her father-in-law quickly realized—also hedging his bets—that his son was unlikely to clear any competitive exam and so he appointed him as his daughter-in-law's caretaker. Sunita's husband moved into a rented a room with her when she was doing her teacher-training course. I met Sunita when she had recently been appointed as a schoolteacher in a remote village and her husband ferried her by motorcycle to school in the morning, spent the day in the village, and even helped her mobilise the children to go to school and brought her safely home in the evening.[47] It was quite acceptable to her parents-in-law that their son spent his day assisting his wife.

Such strategizing enabled new types of domestic arrangements to emerge that however kept the structural integrity of the patriarchal family and the institution of marriage intact. Sunita, continued to play the dutiful mother and wife, even as she used the power of her badi naukri to negotiate her domestic responsibilities and influence other household decisions, which most women possibly would not have been able to do. The fact that Sunita's unemployed husband spent his day tending to the needs of his respectably employed wife didn't bother her (or him), as it made him respectable too. In this role he was still the 'protector' (as her school was in a dangerous location) if not 'provider', and it made economic sense as otherwise a lot of money would be spent on Sunita's transport, I was told.

The preoccupation amongst many first generation employed Dalit women and their families, who had recently begun moving up the social and economic ladder was to strike a balance between marriage and employment—*padhe bhi, kaam bhi, parivar bhi* (study, work and family)—which seemed to suit the woman and both families. The investment being made by the natal family was not just in girl's education to organize a suitable marriage so that the girl remains at home. If managed well, married daughters with jobs afforded the natal family access to new networks of information and social contacts. Unlike in the past where natal families didn't and couldn't interfere with the

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[47] Given the high male unemployment rate in UP, especially in Bundelkhand, this was not a one-off example. See Saurabh Sharma, "UP Elections—Migration From Bundelkhand Continues as Government's Jobs Promise Remains Unrealised," *Newsclick*, December 16, 2021. During my fieldwork, I met many teachers, Anganwadi and ASHA workers, who were being ferried up and down by their husbands. This was explained as necessary due to lack of transport or security concerns, but it was also a means of husbands controlling their mobility, keeping close tabs on the women's interactions, while giving them some respectability.

lives of their daughters once they were married, Kanika's father for instance maintains close ties with his younger daughter and her in-laws.

Education, 'Good' and 'Bad' Girls

This brings us back full circle to the differing meanings ascribed to education, its purpose and what it enables. We see mobility in both sisters' stories but what do their different experiences mean for the transformation of gender relations?

Having considered these intergenerational narratives, let's return to Kanika's initial testimony where she expresses disquiet about her status (or its lack) in the family despite all her achievements. The crux of her problem I believe lies in contestations around the purposes of education for girls and the claims that can be made on its benefits (if any). In Kanika's case, despite her 'star' status—she has been written about in several media articles, travelled abroad, and has even been on a TED talk show hosted by a popular Bollywood star[48]—she has arguably not made the right kinds of personal and professional choices in terms of her family's prestige.

In this narrative, education had 'made' Kanika a 'bad girl', so to speak, by prompting her to transgress rather than maintain social norms. Local journalism was financially insecure and inappropriate profession for women. She had rejected the traditional family structure and brought shame to her family, first by leaving her marriage and then by posing a further challenge to the patriarchal family structure by reimagining and trying to forge a new kind of family, where she had made the unsuitable choice of living openly with a previously married man and adopting his children as her own.

By contrast, Sunita's education has enabled a limited realignment of traditional gender norms and relations that doesn't shake up the traditional family structure. By shifting some gender norms, a new imagination of the patriarchal family and women's role within that was being instituted, without threatening the institution of marriage. In her case, education was not about challenging the status quo and as a model wife and bahu she established new aspirational goals of who an ideal Dalit woman could be.

Further, while both sisters were passionate about educating themselves, in Kanika's case it was always something she primarily wanted to do for herself, as an end in

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[48] TED talk with Shahrukh Khan. November 2, 2019.

itself, and such passion made it a dangerous pursuit. The professional and personal choices she made could not have been made without the education she went through. And as a result her professional successes could only selectively, partially and tentatively be absorbed into the family's narrative of upward social mobility.

Sunita on the other hand was the 'good girl' that education had produced. She checked all the correct boxes—a high-achieving student, who quickly acquired the required credentials, had married appropriately, got a coveted job, and was the mother two sons. Quite obviously, as she declared in her testimony, she had made everyone 'khush'. Unlike Kanika, the younger sister could unabashedly say that she had fulfilled her father's dreams and everyone else's, while fulfilling her own.

Thus when Kanika talked about her family, the subtle comparisons, emotional heartaches, even sibling rivalry (though it is denied) came to the fore. Their father had wanted Sunita to 'ride a helicopter', when in fact it is Kanika who has travelled abroad to present her work as a journalist. And yet, somehow, having a government job amounted to more and was far more readily accepted as social capital that would beget future upward mobility.

For Kanika, the difference lay in what she called the *naam* vs. *paisa* (fame vs. money) distinction. Kanika described her sister as a "*sone ki chidia*" (golden bird),[49] providing income to her marital family and status to them as well as to her parents. Sunita kept both families khush and they tried to do the same for her, it was mutually beneficial. She got the protection and privileges that accrue to women through marriage in addition to status (as an earning bahu) and a lighter domestic work burden. Kanika was well known locally but her job wasn't secure or respectable enough as it didn't have a *sarkari thappa* (government seal of approval).[50]

Another point of resentment for Kanika was the difference in treatment of their 'husbands'. While her partner was always derided for being unemployed and living off her earnings[51] (though he too took on childcare and domestic responsibilities while Kanika worked) in fact Sunita's husband was unemployed too, and Sunita provided for her entire sasural. However, the fact that Sunita's husband spent his day tending to the

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[49] Kanika, interview, March 20, 2015
[50] At one point Kanika had decided to quit journalism and enrolled for a B.Ed. course.
[51] Kanika's mother, interview, March 21, 2014.

needs of his respectably employed wife, made him respectable too. Not so Kanika's partner—and it didn't help that they were not formally married. Kanika was often anguished because of the *akelapan* (loneliness) she feels having given up the security and benefits that come with a socially acceptable marriage. In the next chapter we shall see how the protagonist works around this binary and re-aligns her status within the family.

Concluding Observations

In this chapter, the protagonist Kanika's narrative has been juxtaposed with those of her father and sister, highlighting the judaav or connections between the strands of educational advancement, economic prosperity, consciousness-raising and changing gender relations within the family. It also shows how new strands of the metaphoric web, the jaal were painstakingly woven—in terms of relationships with people and institutions (such as women's organisations or political parties) or of inserting oneself within a changing political economy. The protagonist's own use of the jaal metaphor for connections and (re) connections in explaining her life history captures the contingent and dynamic nature of the relationship between education and social transformation. The chapter shows the remarkably diverse strides in terms of educational attainment and changes in subject position that are possible not only within one family but during the life course of an individual.

Secondly, the life history narratives question the manner in which outcomes of education and empowerment are usually posed in policy studies and some scholarship: in terms of static frames of success and failure. Not only do we see that someone who could be considered an 'ideal' subject of an education policy does not think of her educational achievements only as a 'success', as the social worlds of woman are far more complex and education and perceptions of success and failure are embedded within these complexities.

This also draws attention to other limitations of policies (even 'good' ones) related to women's empowerment and education. Policy frameworks are fragmented and segmented in terms of sectors (education and livelihoods, for instance) and in the case of education, on the basis of age (such as adolescent girls' education and adult education or formal education and non-formal education) and are time-bound. If anything the narratives have demonstrated the long arc of the educational project, therefore making

the case for diverse kinds of support required throughout an individual's life-course. Further, policy formulation, its analysis and assessment take place in a specialized and bounded space that doesn't take into cognizance the larger political movements and influences that are circulating in the environment. What we have seen instead is the interaction between education and the larger political economy.

Thirdly, we see how a Dalit family was remade when three 'visions' of education—a feminist vision, to promote caste mobility, and as a tool for upward mobility through mainstream employment—came together, sometimes fractiously. What I believe we observe here are not just contradictory or competing positions but a powerful creative tension between the contradictory ideological positions. For instance, the encounters between the diverse educational visions resulted in the formation of different subjectivities, within one family. As this chapter has shown, the protagonist's embrace of feminist education led to fraught encounters between that vision and the dominant positivist vision of education and empowerment for women: that education should produce 'good girls'. However, that was further complicated by the fact that this was a Dalit family making inroads into higher education (for the first time) eventually leading to government employment, a status that was strategically used by other family members to enhance their own positions. The results of the encounters on the one hand brought positive gains for the protagonist and on the other, resulted in personal turmoil. But this tumult was also instrumental in shaping her subject-position as a rural Dalit feminist and establishing a long-term commitment, not just to education, but also to feminist education, which in turn opened several new opportunities and networks that were instrumental in shaping Dalit women's location in the public domain (chapter 6).

Fourthly, while theories of education and social transformation either highlight the dominance or immutability of unequal power relations that reproduce inequalities or those that suggest complete empowerment, in this chapter we have seen a process of realignment of patriarchal relationships particularly within the domain of marriage and the family emerge in a manner that is definitive yet tentative about the nature of social change. The place and importance of marriage has not disappeared for either of the two sisters irrespective of whether they accept or reject it but they have negotiated and reimagined the institution in different ways and for different reasons. We also see families willing to loosen patriarchal controls to respond to new opportunities or a

changed policy environment, which is aimed at strengthening the family structure but once these are opened up, women may take it in a direction of their choice.

This brings me to the last point, regarding the importance of understanding what happens when women become the drivers of such change—a gap in the existing scholarship—the gender norms are challenged in ways that are not always in the interest of maintaining the status quo either within the family or in the public domain, which we shall explore in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 6

"KALAVATI IS A FEARLESS JOURNALIST"[1]
BUILDING POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES

This chapter deals with the 'second innings' with feminist education of the protagonist in the previous chapter. This was Kanika's path in learning to be a journalist which involved significant engagement in the public domain and led to her playing an important role in establishing *Khabar Lahariya* (KL), a Bundelkhand-based local feminist newspaper led by rural subaltern women.[2] I will address two further dimensions of this continuing story that focus on the protagonist's journey to becoming a public figure as a journalist, in a context where women are grossly underrepresented in the field of media and where journalism is unquestionably a non-traditional profession for rural Dalit women.

Firstly, I will examine the interconnected domains—*andar* (inner, private) and the *bahar* (outer, public)—of women's lives as they entered a non-traditional workspace. Developing a melded understanding of their private and public worlds, and the gender relations within them, was, I argue, an integral part of their transitions into the world of work as journalists and represents a third node of the jaal. Leading on from this, the fourth node of the jaal is the evolution of the 'political subjectivities' of the protagonist and her colleagues as they transformed their engagement with the public domain from a rural, Dalit feminist perspective by devising a unique journalistic practice.

I demonstrate in this chapter how the KL reporters were able to strategise and navigate the jaal to substantially shift their subject positions within the public domain. I show that for rural Dalit women entering a non-traditional professional field, the neat separation of the public and private an important conceptualisation in liberal and Marxist feminist theories of women's subordination cannot be universally applied and a contextual reading is necessary. I also illustrate how rural Dalit women's political subjectivities evolved through their journalism, by projecting a different perspective on mainstream political stories and politicizing development and gender issues. And

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[1] Kanika, interview, October 13, 2015. Kalavati (changed name).

[2] In this chapter I focus on the Dalit journalists of KL. Dalit women are in a majority and hold leadership positions, but KL's mandate is to work with all local subaltern women, which includes Dalits, Kols, Muslims and OBCs. For details about KL see https://khabarlahariya.org.

therefore, the chapter shows that the space the Dalit journalist figure occupies, is in sharp contrast to other Dalit 'public' figures discussed in previous chapters whether the Anganwadi worker or the school teacher (see chapters 4 and 5).

I.   KHABAR LAHARIYA: CONTEXT AND EVOLUTION

Kanika joined KL in 2002, the year it was started. After graduating from the MSK, she was associated with KL's earlier iteration, *Mahila Dakiya* (Post Woman), a broadsheet written by newly literate women. In 2002, when the publication was restarted in a radically different form—as a rural newspaper, renamed *Khabar Lahariya* (News Waves)—Kanika and other women associated with the earlier avatar were drawn into developing this venture.

This shift from being a programme newsletter to a local newspaper was not simply a change in form. The women who joined KL were trained to become full-time journalists, which signalled a dramatically new imagination around Dalit women's engagement with and location in the public domain.[3] KL's emphasis on the local—in terms of the profile of the journalists (rural Dalit, Kol and Muslim women with basic educational qualifications), language (Bundeli) and content (local stories related to development, culture, corruption and violence against women and Dalits)—proved critical in (re)shaping the contours of the local media landscape and gender and caste relations more generally.[4]

When I was doing my field research, KL had a well-established presence as a grassroots news publication in several districts of Bundelkhand.[5] KL's Bundelkhandi character made it unique, its readers repeatedly told me. At the time of my fieldwork,

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[3] During the Mahila Dakiya days and its transition to KL the phrase 'barefoot' journalist was used. The 'alternative newspaper' image was soon dropped, as the local KL team were especially keen to build a public perception as a mainstream paper. As KL grew, its content and design reflected this desire.

[4] For an account of KL's early history, the local Hindi media landscape, and early profiles of the reporters see Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland*. The film 'Taza Khabar' also documented the reporting and production process of KL as a print publication.

[5] KL's outreach and format expanded quite quickly. It went from being a 4-pager to an 8-pager (2002), from a fortnightly to a weekly (2006), and from black and white to colour (2006). KL began in Chitrakoot District but other District editions were started – Banda (2006), Mahoba, Lalitpur, Faizabad, Varanasi (2012) in UP, and in Sitamarhi (2010) in Bihar. Some of these editions were discontinued due to funding issues and KL's shift to the digital format.

important conceptual and institutional changes were also taking place, not least discussions about moving from print to a digital format.[6] In 2013, conversations had begun about establishing a new institutional structure that would move KL away from the nomenclature of a 'continuing education project' and towards that of an 'independent media organization', and eventually, in 2015, an independent entity was founded to promote local media and maintain KL. The co-founders of the new entity were the rural women journalists including Kanika and Delhi-based members of Nirantar, who had played a crucial role in developing the project. According to co-founder Disha Mullick, "This is a new experiment in power sharing—equally and aggressively co-owned by journalists and us, the urban feminist counterparts, who brought other skills."[7]

The distinctive institutional space that KL holds is evident from the overall position of women in the media profession. [8] While on one hand India's news revolution and its expansion to small towns has brought about new audiences, structures, media cultures and employment opportunities[9] this has largely bypassed those on the margins such as women, socially marginalized groups and rural areas—at the intersections of which KL is located.[10] Women and marginalized communities are grossly under-

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[6] In 2015 KL established a fledgling online presence that rapidly took root. By 2018 KL's print edition had been discontinued. KL in print form experienced difficulties in distribution, raising funds and eventually dealing with the reporter's low literacy levels became burdensome. These issues were discussed during interviews I conducted several KL reporters: Kalavati (KL reporter, MSK graduate), interviewed by author, Bhawanipur village, Banda District, February 22, 2015; Pramila (Former KL reporter, MSK graduate), interviewed by author, Banda, February 21, 2015; Anarkali (KL reporter), interviewed by author, Karvi, March 19, 2015; Meera Jatav (KL co-founder, former MS sahayogini), interviewed by author, Karvi, April 26, 2015. At the time of writing KL was a successful digital-first local news platform with a social media following of about 500,000.

[7] The new entity Chambal Media is a digital media social enterprise was founded in 2015 by a diverse team of rural and urban media practitioners. Disha Mullick (Co-founder KL, formerly with Nirantar), interviewed by author, Delhi, March 22, 2017. For an introspective account about building KL as a feminist organization that straddles rural-urban spaces read Disha Mullick, "When Failure is Part of the Feminist Process," IDR online (September 20, 2020).

[8] Global studies on women in media have consistently pointed to women's low participation and presence in decision-making positions. Of 43 countries studied in a UNESCO report women's participation was less than 50% in all but two the countries. Margaret Gallagher, *An Unfinished Story: Gender Patterns in Media Employment* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

[9] Srirupa Roy, "Television News and Democratic Change in India," *Media, Culture and Society* 33, no. 5 (2011), 761-777.

[10] A further gap, which directly relates to KL's context, is the shockingly low presence of accredited women journalists—2.7% according to one study—at the district levels. Anil Chamariya, Jitendra Kumar and Yogendra Yadav, *Survey of the Social Profile of the Key Decision Makers in the National Media*, Unpublished Report (New Delhi, Centre for the Study of

represented in all forms and at all levels of mainstream Indian media and this disparity is particularly stark at leadership levels.[11] According to a UN study, women's representation is far worse in Hindi newspapers.[12] A 2019 study by Oxfam India found that of the 121 newsrooms it surveyed, 106 leadership positions were held by upper castes and a meagre 5% of all articles published in English newspapers and 10% in Hindi newspapers were written by Dalits or Adivasis.[13] Disaggregated data regarding women media professionals from marginalized communities is unavailable. However, given the abysmally low representation of these communities generally, one can safely surmise that the presence of Dalit, Muslim and Adivasi women in media is negligible. Importantly, studies have also shown that over 60% of women journalists have faced some sort of harassment at the workplace.[14] The KL team undertook a survey to specifically study women journalists in small towns and rural areas in 4 north Indian states. The study confirmed many of the issues listed above: women constituted less than a fifth of the total editorial staff in each state, and the large majority of even these women were from middle-class and upper caste backgrounds. Most had had access to higher education and some held degrees or diplomas in Mass Communication.[15]

Developing Societies, 2006). Accreditation is important to establish a journalist's status, to access information (especially Government), as a networking tool, and to source advertising revenue.

[11] International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* (Washington D.C.: IWMF, 2011), 233-237. For an overview of issues related to women and media: Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (eds.), *Whose News?: The Media and Women's Issues* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006).

[12] According to a 2019 UN Women Report: Only 17 % of 2,084 writers in Hindi media were women, 11 % of women writers got by-lines, 5% were by-lines for front-page articles and 2.7% for sports stories. None of the 13 newspapers studied had a female boss (UN Women, *Gender Inequality in Indian Media* (UN Women: 2019). For an analysis of the Hindi media landscape: Sevanti Ninan, *Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007); Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland*, 89-102.

[13] Oxfam India, *Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms* (New Delhi: Oxfam India, 2019).

[14] Suzanne Franks, *Women and Journalism* (London: I.B. Tauris and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, 2013).

[15] Women and Media News Trust and Nirantar, *Zile ki Hulchul: Conversations with Women Journalists in Small-Town India* (New Delhi: Women and Media News Trust and Nirantar, 2014), 7-8. Ten media organizations were surveyed and qualitative interviews with 20 women reporters were conducted. Interviews with senior management revealed deep seated biases against hiring women: they were often regarded as being a burden as they couldn't be sent on 'risky' assignments and had to be provided 'protection', they were 'high investment and low returns' as they 'would marry and leave' or they entered for 'glamour' and then left, when asked to work hard. The reporters' testimonies countered each of these allegations and instead pointed to accounts of all forms of harassment. See Disha Mullick, "Playing Reporter: Small-town Women Journalists in North India, *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 5 (2015), 692-705.

Besides stark gender inequalities in access and discrimination in the workplace, rampant biases in media coverage of gender and caste issues have also been documented.[16] The entry of rural Dalit women who were not highly educated, into a local media landscape dominated by upper caste educated men, challenged several interlocking relations of gender, caste and class.

II.   TEACHING AND LEARNING RURAL JOURNALISM

Integral to KL's vision was to carry forward a feminist education agenda, and Kanika in particular embraced the role of becoming a feminist educator and mentor. Implementing this different iteration of feminist education – similar and different to earlier interventions discussed – entailed addressing 'pushbacks' from two locations. One, from the male-upper caste dominated public world of media and the casteist and gendered public sphere in which the journalists had to operate and the other from the private domain of the journalists' families.[17] Both sets of detractors opposed their entering this non-traditional area of work, albeit for different reasons.

When I was doing my research Kanika was already a senior reporter and committed to recruiting and mentoring women from marginalized communities. I observed her closely at work and discerned the following pattern in KLs pedagogy of feminist education: developing close relationships with the new entrants that combined addressing personal and professional issues—including the challenges of gender, caste and low education levels that they encountered simultaneously—which went alongside building solidarities amongst other subaltern women on the one hand and between rural and urban women on the other. Rural women rarely have local support mechanisms that extend beyond the family or kinship network, and as such networks do not encourage

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[16] Some of the persistent concerns are that women's voices and perspectives are excluded in reportage. For instance, mainstream reportage on violence against women is sensationalized and the complexities of women's situations are glossed over, particularly in cases that lie at the intersections of gender and caste. According to Oxfam's 2019 Report only 10 of the 972 articles featuring on the cover pages of the 12 magazines studied were about issues related to caste. See archives of *The Hoot* on Gender and Media and Caste and Media; Joseph, "Whose news"; Jeya Rani, "The Dalit Voice is Simply Not Heard in the Mainstream Indian Media," *The Wire* (November 15, 2016); Ajaz Ashraf, "The Untold Story of Dalit Journalists," *The Hoot* (August 12, 2013).

[17] This had been experienced in other contexts as well when women were stepping out of their traditional roles. I will be discussing its particular nature in the context of journalism.

them to take decisions that go against prevailing gender norms, developing relationships and structures outside traditional networks were critical enabling factors for the journalists to negotiate between the patriarchal family and public workspace. Kanika grew into her role as an educator even as she was herself being mentored by KL's urban feminist co-founders, and she replicated and adapted several of these strategies as well as those of her own learning journey. I unravel the nuances of the strategies involved in establishing rural women journalists through this one example.

Kalavati and Kanika

> Kalavati is a *nidar patrakar* (fearless reporter). In her *kshetra* (area) everyone knows her. They see her going from village to village, pedalling *tez tez* (fast) on her cycle. The way she moves around exemplifies our image of a rural woman reporter, an *azad* (free) woman. Her life has been a long *sangharsh* (struggle). I have been with her through her sangharsh (Kanika, Banda, October 13, 2015, emphasis added).

Kalavati, like Kanika, is a graduate of the MSK. She joined the MSK in 1998 to escape a violent marriage, leaving her six-month-old daughter in her parents care.[18] But unlike Kanika and other MSK graduates I spoke to, Kalavati was not particularly effusive about her time at the MSK.[19] She told me matter-of-factly that she had joined the programme thinking that becoming literate would enable her earn a little something, in case she was forced to leave her sasural. After completing the MSK course, Kalavati returned to her sasural*,* ignoring the advice of her teachers and everything she had learnt at the MSK about building self-esteem or the recourses to address domestic violence. Episodes of extreme violence and daily humiliation continued but she kept away from all her didis. In the meanwhile Kalavati had two more daughters, which did not help her cause at home. But she soldiered on, hoping that her husband would reform himself and because she did not want to give up her *haq* (rights) in her sasural—for her daughters'

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[18] The violence Kalavati experienced was not atypical. KL regularly reports such cases. Official figures on domestic violence are not available, but according to the Government of India's 2019 National Crime Records Bureau Report, Uttar Pradesh topped the list of states accounting for 14.7% of all crimes against women. UP reported (% of all India figures) in the following categories: Cruelty by husband (15.18%), Dowry (34.46%), Acid attacks (32.87%), Rape (10.14%), murder with rape (12.45%). Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, *National Crime Bureau Report* (New Delhi: 2019).

[19] I interviewed Kalavati several times and her family members. I also accompanied her on reporting trips. This vignette is largely based on three interviews. Kalavati, interviewed by author, Bhawanipur village, Banda District, February 21 and 22, 2015 and May 21, 2015.

sakes.[20] Finally, it became too much even for a stoic Kalavati to bear, when one night after she had been beaten within an inch of her life and then locked in a room, she overheard her husband and brother-in-law plotting to murder her by dousing her with kerosene and setting her alight.[21] She screamed and screamed so that the neighbours were alerted and the next morning she somehow escaped while going to relieve herself.

A now desperate Kalavati, back at her maika with her three daughters, approached her former MSK teacher who told her that KL was looking to hire former MSK graduates as part of their mandate to employ women with low educational qualifications or in difficult circumstances. Kalavati went for the interview. She hadn't written or read anything for years, so when she was asked to write a letter explaining why she wanted to join KL, she did so with great difficulty. Kanika was on the interview panel and she selected Kalavati nonetheless. Kalavati was immediately sent off for an on-the-job training where Kanika was one of the trainers. Nirantar members had trained Kanika and she and other senior reporters were gradually groomed to become trainers themselves. Kanika recalled expending a lot of mehnat (effort) with Kalavati and other MSK graduates to improve their basic literacy skills, and to teach them new journalism skills such as interviewing, writing news stories, verifying sources etc. "For a long time I gave them *imla* (dictation) to improve their spelling, provided feedback on their story ideas, rewrote all their drafts, and accompanied them while reporting," she said.[22]

Kalavati had joined KL in 2010, so when I spent time with her in 2015 she was no longer a newbie journalist but had not forgotten the visceral fear she had felt when she started out. "I couldn't open my mouth to speak. I couldn't look people in the eye. They [KL team members] would send me to the thana (police station) to follow up on stories. I would be trembling. I think people could see it! Of course, I was asked personal questions. Early on when a *daroga* (policeman) offered me tea and said he would look after me and I shouldn't roam around in the sun, I was very rattled. This is a *dabang* (literally all-powerful, but used here as feudal) area and security is always an issue. I never drink tea with anyone while doing a story."[23]

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[20] If she left she would forgo any rights in the property for her daughters.

[21] She feared her husband and in-laws would murder her in this manner and claim it was suicide, a common pattern in the area.

[22] Kanika, interview, February 21, 2015.

[23] Kalavati, interview, May 21, 2015.

Negotiating the public sphere, for all the reporters I interviewed,[24] had meant experiencing fear in an embodied sense, which was enmeshed with and heightened by their caste location. Roaming around in the sun risked inviting the innuendos that marked the caste status of Dalit reporters like Kalavati. As reporters, they were not doing the type of physical labour typically ascribed to Dalit women, nevertheless the work they did took them outside the home, and to remote areas where they went unaccompanied. Thus, 'roaming around' also meant talking to unknown men, which in turn implied loose morals, again stereotypically associated with Dalit or other 'deviant' women such as single women. Kalavati was both. As Dalit women they had been socialised not to address (except as supplicants) upper caste men. So when they had the temerity to interview and confront upper caste men, they were physically threatened, verbally abused and browbeaten[25] or subjected to subtler forms of intimidation. Kalavati recalled how upper caste men demanded to see her notebook after an interview, which always made her very nervous as her literacy skills, despite Kanika's efforts, had remained rudimentary. Such public assertions of power were required to counter the impudence of a barely educated Dalit woman questioning an upper caste man. We read about similar forms of retribution in the case of the handpump mechanics in chapter 2. Thus while the fear of sexual harassment and intimidation stalked all women, it took on a different meaning in for Dalit women.

The KL journalists understood well the vulnerabilities they individually and collectively experienced as a result of their gender, caste and class locations. [26] Sexual intimidation—comments about personal appearance, being asked by officials to come to their residence for an interview at night and being refused information if they failed to comply, physical advances, requests for phone numbers, questions trying to ascertain

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[24] Meera Jatav, interviewed by author, Mau, December 11, 2015; Interviews with KL reporters Pramila, Anarkali; Manisha, interviewed by author, Banda, November 1, 2014; Mehrunissa (Former literacy teacher, former KL reporter), interviewed by author, October 14, 2014.

[25] For instance, the reporters were asked their village names and then connections with the powerful uppers caste landlords and officials were publicly established.

[26] Senior KL journalists constantly lamented that the younger generation of better educated Dalit girls did not want to be reporters and only sought 'office' or 'computer' work, possibly for these reasons. The older generation of KL reporters saw this as a sign of fragility, laziness, and selfishness as they were looking for personal not community advancement. Interviews with: Meera Jatav, interview, April 26, 2015; Manisha, interview, November 1, 2014; Kanika, interview, Banda, October 13, 2015.

their 'backgrounds' such as marriage status, caste etc.—were used to constantly remind them of their vulnerability. Or as some reporters said, this was all "part of the job."[27]

To become a 'nidar patrakar' as Kalavati and the other reporters had done, required building self-esteem, professionalism and a range of survival skills. Sharing 'survival' strategies like not drinking tea (ironically a classic networking strategy for male journalists), going to the field in pairs, taking consent from sources in writing,[28] keeping each other informed about their whereabouts (made much easier with mobile phones) were among the many things they did for each other.

According to Mullick, "Kanika had explicitly and implicitly mentored Kalavati to build her confidence as a reporter in the field and supported her while she made her case to cover certain stories in editorial meetings." [29] The intimacy and empathy with which they related to each other was also due to the shared nature of the long sangharsh and the sense of azadi they experienced. The latter, whether it was riding a bicycle to unknown places, questioning powerful men or having an independent income, was exhilarating, and yet contingent. Thus ironically, though Kanika had declared that Kalavati was azad, no one knew better than her that this was not the case, or at least not as categorically as she had asserted. When I was trying to track Kalavati down, Kanika warned me that "nowadays Kalavati *tension mein hai* (is living in tension)". And reminiscent of her own testimony she added, "Kalavati's done a lot in life but even then she hasn't got *vo jagah* (that space). She hasn't been able to free herself of the family's *bandhan* (ties)."[30]

Kalavati and her three daughters lived at her father's home in Bhawanipur village in Banda district. Her anxieties at the time were on two counts: organizing her eldest daughter's marriage and her extremely fraught relationship with her four brothers over

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[27] See Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland*, 131-146. My fieldwork was before the 'Me-too moment', which women journalists in India were at the forefront of instigating. KL reporters have commented about the urban, class and caste slant of these discourses, which they said did not include their experiences (Khabar Lahariya, "#MeToo: An Open Letter From the Invisible Women Reporters of the Hinterland," *The Wire* (October 12, 2018).

[28] Often upper caste sources would retract their statements, putting the journalists in trouble. To protect themselves, journalists would often ask them to sign and acknowledge the information they gave. This many sources refused to do (Kanika, interview, March 20, 2015). This issue was solved to an extent when KL went digital.

[29] Email correspondence with Disha Mullick (December 12, 2020).

[30] Kanika, interviewed by author, Banda, October 12, 2015.

inheritance. Her brothers feared their father would leave a share to Kalavati.[31] Kalavati lived in palpable fear of becoming homeless, the minute her aged father died. She was made to constantly feel guilty for living at her maika, even though she contributed financially and her daughters did all the domestic work and the lion's share of the agricultural and cattle-rearing work—something for which mother and daughters had paid a price. Her eldest daughter had dropped out of school and the middle one seemed poised to do the same.

Kalavati was therefore desperate to quickly arrange a marriage for her eldest daughter, but as a single woman this was difficult to do as her personal and professional life was constantly raked up.[32] Nonetheless, Kalavati did all that was required to arrange a marriage on her own but despite everything she did she capitulated in the end, once again against all her colleagues' advice. Not only did she put her husband's name on the wedding card, her entire sasural family attended the wedding, despite having made no financial contribution, much to her fathers and colleagues' fury and frustration.

For Kanika, who had regularly counselled Kalavati, her various personal stands felt like betrayals.[33] Kalavati had decided she was not going to fight her brothers for a share of her inheritance.[34] She was pursuing a legal case against her husband, but only half-heartedly, and was even considering a *samjhauta* (compromise).[35] A single woman's life is subject to public scrutiny and Kalavati still got rattled by the allegations that her

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[31] The property had been divided 5 ways. Her 4 brothers had already received their share and Kalavati's father had retained one share, which on his passing the brother's believed should come to them.

[32] Arranging a daughter's marriage typically requires the father or at least male relatives, to take care of negotiations, investigate the background of the prospective groom, organize the finances, besides playing important roles in many wedding customs, such as *kanya daan* (giving away of the girl).

[33] Kanika even talked to Kalavati's father (without success) to put his share of the land in Kalavati's name, which was a bold thing for Kanika to do, as she had no 'formal' locus standi in the family. Kanika, interview, October 12, 2015.

[34] According to feminist economist Bina Agarwal a critical factor leading to and perpetuating gender inequality was women's lack of ownership over land, which in turn deprived women of other resources such as credit, technical inputs, bargaining power in the home, and social and political power. Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). In India while 73.2% of rural women workers are farmers, only 12.8% own land (Shreya Raman, "73.2% Of Rural Women Workers Are Farmers, But Own 12.8% Land Holdings," *India Spend* (September 2019).

[35] After Kalavati had filed a legal case, her husband's family through intermediaries had approached her for 'a compromise' and was pressuring her to withdraw the case. Her former MSK teacher, was pursuing her case was unhappy about this development as Kalavati had been avoiding her since then. Kalavati, interview, February 22, 2015; Pushpa, interview, March 3, 2015.

husband's family openly made against her: about her alleged affairs and her *badchalan* (bad habits) of cycling around freely, talking to unknown men, and staying out at night.[36] A sticking point in her 'compromise' negotiations was her husband's insistence that she give up her job. The sexual connotations embedded in the phrase 'roaming around' were thus doubly problematic for the journalists. For the men in their families their perceived loss of control over 'their' women's sexuality provoked endless bickering and domestic violence. Even though Kalavati had bought a small plot of land with her own earnings, in itself is an impressive achievement, she didn't want to live alone and the prospect of losing a toehold in some kind of family setting was still daunting. Thus, despite being a nidar patrakar, at a personal level Kalavati hadn't fully resolved the many challenges that confronted her. Her job, which gave her financial independence and public recognition, was also a constant source of tension. Kalavati's story resonated with several women I interviewed, who had struck out on their own but still faced a lot of hostility from their families. Even when the latter depended on them for cash or other support they were also wary that these now 'empowered' women would claim their inheritance.

However, the feeling of betrayal, the ambiguity, the complexities and asmanjas (inner turmoil) evident in Kanika's testimony was in fact another connection, not just to Kanika's story, but to other reporters as well. Kanika remains committed to supporting other single women in KL's network but she also recognizes the importance and complexities of maintaining a link with the family, for security, stature and respect. The roles that Kanika took on – journalist, educator and mentor – reflected her own experience of the kind of support and mentorship she had received, in tackling the grey areas and fluidity of her decisions, which her colleagues had taken on for her. It took Kanika 13 years, she told me, to get her personal situation accepted *kuch hadh tak* (to some extent) by her family. This period coincided with her journey of becoming a journalist, and it was her urban colleagues who provided her not just support and professional advice but a space to imagine alternative relationships outside of marriage and kinship. As Kanika reshaped her 'political' self, she also nurtured new types of

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[36] KL's editorial meetings at the time were conducted in a residential 'workshop' mode' and took place over a few days. This had been a constant source of tension for many of the journalists. Kalavati's sasural still tracked her movements. Kalavati, interview, February 22, 2015.

relationships outside the family[37] and it also brought home the importance of women's professional selves as connected to but also separate from their personal lives. On the ground such complications—-where women are unable to take clear and consistent stands—trouble feminist political agendas and those of empowerment programmes and are often therefore written out of reports and even protagonists' own narratives.[38] So when Kalavati's parting words to me were, "Whatever else may be the case, I have a naukri and azadi. I am a patrakar. I don't fear anyone or anything anymore," the ironies and complexities of reconciling the private and public were starkly evident.

III. RESHAPING THE PUBLIC DOMAIN: THE PRACTICE OF JOURNALISM AS DALIT WOMEN

Going beyond a framework of overcoming barriers of both public and private spaces, in this section I show how rural Dalit women recalibrate their gender, class and caste identities to devise a distinctive style of journalistic practice. This in turn entailed developing an understanding of 'politics'—both formal politics and the politics of development and gender—through planned educational interventions such as training, and equally through their praxis. The latter was crucial in establishing their political subjectivities, which eventually enabled them to create a niche for themselves within the media landscape. Their practice was hyperlocal, but also spoke to regional/national concerns from a subaltern feminist perspective.

In order to understand the particulars of KL's journalistic practice I accompanied Kanika and other KL journalists while they were reporting in the field. Three aspects of their practice that surfaced repeatedly through my conversations and observations and I believe these epitomised KL's unstated journalistic principles: *Ghumna* (roaming), *ghusna* (to get inside) and *nazariya* (perspective). Ghumna and ghusna took them to 'remote' areas and enabled them to 'unearth'[39] stories that others did not consider newsworthy:

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[37] Kanika, interviewed by author, on train journey from Karvi to Delhi, March 19, 2014; March 20, 2105.

[38] Roy, "New Activist Subjects" and Paik, *Dalit Women's Education*, have also mentioned such complications, and the importance of revealing them.

[39] When I asked how they identified stories several reporters used phrases like *dhoondh dhoondh ke* (we search and search) or *khod khod ke* (we dig and dig). Sniffing out stories happened in two ways. One, if they had a lead they would follow it to its source-village, investigate that

such as the failure of local development, cases of violence and discrimination, local culture and human-interest stories that were considered unimportant.[40] Unlike mainstream newspapers, the KL reporters did not have 'specialised' beats—such as crime, education or health—journalists roamed around in the sun and sniffed out stories or followed leads they got from local sources. The fact that they 'roamed around' marked them as 'low caste' women (as discussed above) but also set them apart from male upper caste reporters who rarely ventured beyond the city and filed stories by phoning their 'powerful' sources.[41] KL's practice gave their reporters a credibility that overrode other 'disadvantages' of status and educational qualifications.

Equally, KL's nazariya—their rural Dalit feminist standpoint—meant that KL provided a different perspective on 'mainstream' stories that they reported. An example that illustrates this would be KL's coverage of a sexual assault case: a female NGO worker who reported that she had been raped by the male NGO head, a powerful man with high-level connections to the media, politicians, the police, administration and local and national NGO networks. When the police had refused to file a case, the woman took the story to the mainstream press. Instead of any investigative reporting the mainstream journalists carried out a full-scale character assassination of the victim and the NGO head even managed to organize street protests against her, which the media reported on sympathetically. Meanwhile, the KL reporters met the victim several times as well as other informants and ended up reporting the case very differently.[42] The position they took was that the victim at the very least had the right to a fair hearing and that alluding to the victim's 'character' was not legally permissible. Their reportage also took the story

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story, and then roam around to dig out other stories. Second, they would simply decide to go to a particular village, usually a remote one and then find something to report on. Their practice also included going to the block office, *tehsil* (local court) or thana. But this was usually more purposeful as it was not easy for them to simply 'hang-out' in such spaces.

[40] As an example Kanika narrated this story she had covered of a young Dalit girl whose body was covered with deep sores. The family, already poor, were deeply in debt paying for the girl's medical treatment. Only a paper like KL would listen to their story, and if KL reported it there was a chance that the health department would respond, the family had told her. She had decided to do this story though it wasn't newsworthy at a time when panchayat elections were on. Kanika, interview, October 12, 2015.

[41] The KL journalists walked and took public transport. Several KL journalists talked about the differences between them and male reporters.

[42] Meeting *sabhi paksh* (all sides) was an integral part of their journalistic training. Early on, reporters would file stories based on just women's testimonies, which opened them up to criticism. This insistence on sabhi paksh had also been necessary to demarcate the differences from activist outfits, as KL had emerged from such a historical background. Joshi, interview.

beyond this one incident and made it about a much larger issue of sexual assault in the workplace and the vulnerability of women workers, and particularly the deafening silence within the local NGO sector that was meant to be more sensitive to such issues.

When KL's story broke, their reporters were warned by men in 'powerful' positions to withdraw the article or face consequences. They were disparaged for being naïve and blindly taking the side of the victim and for not having proper sources. While this was a high-profile case, KL routinely reported cases of domestic violence, dowry, sexual assault and caste-based violence. Reporters like Kalavati were committed to following up such cases. As Mullick says, "Perhaps where her personal and professional lives did intersect were in the stories [she] proved most adept at covering—exposés of violent crimes against women that are then hushed up or 'settled' by families." [43] Or as Kanika put it "we understand the *dav-pech* (machinations) of local issues."[44]

In KL's journalistic practice—negotiating the complexities of embedded power relations—we see the generative aspects of jaal-making, where the journalists turned around the very aspects of their gender, caste and class identities and educational status that placed them in a disadvantageous position. Their journalistic practice was also strategic and they had honed it as a well-modulated exercise of power. Kanika for instance leveraged her Dalit-woman identity and tapped into all her old connections (see chapter 5) which gave her and other journalists an 'insider's' access to the women and marginalized sections of the community. When they interviewed women they always spoke in the local dialect, sat on the floor, held women's hands and consoled them (if the case was difficult one). For Kalavati for instance, whose Hindi was 'rustic' and her literacy skills poor, speaking in *dehati bhasha* (rustic language) allowed her access, and intimacy with her informants and resulted in her getting in-depth insights especially in cases of sexual and domestic violence or of caste atrocities, and was not always a disadvantage.[45]

But I also observed the reporters adopting a very different approach when they spoke to people in 'power'. This was necessary, as women like Kanika and Kalavati did

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[43] Mullick, interview.

[44] Kanika, interview, March 20, 2015.

[45] Kalavati reported extensively on the local sand mining mafia that had pitted her against very powerful forces. She said she actively pursued such stories as it established her as a journalist. Kalavati, interview, February 22, 2015.

not have the usual attributes of power—in gender, caste, class, education, language—that instantly got male upper caste journalists 'access' and respect. The elements of their practice included variations of tone and body language and the strategic deployment of information and their insider-outsider status. They also made use of the fact that their trips were often to remote areas that were off the local media's radar, and appeared 'sudden' thus mimicking the repertoire of 'inspections', which are well-established exercises of power that functionaries in the lower bureaucracy are accustomed to and terrified of.[46]

The journalists had gradually become comfortable with the power they exercised, which became particularly visible in their reporting on the implementation of government entitlements, as I witnessed. On a visit to a school with Kanika and Manisha (another senior journalist), the mid-day meal had not been cooked when we arrived unexpectedly.[47] They spoke to the students in Bundeli and the teachers in *shudh* ('pure') Hindi. With the teachers, they maintained a distance, were charming but authoritative. While Kanika was interviewing the teachers and principal, Manisha stepped outside and spoke to the locals. With teachers Kanika displayed her in-depth knowledge of the local scene and policy matters by 'dropping' snippets of information about the provisions of the Right to Education Act. They were both insiders and outsiders. By the time they concluded their ghusna with the students and teachers and ghumna around the school premises, the meal was miraculously being cooked.[48] The principal literally pleaded with the journalists not to print the story as she had already taken care of the problem. She was on the verge of retirement and said this would spoil her record.

For the journalists the tangible results of such reporting were important in building their public personas as 'powerful' Dalit women who could also 'give back' to their communities. At least some of their stories had an immediate impact—pipes were fixed, teachers were transferred, ramshackle school boundaries re-built, mid-day meals provided—all of which made them fiercely committed to covering such stories. They

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[46] See Gupta, *Red Tape*.

[47] Visit to Government school in Palra, Tindwari Block, Banda District (Field visit with Kanika and Manisha, February 21, 2015).

[48] The reporters mentioned that such conciliatory gestures were common. Sometimes when they crosschecked a story with the concerned official, s/he would call the erring teacher or official in their presence and either yell or threaten suspension – an on the spot action taken report. In return they would ask for the story to be dropped.

could 'get things done' without being a political leaders or participating in formal politics. The purpose they told me was not only to get individuals punished but also to force the system to be more accountable, which is why such stories were a regular feature, even if they could be repetitive. Their modalities of exercising power while reporting were an interesting combination of the feminist conceptualisations of power discussed in the introduction—power over, with and to—which they developed from their own contextualised experiences of overcoming 'power as domination' and evolving a practice of power that was generative.

One aspect of KL's 'politics' and the shift in their political subjectivities was displayed through the example above: that is politicizing development from the nazariya of subaltern women and broadening the ambit of what counts as news about and for women. The other, of reporting on formal politics, has been a considerably longer and more painstaking journey.

In 2015, when I was doing fieldwork, Panchayat elections were being held in UP. The KL team was relentlessly pursuing stories, interviewing candidates and local politicians with confidence. However, this had not always been the case, and what I was witnessing was the distance the reporters had traversed in developing their political reporting skills and their political subjectivities.[49] Let me take you back to 2004, to what is recollected as a watershed moment in KL's journey. The reporters were participating in a journalism-training programme[50] and the Lok Sabha elections were just around the corner, a time of intense media activity. To the trainers KL appeared to be 'outside' or oblivious of this moment. They asked why KL was reporting only about *naali, sadak,*

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[49] Interviews with Kanika, Meera Jatav, Shalini Joshi and Dipta Bhog (for details see interview list).

[50] The journalism trainings were initially conducted by Nirantar. They combined perspective building with teaching skills, much like the handpump trainings (see chapter 2). In this case, the skills taught included reporting, writing stories, interviewing, different types of sources, verifying sources etc. The perspective building component, included sessions on ethics, critically analysing mainstream media reports from a feminist and Dalit perspectives, and what it meant to report on violence cases from a feminist perspective and a basic understanding of gender. From 2007 the KL team had started conducting rural journalism courses for a wider audience. Senior KL reporters like Kanika were trainers. An important part of these trainings was accompanying KL reporters in the field. Based on unpublished training reports and interview with Shalini Joshi.

paani (drains, roads, water) and not the elections?[51] The reporters were taken aback by the question.

On the face of it, the huge gap between women and formal politics should not have surprised anyone.[52] But the absence of 'political' reporting in KL was striking as it aspired to being 'recognised' as a newspaper and had shed its women's development 'newsletter' image. The qualms about including political content also extended to KL's Delhi-based team at Nirantar, who given their location in a women's organization, had chosen to remain within a familiar space of redefining what constitutes the 'political' and focusing on 'gendering' news.[53] The issues that came to the fore during the discussions that followed reflected women's self-definition as citizen-subjects—as 'development' rather than political subjects—and their exclusion from the political space. The reporters had not considered political reporting as being part of their mandate for two reasons. First, they did not feel that they had the requisite knowledge. Despite having lived through the churn of Dalit politics from the 1990s—often at close quarters as Kanika had done through her father's association with the BSP—most reporters did not have information about the BSP except in terms of generalities. Secondly, they had internalized the perception that as rural Dalit women they did not have the *aukat* (right or status) to air their political opinions publicly.[54] "Men never discussed politics with women in the family, at best women overheard. Women didn't sit at the *chaupal* (public square)," Kanika said by way of an explanation of that moment. The extent of their hesitation is also reflected in this statement: "We had to be pushed into it, we had to be taught, we had to learn. And this took a long while," said Kanika.[55] This scenario was very different to accounts of Dalit women in Maharashtra who were part of the Ambedkarite movement, where social reform through education and women's political participation in the Dalit movement had actively been mobilised.[56]

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[51] The original training schedule was abandoned and a crash course in politics was undertaken instead. Interview with Dipta Bhog who was a trainer at that workshop (Bhog, interview, March 22, 2016), see Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland*, 117-121.

[52] The number of women representatives in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament, comprising directly elected representative) is abysmally low. Out of 545 seats, women representatives have been: 78 (2019), 64 (2014) and 52 (2009).

[53] This was an important reason for eventually moving KL out of Nirantar.

[54] Joshi, interview.

[55] Kanika, interview, October 13, 2015.

[56] Paik, *Dalit Women's Education*; Pawar and Moon, *We also made History*.

The knowledge gap was addressed through trainings that included topics in the school-level civics curriculum, the political history of UP, mapping the trajectories and ideologies of political parties.[57] But tackling the 'perspective gap' meant developing their political voices. According to co-founder Shalini Joshi, "[this] took a very long time and required a different kind of on-the-job training, confidence building for the reporters to feel comfortable writing the editorials. They were reticent about expressing their points of view. They didn't feel they had anything valuable to say. They were scared of a backlash too."[58] The new conviction that KL reporters should grapple with presenting their political views marked an important moment in KL's evolution into a 'proper' newspaper and of the women as 'proper' journalists, with new sources and networks and judaavs. And for Kanika personally 'Political literacy' was a continuation of her engagement with feminist education.

Political 'Literacy' in Action

The reservation clause in the Panchayati Raj Act (1995) assigning 33% of seats to women (including reservations for Dalit women) brought large numbers of women into grassroots politics.[59] Since its passage, two types of narratives about women's participation in panchayat politics have become commonplace in popular discourse. One of these constructs women candidates and elected representatives as 'dummies' or 'proxies' for their husbands or other male relatives. Such women are presumed to have no agency or interest in politics.[60] The other presents celebratory accounts of women panchayat members who have broken free of their 'patriarchal' shackles and 'performed well' and brought 'development' to the village and attended to women's needs. The latter

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[57] Senior reporters like Kanika said that despite the passage of time they have to cover many of the same bases with new reporters.

[58] The residential editorial meetings worked as 'mini-trainings'. Joshi, interview April 5, 2016 and based on personal experience.

[59] In 2018 UP had 2,72,733 elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Government of India, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, *Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions* (2019), 19.

[60] See Khabar Lahariya report on proxy candidates see "Pradhan Kaun? Mahila Pratyashi ya Pati" (Who is the pradhan? The Woman Candidate of her husband? *Khabar Lahariya*, February 16, 2016.

narratives mythologise women's innate 'incorruptible' nature that drives them to bring 'development' to the village.[61]

In 2015, what KL planned to do through its reporting, was to break out of these dominant narrative by rejecting both positions and to present more nuanced accounts of how women candidates worked the system, negotiated their families, and strategized, as well as of the different playing fields facing women and men, Dalits and upper castes. KL did several articles that broke the mould of the stereotypical female candidate.[62] But for me the crucial interview that exemplified the evolution of Kanika's political subjectivity, brought me back to her conflicted yet deep relationship with her father (see Chapter 5), of crossing the line between the andar/private and the bahar/public and of the contingent nature of narratives.

Excerpts from Kanika's Article in Khabar Lahariya[63]

> This year, my father contested the Gram Panchayat elections from Kashai Gram Panchayat in Karvi Block of Chitrakoot district ...
>
> I have reported on every aspect of the elections for *Khabar Lahariya* over the past 13 years; this year, a suggestion was made that I interview my father.
>
> There is very little writing by Dalits on issues concerning the Dalit community. And the number of Dalit candidates contesting elections is also miniscule. This was a rare opportunity where a Dalit candidate standing for the pradhan seat was being interviewed by a Dalit reporter, who happened to be his daughter – An interview where I had a deep understanding of the context with respect to the interviewee due to being a part of the community and the family and also an understanding of the political context due to being a reporter.

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[61] For example: Shodh, *Documentation of Success Stories of Women Panchayat Representative of Madhya Pradesh on Women's Leadership Zila Panchayat - Mandala Teh. Mandala, Dist.* Mandala (M.P.), (Jabalpur: Society for Development of Humanity, u.d). Sanchari Pal, "Women on Top: These 10 Female Sarpanches Are Leading a Quiet Revolution in India's Villages, *The Better India* (February 7, 2017).

[62] See Khabar Lahariya articles on Sheelu Nishad (December 11, 2015), a single woman, contesting elections on her own terms, "The Thing Is, People Think Women Are Weak. I Don't Think That's True", December 11, 2015 and "Woman Panchayat Candidates in UP: Subverting Personal and Political", *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 44 (31 Oct, 2015).

[63] Khabar Lahariya, "An Interview with My Father, A First Time Panchayat Candidate." *Khabar Lahariya*, December 18, 2015.

I had never even dreamt of meeting my father and talking to him in a setting like this. I have dealt with the interweaving of my personal and professional life but this was a line I was not prepared to cross.

'You are a fearless and independent reporter, aren't you? Why are you inhibited about interviewing your own father? Interview him just like the array of political candidates and ministers you have interviewed before. Do not look at him as your father but as a promising first-time political candidate. Be it a family member or otherwise, you should interview them all.' With all these thoughts cluttered in my head, I accepted the offer and went on ahead to interview my father.

Another cause of my tension was that at first I had opposed the idea of my mother contesting because she is uneducated and I wasn't too happy with my father contesting either. All because I understand how difficult it gets for decent folk when they step into the murky world of politics. Despite of my father's request I refused to accompany him for the enrolment procedure. By the end of it all everyone in the family got involved in the campaigning and supported him with all that we had to offer financially. Immediately post the nomination, I headed over to my village to interview him. …

I am saddened by the news of my father's loss because of family ties. But as a journalist and a member of the society, I am saddened because he was a promising candidate with a fresh perspective which I didn't come across through various interviews with other candidates across UP. While repeatedly listening to the clichéd mindless promises of development with respect to drains and roads, I think my father had a good understanding of the problems especially concerning the youth. Despite of being an uneducated farmer, he understood the importance of education and encouraged us children to study hard and strive to be better citizens. If he were elected, he would have wisely encouraged the daughters of the village to study further with his personal experience.

The questions Kanika asked her father during the interview covered his reasons for wanting to contest elections, why he contested and not his educated sons, his experience in politics, his allegiance to and disillusionment with the BSP, and his manifesto. The article Kanika wrote was important as it pointed to the huge distance that she had traversed in her personal journey from struggling to get an education (see chapter 5) to her entry to the public domain as a Dalit woman with political agency. But for me there are two other noteworthy aspects of Kanika's article. It reflected a dramatic reversal of gender norms in a space outside the personal realm of the 'family' and in the public domain of 'politics' where women are routinely excluded. In other words, the 'personal is political' feminist slogan was made to work in the reverse direction: it was not women's 'invisible' work in the private domain that was being made public, but

rather women's work in the public domain that was brought home. Kanika's father answered questions posed to him by his journalist daughter as he would with any other journalist.

I would like to take you back to Kanika's testimony (at the start of chapter 5) where she expresses deep feelings of asmanjas resulting from not being given what she perceives as her rightful jagah (place) within the family, despite her many achievements. The tenor of this piece of 'public' writing, though also a testimonial of sorts, is different. I see it as an example of her working through her difficult relationship with her natal family, and her father in particular, but it doesn't stop at that. She chooses to write the interview using a personal voice—a daughter's voice that reflects the andar—but where she is neither expressing hurt or resentment (as she did earlier) nor making claims on her family. Instead the tone she adopts is both vulnerable and authoritative. By crafting this voice, she is attempting to simultaneously shift gender relations between fathers and daughters within the public domain (bahar) by bringing her 'political' self to the personal domain (andar). It's an invitation to her anonymous readers and her intimate family members to acknowledge the alternative possibilities for Dalit women's subject positions and of reworking intergenerational gender relationships.

Thus the evolution of women like Kanika and Kalavati as 'public' figures—nidar patrakars—practising a different style of journalism, required of them much more than overcoming 'fears' or managing the fault lines between the public and private, a fact that is not highlighted enough. For instance, when women journalists from the national and international media have interviewed KL reporters they have invariably asked them about how they have managed to convince their families to let them work in this field. The KL team told me on a few occasions that they felt annoyed by such questions. As Meera Jatav put it, "She [interviewer] is a female journalist, so am I, so let's talk about media." She went on to say, "Male journalists are never asked about what their wives do!"[64]

This situation reflects the conundrum that feminist 'emancipatory' politics poses. On the one hand, documenting reporters' struggles by interrogating the oppressive gender relations within the private sphere is critical. On the other hand, an over-examination of the private domain was resented by the women themselves who felt they

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[64] Meera Jatav, interview, December 11, 2015.

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were being dragged back to the domestic sphere rather than being acknowledged for their craft and included as equals in the larger media community.

Public/Political, Private/Personal and Dalit Women

In order to establish themselves as professional journalists, KL's Dalit reporters faced challenges from both private (family) and public (work) spheres, and as they strategised to address these they also reconfigured Dalit women's political subjectivities and their relationship to these spaces. My ethnographic research, which lies at the intersections of gender, caste and education affords me an opportunity to reflect on feminist theorisations around the public/political/bahar and private/personal/andar and the relationship between the two in understanding women's subordination and empowerment from a fresh vantage point. There are two issues that I would like to reflect on here: 1) The separation of the 'private' and 'public' as a standard benchmark of feminist theorisation and its relevance for understanding Dalit women's entanglements with power. 2) The constitution and regulation of publics and the possibilities and consequences for Dalit women in (re)shaping and (re)inhabiting these.

The Public/private Separation

What does the nature of Dalit women's experiences and the contestations they faced as they entered the public domain in roles not typically ascribed to them showcased in this chapter and previous ones, reveal about the feminist slogan the 'personal is political'? I am signalling this particular slogan as, not only has it influenced feminist theorisation and activism globally for several decades but it also informed the initial gender trainings, handpump mechanic trainings and the literacy and curricular material and processes (see chapters 2 and 3).

The construct—'The personal is political'—is premised on a separation of the private and public domains and has been crucial in establishing that what happens within the private domain of the family home is a matter of public concern and policy making. Advocacy by women's movements globally around this conceptualisation over several decades has brought crucial issues—such as domestic violence and abuse and intra family discrimination around access to resources—within the ambit of public debate and scrutiny. Further, as laid out in the introduction, feminist research and activism has

shown that women's exclusion from the public sphere and their relegation to the domestic has had a variety of negative impacts. These are all too familiar and include: women's low participation in development and politics, unequal access to public resources such as education and employment, unpaid social reproduction (domestic work) resulting in a range of problems from double work burdens to discrimination in wage structures and stereotypes around what constitutes women's work (see introduction).

However, while promoting women's access to the public sphere feminist scholars have also been critical about the definition, constitution and nature of the prevailing idea of the public sphere itself, much like in the case of development policies traced in the introduction. Nancy Fraser for instance, has critiqued the liberal notion of an inclusive, undifferentiated and uncontested public sphere (the dominant conceptualisation) and has argued that 'bourgeois publics' were constituted by gender exclusion.[65] In other words, that the 'public' is inherently gendered is recognised, by feminists at least.

Despite such critiques and even with the growing influence of intersectional politics within feminism[66] and the recognition that public(s) and private(s) can be used in a variety of senses, the dominant and popular perception is of a 'public',[67] most commonly understood as a liberal public sphere, and a 'private' that is the nuclear home. Here, a white, middle-class or elite woman (upper or middle caste in the Indian context) undergirds the imagination of what constitutes the 'public' and the 'private'—even though she may not be occupying the public, she influences its contours because of the power and privileges she enjoys. She is typically seen as 'working' for no remuneration within the home and performing other tasks required for social reproduction—a construction that continues to inform theoretical and policy discourses and

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[65] Nancy Fraser critiques Habermas's articulation of the liberal public sphere as a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' and 'common interest.' Nancy Fraser, **"**Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 58, quoted in Lucinda Ramberg, "Caste and the Configuration of Gender: A Response to Rupa Viswanath's The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India," *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2022), 19-28.

[66] Black feminists have also questioned the productive-reproductive binary. See Carmen Teeple Hopkins, "Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal," in ed. Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 131–47.

[67] Stanley Benn and Norman Gaus (eds.), *Public and Private in Social Life* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

representation in educational content (see chapter 3). In the introduction, with regards to the Indian context, I have discussed the debates around construction of the 'new' woman that was central to the ideology of Indian nationalism during the anticolonial struggle and its exclusion of Dalit women (both at the time of independence and in subsequent historiography). Elite upper caste male nationalists constructed—using education as an important vehicle—an image of the quintessential 'Indian woman' as a docile homemaker, content and contained within the domestic sphere. A nexus was thus created between the private/family-home/upper caste/upper class that has remained tightly bound, despite critiques by scholars and accounts of women resisting this construction even at the time (see introduction). An upper caste, upper class female figure who did not work for wages outside the home became the 'paradigmatic national woman'[68]: she was ranked above other women and was to be emulated by 'other' and all women—again an image that has endured. Kamala, the protagonist of the state-developed literacy primer (see chapter 3) who steps out of her home to play a public 'social' role, exemplifies the nature and direction that such change processes should take and has the 'official' stamp of being an ideal female subject.

That maintaining a distinct separation between the public and private spheres is untenable for Dalit women has been a running theme through my dissertation. Returning to literacy primers *Banda ki Batiya*, which was based on Dalit women's lives and created by them, countered this representation (see chapter 3). Further, the ethnographic material that I have presented throughout makes it evident that Dalit women have routinely worked outside the home either due to economic compulsions or social sanction (for example Besaniya's life history in chapter 4) and therefore being tied exclusively to unwaged domestic work does not reflect the lived reality for most Dalit women.[69] It would be safe to say that the label 'wage-earner' would apply to most Dalit women. However, it is worth noting that even with such a large group of women already occupying the public domain, our perceptions regarding the separation of the public and private continues to dominate the discourse as it is nurtured and perpetuated at the

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[68] Rupa Viswanath, "Response to Readings of The Pariah Problem," *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2022), 55.

[69] According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2017-2018) the Female Work Participation Rate (All India) for General Category was 17.2% and for SC's 23.9%; and for rural India it was 18.3% (for the General category) and 24.2% for SCs (Quoted in Pushpendra Singh and Falguni Pattanaik, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 12, no. 1 (2020), 24).

'highest' levels, like 'official' educational material. A more recent example is the inclusion of the demand for compensation for housework in recent election manifestos of some Indian political parties. While this has been a long-standing demand of international campaigns, and without diminishing the importance of recognising unpaid care work and the heavy burden it places on all women, such demands should be interrogated further. Though some debate was generated, not enough was said about the contextual specificities of different groups of women. We should be open to the possibility that Dalit women may not perceive such demands in the same manner as upper caste, middle class or working class 'housewives' and may prefer for instance raising minimum wages or improved working conditions.[70]

Dalit Women and the Public

This discussion doesn't remain limited to the fact of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' but must include the terms on which it occurs. My research has also shown that Dalit women are 'included' within the public sphere in deeply stigmatized ways. The stigma Dalit women face is due both to their being historically restricted to performing menial low-status jobs and to the sexualized discourses within which their public labour (usually agricultural labour) is cast. The perception of Dalit women as 'public' women, simply because they labour and irrespective of the type of work they are doing, projects them as having 'loose' morals and being 'easily available', as Kalavati's example in this chapter repeatedly shows.

Further Dalit women are not just 'included' within the public sphere in stigmatised ways, they are simultaneously 'excluded' from certain public positions. Any job that is not purely physical and engages with knowledge or is perceived as skilled work is out-of-bounds for rural Dalit women. In chapter 2 we saw how the identity labels mahila, achooth and unpadh (woman, 'untouchable', uneducated) coalesced to prevent Dalit handpump mechanic Aitwariya from becoming a trainer. The handpump

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[70] 'Wages for Housework' is an international feminist campaign that emerged in the 1970s in the West. The campaign seeks to establish social reproduction work as legitimate work requiring compensation arguing that unpaid housework allows the production of surplus value under capitalism (see introduction). The demand to recognise unpaid reproductive labour (not necessarily seeking compensation) has been raised by Indian feminists as well. The inclusion of the demand for wages in election manifestos generated debate but the issue of caste and labour did not receive much attention. See V. Geetha for a discussion of the Tamil Nadu context, "Why Wages-for-Housework Won't Help Women," *Indian Express* (March 13, 2021).

mechanics found it hard to shed their image of being fit only for 'roti-gobar' (literally bread-cowdung) kind of work. In this chapter too, we have been acquainted with how Kalavati—a rural, Dalit woman with poor literacy skills—struggled to be allowed to embrace the identity of a journalist. Other research has also shown that when 'low-caste' women enter the workforce in occupations previously outside their reach, caste and class issues and not just gender determine their location in such employment. Panchali Ray's research on the nursing sector demonstrates how gender and caste relations work in tandem to restrict Dalit women with minimal qualifications to performing menial, 'dirty' and low-end jobs, where they are at the receiving end of sexual innuendoes.[71] For Dalit women therefore, the boundaries between private and public are neither distinct nor are they porous, as they cannot slip in and out of these spaces seamlessly.

Thus the public sphere excluded women generally, but importantly, certain groups—for example Dalit men and women—were kept completely outside a certain kind of public sphere physically and symbolically, through power-laden sanctions, structural arrangements and power relations. Individuals and communities are not excluded/included in the same manner and hold relatively different positions (in terms of power and status) within the public sphere. In relation to the groups mentioned here, Dalit women would be ranked the lowest, behind Dalit men and the 'paradigmatic national woman'. This point bears repeating, as it is in this context that the entry of rural Dalit women with rudimentary educational skills into new terrains such as journalism needs to be examined.

(Re)shaping Publics and Dalit Women

The academic literature on 'publics' has in parallel studied the creation, presence and value of 'counter publics'. "Subaltern counter publics", to use Fraser's term, emerge precisely to address 'exclusions' from the mainstream public sphere.[72] Conceived and nurtured by those on the margins of the dominant public sphere, these are sites of political engagement, opinion-making, dissemination of ideas, expressing dissent and

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[71] Panchali Ray, "'Is This Even Work?' Nursing Care and Stigmatised Labour," *Economic and Political Weekly* LI, no. 47 (November 19, 2016), 60-69.

[72] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67. Michael Warner, "Publics and Counter publics," *Public Culture* 14, no.1 (2002), 49-90. For an overview see Francis Cody, "Publics and Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011), 37-52.

activism. The Dalit counter-publics[73] extends the concept of counter-publics as sites of Dalit mobilisation and assertion, though there has not been much discussion on Dalit women's role in such counter-publics. I have invoked the idea of counter-publics not to suggest KL as an example of a Dalit women's counter-public but rather the contrary.

There are two observations that make KL an interesting example to consider (i) the 'register' or 'voice' used to alter Dalit women's subject positions in the public domain (ii) the desire to move beyond being a niche 'alternative' newsletter (a counter-public of sorts) to carving a space within a gendered-casteist public.

With regard to the first point, while the Dalit women journalists of KL shared their 'exclusion' from the media profession with all women, they simultaneously had to contend with the long history of exclusion of the Dalit community from the 'political' public sphere,[74] which extends to the present. As research, including my ethnography, shows, most Dalit women in UP hardly have an active political voice (beyond being voters). [75] In this chapter we have understood in the context of KL how Dalit women's political voice was painstakingly developed and the consequences of doing this. Transforming Dalit women's political subjectivities has entailed shifting the ways in which they have historically occupied the public sphere, which, being deeply rooted in several power relations, invited censure and reprisal. Here it is important to remind ourselves that as not all 'publics' are similar, and therefore the significance of reordering it will also vary across castes and classes and the kind of public sphere being restructured. The journalists were entering the sphere of public opinion—historically a bourgeois, upper caste space.[76] The import of Kalavati being recognised as a 'nidar patrakar' or of Kanika interviewing her father about politics and publishing it for a public audience can

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[73] Ram Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (eds.), *Dalit Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India.*

[74] Rupa Viswanath referencing Dalit social action in colonial Tamil Nadu argues that Dalit issues were consciously cast as social issues as a way of keeping Dalits out of the sphere of politics, rights and public opinion (Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[75] While this is true, researchers like Ciotti have also questioned the idea of the sexual division of labour (at the core of separating the public and private) as being a barrier. In her research with middle class women, whose husbands were already political activists' families were more than willing to absorb women's domestic work. Ciotti, "The Conditions of Politics", 113-134.

[76] Habermas's view of the public as public sphere has dominated debates. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

fully be understood if we consider the contexts within which they have emerged and work, as their detailed life histories have shown. In other words the register or voice being used to address the public becomes critical.

My second point about moving beyond an 'alternative' (in the sense of a counter-public) follows from this. In 2002, when KL was re-started and on several occasions thereafter, discussions were held about the positioning of KL, which had significant implications for the identities of the women working there. [77] While the newsletter (*Mahila Dakiya*) had been important in giving subaltern women a platform to share their experiences in their own language, it was perceived as an 'innovative' education project. After the after the 'watershed' workshop (discussed in this chapter) the patrakars were insistent on dropping the 'barefoot' journalist label. They were clear about retaining the local, but not remaining on the *kinara* (margin).[78] The identities of both—patrakars and the newspaper—evolved slowly but there was no looking back despite the challenges that came along. Two journalistic strategies that I have discussed in this chapter: the attempt to change the discourse on reporting about women in panchayat politics and the 'invention' of KL's own brand of journalism (the ghumna, ghusna, nazariya) and through it a new way of conceptualising power, would not have been possible if KL was framed as a counter-public. KL patrakars wanted to voice their opinion from a subaltern feminist standpoint—or nazariya— without being seen as a "Dalit newspaper." They wanted very much to be a voice within the larger public that they had been excluded from, for this voice to nudge or challenge that public from within. Of course KL itself represented a form of 'counter-private' a feminist space of political intimacy, strategising and solidarity that enabled a new engagement with the mainstream—a dynamic that expresses another dimension of the andar-bahar that the Dalit women journalists negotiated.

Concluding Observations

To conclude this chapter and in order to understand what this 'new' public figure—a rural Dalit feminist journalist—stood for in the context where she was operating, it is

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[77] Interviews with Mullick, Joshi and Meera Jatav, April 26, 2015.

[78] Manisha (Senior Reporter) interviewed by author, Banda, March 20, 2014. She used this term in the context of KL's discussions to go digital but similar sentiments were shared about not wanting to be left behind.

helpful to reflect on how she differed from other female workers that she professionally engaged with and was often compared to: the Anganwadi worker, the NGO activist, and the upper caste male journalist.

In the rural context, the Anganwadi worker is an aspirational 'working woman ideal' for women with formal education and ambitions of upward mobility. Those with more advanced educational qualifications might aspire to be schoolteachers (see chapters 4 and 5). The KL reporters' work, as this chapter has shown, was completely at odds with these icons. As Kalavati explained when I put it to her that other women workers leave the home without facing the kind of opposition the reporters did, "Why won't a family like its daughter-in-law, or a husband his wife, to be an Anganwadi worker? She goes from her home to the *kendra* (centre), which is in the village, and people can watch her. Her work is to feed and teach children. It's *surakshit* (safe). She works for a few hours, always during the day. She never has to confront anyone. Salaries are low but she adds to the family income by selling the panjiri (nutritional supplement). Even if corrupt, she can bring no shame to the family."[79]

We have of course seen in chapter 4 that the lives of Anganwadi workers are not as simple as Kalavati suggests. But in public perception, an Anganwadi's job is considered an 'ideal' job for women—the right balance between home and employment, work as a continuation of domestic roles and movement outside the home easily monitored—and is the standard against which Kalavati, and other journalists are compared.[80] Thus, what Kalavati was signalling, was that the Anganwadi worker, did not visibly or frontally challenge gender norms and in fact reinforced them and unlike a reporter's job, an Anganwadi's work certainly did not entail breaking into a male-dominated work sphere. However, the fact that nation-wide Anganwadi are ASHA workers are agitating for their rights to be recognised as workers, complicates the picture further.

As KL's history began with women's empowerment programmes and the women's movement, the other figure that KL reporters have been compared to and have

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[79] Kalavati, interview, February 21, 2015.

[80] There is an element of tension, when reporters discuss Anganwadi or Asha workers, as they routinely call them out for corruption. Yet there is an affinity as well. KL has covered Anganwadi and Asha protests for regularization and improved working conditions and supported these campaigns. And despite their critique many reporters may even consider taking up such jobs.

compared themselves with, has been that of the social activist. Besides the antecedents of the KL project, the immediate affinity with social activists is based on commonalities in the nature of their work such as the need for mobility, calling to account structures of power (such as the bureaucracy and police) and working within a larger vision of social justice. When KL started out, the boundary between the women's roles as reporters and social workers was blurred. Often while reporting about stories of violence against women, the journalists ended up trying to resolve the cases as well. This came in the way of building credibility as journalists and they slowly worked at separating the two roles.[81]

And finally, to establish themselves, KL reporters had to position themselves against and alongside male, upper caste, highly-educated journalists. They faced these power dynamics by establishing a completely different practice of journalism that included both process and content, as described in this chapter. By operating as insiders/similar to and outsiders/different from the constituency they catered to, their journalistic practice enabled them to challenge stereotypical images of Dalit women in the public domain. This shift—from rural Dalit women as development subjects, to citizen-subjects engaging with the public domain as 'political' journalists—was an important process of subject-making. This was something that was achieved by using the networks and resources built over several years and by connecting to earlier points—making judaavs within the jaal—showcasing the radically different possibilities that education enables. And yet as the life histories in this chapter and the previous two have shown, the relations that constitute the jaal-judaav combination are dynamic, evolving and tenuous.

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[81] After many discussions with the reporters the difference in the two roles was separated out. KL reporters passed on information to local activists, who could take up cases. Joshi, interview, April 5, 2016; Naqvi, *Waves in the Hinterland*; and my own observations from that time.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS:
WHAT INCLUSION LEAVES OUT

The story I have told in this dissertation is about the afterlives of a set of education policies and programmes introduced in India in the mid-1980s—the Women's Development Programme, Rajasthan (WDP, 1984), National Education Policy (NEP, 1986) and Mahila Samakhya (MS, 1989)—that reimagined the purposes of literacy and education for rural women and the rural woman subject. Departing from instrumental and developmental approaches that dominated (and still dominate) policy formulations around gender, education development and empowerment, the vision of women's literacy and education put forward by this policy-programme regime, was one that connected women's education with their individual empowerment and societal transformation of gender relations. Empowerment in the mid-1980s and early 1990s was still considered to be a transformative development framework and as an advancement over welfare-oriented and WID approaches (see introduction).

To briefly recap, the MS programme (the one principally discussed in this dissertation) proposed that educational processes for rural women from marginalised communities be such that they enhanced their self-esteem, developed skills of critical thinking, enabled access to new information, built new skills and capacities that ultimately lead to individually and socially transformative action. The introduction of new discourses, pedagogies, and institutional practices was made possible due to the partnership between the women's organisations and the state (see chapter 1), which left a feminist imprint on programmes that were implemented across several locations and scales (national, state and local). Chitrakoot District in UP where MS was piloted in 1989, and where my research is based, is one such place.

This is not the first time that the story of this policy-programme regime is being told. Existing studies regarding the MS programme, several that I have referenced, can be classed in three categories: evaluation and independent studies that have focussed on studying MS's impact, achievements and failures; analytical and reflective accounts, often written by programme insiders that focussed on understanding and showcasing the programme's innovations; and academic scholarship that has largely been centred on

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critically interrogating the neoliberal rationality of empowerment as well as the damaging or paradoxical outcomes of the state-feminist partnership of the MS programme.

By studying the afterlife of this policy conjuncture, I have sought to tell a different story and tell it differently. For one, I have examined the idea of a policy afterlife across scales, actors and sites using a methodology of recording contextually embedded life histories of Dalit women (a primary target group of the programme) and their families who were part of the literacy and educational interventions of the early 1990s; through interviews with a range of other crucial actors such as feminist educators, MS staffers, mobilisers, literacy teachers, trainers, and policy makers across multiple sites; and by examining literacy and curricular texts from that time, an archive so far unexamined in any depth.

Second, this combination of sources and methods has enabled me to go into, beneath and beyond an examination MS's stated policy intentions and programme objectives and its impacts. I have not studied the programme per se but rather examined broader questions about what literacy and education meant, did, and enabled (or not) for rural women on the margins, and its relationship to processes of social transformation. I have revealed the granular details of the complexities, tensions, negotiations, collaborations, precarities, accomplishments and disappointments involved in Dalit women's self and community empowerment and located these within broader political and developmental contexts, over a long period.

And third, the existing scholarship has referenced MS's transformative educational mandate, but kept it that. For the most part, education has been glossed as the vehicle for empowerment, and at best 'training' as an innovative educational intervention has received attention (see chapters 1 and 2). Few in-depth studies have delved into the conceptual assumptions and pedagogic processes of the 'empowering' and 'feminist' literacy interventions introduced, the tensions entailed in knowledge production, or how engaging with knowledge and learning to read and write in adulthood shaped subjectivities. Earlier studies, including my own previous work (also referenced) have been confined within the framework of determining whether or not women had been 'empowered'. And even if the indicators to study empowerment may have been more 'feminist' in orientation (by addressing issues such as changing gender norms or domestic violence) these were still pre-determined empowerment indicators based on researchers' perceptions of what these might be.

By bringing together these diverse and crucial strands my research has documented an exceptional example of feminist transformative education—its possibilities, limits and transfigurations—in producing new knowledge, pedagogies and feminist subjectivities. It examines what this example tells us about processes of social change, transformation of power relations, the politics of gender, caste, and feminism reflected on discursively and concretely by the policy subjects of a state-sponsored programme focussed on gender and education. Thus a core contribution of my research is to draw attention to and politicise adult women's literacy and education as an area of contemporary scholarly enquiry in the social sciences—an area that has been largely neglected.

For my concluding observations I return to examining the nature of relationships between gender, education and empowerment in the four broad intertwined areas I set out to explore, namely the (1) production of new subjectivities (2) divergences with dominant discourses (3) intergenerational impacts and perspectives (4) contributions of studying policy afterlives.

I.   THE PRODUCTION OF NEW SUBJECTIVITIES: BEYOND INCLUSION/EXCLUSION

Gender, development and education discourses have overwhelmingly been determined by frameworks of exclusion/inclusion, typically expressed in terms of 'access' (or its lack) such as: the exclusion *of* groups, for instance, women and other marginalized communities; their lack of access *to* resources and institutions; and exclusion *from* a place at the high table where priorities are shaped and networks forged. Unquestionably, these are crucial lenses through which discourses and actions pertaining to gender inequality, discrimination, education, empowerment and development should be examined, but I argue (as others have also done) that stopping at this point is inadequate (see introduction). My research has shown that limiting marginalized women's experiences of accessing education to binary constructions of inclusion/exclusion conceals more than it reveals about the workings of power, gender, caste, education and self and social transformation.

The Rural Dalit Woman as Educational Subject: A Neglected Area

One occlusion that results from an overemphasis on access is the inadequate attention paid to education as a site of subjectivity formation and the complicated nature of this process, more generally. My research has addressed this by shining a light on a particularly neglected constituency, rural subaltern women, and a particularly ignored sector, that of adult education and literacy.

In Indian colonial historiography, adult women's education has been intensely debated but as the existing scholarship has shown, the purposes of women's education and its imagined female subject were conceived with the ideal of an upper class and upper caste urban woman in mind, a construction that has continued to dominate the academic, policy and educational curricula. Dalit women's experiences were left out of the writing of colonial histories of women and education—a gap that recent scholarship has begun to rectify (see introduction and chapter 6).

The contemporary context, where adult women's education has been relegated to the post-independence developmental state, also reveals omissions. Not only has the state's performance been underwhelming (as statistics have repeatedly shown), but equally the contemporary Indian feminist movement's troubled relationship with the state from the mid-1970s led to adult women's education and literacy being deprioritized, in these circles as a discourse promoting the interests of the state (see introduction and chapter 1)—a legacy that still prevails. While feminists and other critical theorists have underscored the importance of the socialisation role of education and critiqued education systems and curricula for promoting socially approved gender roles and establishing harmful stereotypes that eventually limit women's opportunities and reinforce inequalities, such analyses have largely been applied in the context of formal education (see introduction and chapter 1). In India, they have been extended to adult education in limited ways—such as through a few critical studies of literacy primers—and warrant continued attention (see chapter 3).

Women's education has been an area of engagement for contemporary Dalit academic, activist and literary studies, however the focus here too has been on formal education. Formal education, largely of urban women has been important in developing Dalit women's consciousness (see introduction), and revealing Dalit women's struggles to access and negotiate a highly discriminatory formal education system. Although the low literacy rates of Dalits are routinely highlighted as a evidence of Dalit women 'lagging

behind' and hence of state neglect, adult Dalit women's literacy and education has not been prominent in the hierarchy of perceived needs, programmes or of academic enquiry. The implication of such neglect is an erasure of the experiences of a very large section of illiterate Dalit women who may wish to or have tried to reverse that status in adulthood. The detailed narratives that I have presented address these concerns.

Subjectivity Formation: Interconnections, Contestations and Altered Positions

My research is not merely about redressing omissions in a narrow sense, but has demonstrated that adult women's literacy and education are important and contested sites of subjectivity creation for subaltern women and vice-versa: that is, examining literacy—a powerful resource denied to marginalized women—theoretically and practically deepens our understanding of processes of rural and Dalit women's subjectivity formation, and more generally, of social transformation and the workings of power.

My research makes a further contribution by demonstrating that in order to explore such complex processes, it is crucial to set into motion dynamic conversations between actors and sites of action, rather than contain the analysis within static oppositional stances. Here I refer to the fact that my research has initiated such dialogues between (1) three sets of actors—feminists/ subaltern women/ and the state—some of whom are often positioned in adversarial terms, such as the state and women's movement (2) three sites—policy/pedagogy/knowledge production—as both discursive spaces and sites of praxis. By adopting this approach, my research does more than 'talking back' to dominant policies, pedagogies and knowledge frameworks. Instead I have shared fresh understandings about education, subjectivity-formation and empowerment by documenting the nature of negotiations, and how received concepts and stated positions shifted.

Literacy and Education: Shifting Positions and Conceptualizations

The inclusion of the conceptual distinction between education (broad) and literacy (narrow) as two ends of the education continuum in the vision document of MS was reached after protracted discussions (see chapter 1). Feminists who were partnering with the state (beginning with the WDP) were insistent on rejecting (with good reason) the

narrow/developmental/functional conceptualisations of literacy. However, along the way, as the narrow/broad understandings of literacy/education were translated into an actionable programme, there were several twists and turns, and positions were reassessed. Literacy was sidestepped by developing new pedagogic approaches. Recouping and enhancing women's oral ways of communication were integral to these processes. Women trainees and learners who were disinterested in literacy embraced these pedagogies (see chapters 1 and 2).

As their self-confidence grew, Dalit women who participated in these programmes actively intervened in public arenas, such as the state bureaucracy, in ways that were different from what they were (and felt they were) allowed as 'low caste' women. Their newfound confidence and enhanced information levels did not however, protect them from being humiliated due to their 'illiterate' status which was closely connected to their caste identity, and eventually compelled them to reconsider their position about literacy's value (see chapter 2). As Dalit women demanded to be taught to read and write, seeing it as an important step in the evolution of their Dalit feminist subjectivities, the urban upper caste feminist partners were also compelled to reconsider their stand on avoiding literacy.

As the tussles with institutions of power were typically around signatures and paperwork, this should have meant that adopting a 'functional' literacy approach would suffice. But by then Dalit women were as committed to making their experiences a basis for literacy learning, as their feminist associates (see chapter 3). For the latter, Dalit women's life-worlds and not just countering oppression were explored in the realm of educational material production. The creation of the primer *Banda ki Batiyan*, took them beyond the 'conscientisation' approach—an original influence for the programme—and explored social, economic and cultural aspects of Dalit women's lives, showcased new female agentive subjects, whose caste and class status were marked, rather than flattened out as in state primers (see chapter 3).

There was a further twist, when some of the women who were determined to make long-term commitments to their education argued that just local content was no longer sufficient, and that accessing mainstream knowledge was essential to shifting their ascribed status as Dalit women. Nayi Batein informed the curriculum, that embraced a diverse, expansive mix of mainstream and local knowledge (see chapter 3). Eventually, it

was this 'exclusive' knowledge that determined the subject positions of several of my informants (see chapter 4, 5, and 6).

In the end my research demonstrated that: Dalit women were drawn to literacy and education programmes for reasons that went well beyond functionality and economics; subaltern women don't just accept or reject knowledge but may actively create it; and that Dalit women's relationships with knowledge in general and mainstream knowledge in particular, is troubled—the latter being something they desired but which also left them wanting, which was particularly acutely felt due to their caste status. However, this is rarely discussed in accounts of women's literacy, development and empowerment, including in accounts of this programme that I re-examined. For the feminist educators, too, we saw that closely held perspectives had to be prised open up for interrogation and that the eventual framing was neither developmentalist, nor conscientisation, nor was it entirely about recouping indigenous practices.

What my research also demonstrated is how evolving subjectivities shifted and pushed the understanding of social categories such as caste. As gender trainings were localised, the pressure from below led to locating an understanding of patriarchy in the training and curricula frameworks within the political economy of caste and class. The powerful association of caste with denial of knowledge and therefore its importance for processes of subjectivity formation came up repeatedly not just in the internal dynamics of the new pedagogic interventions but also in its subsequent deployment. The dynamics of knowledge, caste and gender came together in the case of handpump training, where the objection to Dalit women learning this technical skill, that simultaneously challenged gender and caste-based norms around untouchability, unleashed particularly strong reactions among the powerful upper castes, especially when Dalit women, as trainers, actually tried to impart this knowledge to upper caste men (see chapter 3). Similarly, in the case of the KL journalists, we saw several examples where powerful upper castes (usually men) tried to intimidate and deny them the possibility of occupying the public domain as knowledgeable, opinionated women, by constantly reminding them of their caste status (see chapter 6). While the standard narrative of the women's movement has been critiqued for the exclusion of caste (see introduction), what the feminist-education-in-practice I have documented shows is the complicated process of inclusion and reworking of caste and gender categories.

II.   CONTESTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES

The second set of observations pertain to the nature of the relationship between education, self and community empowerment for adult rural women. Here I foreground the emic concept—the jaal as a conceptual metaphor —as being extremely useful in both explaining this relationship and thereby pointing to how it differed from mainstream elucidations. The jaal or web of power relations was used by my informants together with the concept of judaav—the points of attachment within a web—which signified for them connections to new ideas, relationships and institutions around which the jaal was negotiated and new strands woven. It is a valuable conceptual contribution my research makes for the following reasons:

Neither Linear Nor Stable

Dominant discourses—policy texts, popular accounts, and even academic scholarship— posit trajectories of upward mobility and empowerment as being linear and intrinsically stable. Not necessarily positioned as 'barrier-free' journeys, the hurdles—even intractable ones like poverty or cultural practices—encountered along the way are for the most part overcome relatively easily, at least in the success stories that are now common in the empowerment literature. And if problems are not surmounted, they are brought back to lie with recalcitrant individuals or backward communities.

In sharp contrast, testimonies of several informants from my research show otherwise. Besaniya's testimony is particularly instructive (see chapter 4). She aptly uses the jaal metaphor to reflect the fraught and precarious nature of social change processes. I will briefly recall the several steps she walked (to use her phrase)—working as a bonded labourer, getting out of bondage, embarking on a journey of remaking her self as an MS sakhi, investing in a six-month MSK programme, returning to daily wage work, building the sangathan, obtaining a very low-end government position and eventually her son securing the dealership of the local fair price shop. Though remarkable, she reads her own life history as a journey where her attempts to change one set of circumstances often resulting in having to confront others–-akin to feeling 'trapped' within a jaal. Achieving the latter two milestones had thrown her life into a whirlpool of conflicts with her family, community, and the sangathan, leading to a loss of economic and social status

for her individually, for her family and in the end the Dalit community as well. She used the jaal imagery to tell us that the results of her labour to remake her individual and collective selves, was neither a straightforward upward movement nor a freefalling descent, but rather was located within a complicated and unstable web of intersecting social relationships. And precisely for that reason the metaphor of a ladder—movement up or down—frequently used in development and education policy-speak, didn't appeal to her.

Embedded and Not an Isolated Lever of Change

Relatedly, the jaal metaphor also usefully calls into question narratives of upward mobility that isolate education from other socio-economic and political processes and contexts. Developmentalist, neoliberal, and even transformative frameworks position education as an independent and neutral lever that if switched on can change an individual's circumstances and eventually those of her family, community and society at large. Such narratives are seductive and at various moments, my informants too bought into these, only to realise otherwise: that education, its denial, their experiences of it, and the resulting outcomes, lay enmeshed within and not outside the web of power structures and relationships.

Besaniya is denied an education in childhood because of her class and caste, which means she has not option but to work as a bonded labourer. Later it is her caste and gender identity that provided her an opportunity to learn as she fell within MS's target group. Her midwifery skills associated with her caste influenced her chances of getting AWH post. Her identity as a Dalit woman shaped her experience with knowledge and she led the call to strike at the MSK. Her new pehchaan were also built around her efforts at establishing the sangathan, which eventually she distanced herself from. Looked at another way, if we fail to locate Besaniya and her family's story within the entrenched feudal caste and caste relations of Bundelkhand, the changing dynamics of low caste mobilisation in rural Uttar Pradesh, the politics of women's sangathans and microcredit or the precarity of low-end volunteer positions within government programmes, and the power these larger phenomena enabled and foreclosed, we would have a partial understanding of how the dynamics of education and opportunities for upward mobility within the Dalit community worked. Technically many of the problems

she encountered can be called 'barriers'—caste and gender are also described as independent 'bottlenecks'—but this obscures the embedded entanglements of education and processes of social change on the ground.

Laborious, Painful, Embodied Experiences

The jaal metaphor also crucially demonstrates that to secure social and economic advancement through education is a very laborious—intensive, long and painful—process for poor Dalit women. Here too, while 'struggle' is often integral to the repertoires of educational narratives of the marginalised, it is usually presented in decontextualised and dispassionate terms in education, development and empowerment literature. Instead in my research I have analysed the 'collateral damages' of upward mobility—by breaking it down into the tensions between notions of individual and collective empowerment, intra-family and community dynamics and turmoil between inner and outer selves—as emotional and embodied experiences.

Returning to Besaniya's case, her own and her family's economic and social status gains juxtaposed by her failure to challenge an entrenched system and patriarchal family was disastrous for her sense of self and public esteem within the community, and eventually led to fissures within her family and Dalit community. I have explained the tensions pointing to the limited room for manoeuvre that Dalit women have, and the intractable nature of social relations that emerge when they embark on processes of individual and collective social change, rather than the discourses of jealousy, intrigue and corruption that looped the problem back onto Besaniya and the Dalit community. But for Besaniya being trapped within the jaal demonstrated individual pain from the loss of relationships and friendships and ultimately collective pain for the community, and Besaniya herself suggested the vocabulary for this.

A second dimension of the embodied and emotional experiences that resulted from the embrace of feminist education, which once again provides a sharp contrast to the language of barriers and functionality, is seen in Kanika's story. She expressed her long educational journey as one of struggle, desire, denial, fear, and danger (chapter 5). Kanika struggled on multiple fronts as her aspirations grew, eventually to a point where the struggles of her colleagues (fellow reporters) became hers as well. Her quandary lay in two themes common in feminist politics: reconciling her *andar* (inner/private) and *bahar*

(outer/public) worlds, and the unpredictable and paradoxical nature of educational outcomes (introduction and chapter 1). Feminists have argued that education may further 'domesticate' rather than 'liberate' women, but the paradox of emancipatory education can apply to the woman herself, as several testimonies show. Transformative feminist education teaches one to question traditional gender-power relations and dominant knowledge regimes (chapters 2 and 3), but challenging the status quo may well have dangerous implications for women themselves, who must consider the real possibility of giving up the security, status and privileges that come with the marriage contract (chapter 5 and 6). We saw that someone who has been considered an 'ideal' subject of an education policy does not think of her educational achievements only as a 'success', as the social worlds of woman are far more complex and education and perceptions of success and failure are embedded within these complexities. These dilemmas haunted several of my informants—Kanika, Kalavati, Vimala, Dipti, Shivrani, Besaniya—and they sought to address them in different ways, and by so doing changed gender relations and family dynamics (see chapter 4, 5 and 6).

Entrapment and Generation

The jaal metaphor conveyed the complicated and dynamic nature of the relationship between transformative education and social change as one of 'entrapment', but it also reflected this relationship as a 'generative' process. The latter involved weaving new threads of the jaal in a way that forged new judaavs at the level of ideas (for example, feminist education, political subjectivities), institutions (for example, family, NGOs, the public sphere) and relationships (for example personal, social—gender and caste—and movements and networks). I have discussed the connections with feminist education already, and will dwell on the others below, but what I want to highlight here is that the jaal provided a framework to conceptualise power and its exercise from the perspective of subaltern women in new ways.

We find that the jaal does not fit neatly with feminist conceptualisations of power (see introduction) of—power over (as domination), power to (as capabilities), power with (as solidarity building) or power within (building self-esteem). The web provides a framework that is both firm, especially for marginalized groups, but can also be changed and recalibrated. Besaniya feels trapped but also recounts all the steps she has walked.

For feminist the outcomes of education have often been positioned as being ambiguous, unintended or double-edged. My research shows that education is not simply a double-edged sword, nor is the impact of education necessarily ambiguous, though it may be unstable. If one takes the stance that education is embedded in power, then it becomes clearer that the outcomes even if unintended, may be anticipated and the jaal-judaav combination reveals the strategies through which power is recalibrated and manoeuvred.

III. INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECTS: EDUCATION, GENDER, CASTE AND MOBILITY

The ethnographic material from my research has interrogated two sets of dominant discourses from an intergenerational perspective: 1) those of education and upward mobility in the context of Dalit women, and 2) the transformation of gender and caste relations in the private and public domains and offers a number of fresh insights as described below:

Women as Catalysts of Change: Intergenerational Strategies
Some of the common ways through which intergenerational upward mobility is examined are in terms of improvements in levels of educational attainment, class status, or type of occupation. Being able to leave stigmatised occupations is an important consideration for Dalits' upward mobility. Building on the generative aspect of the relationship between education and social change highlighted by the jaal imagery, the narratives from my research lend themselves to an examination of intergenerational mobility through different lenses: who can play the role of a catalyser, what strategies are deployed and what is the nature of results in terms of gender relations?

My research establishes the crucial role that rural Dalit women have played in catalysing transformation at the levels of the individual, family and community and of wider gender and social relations and institutions. Existing academic inquiries on education and upward mobility amongst Dalits have either focussed on formally educated urban Dalit men and to a lesser extent on women; or in the context of rural girls, the focus of research has been on whether education (and domesticity which tends to follow) has led to 'more' or 'less' gender equality (introduction and chapter 4); or in the literature in the case of literacy, empowerment and development pays attention to

episodic interventions and their immediate results (such as whether a loan to a poor woman leads to income enhancement and therefore decision making abilities) or whether acquiring the skill of literacy improves productivity through more efficient performance of everyday tasks (see introduction) .

My research shows that labouring Dalit women who struggled to access literacy and education that was feminist in orientation have been important catalysts of individual and collective transformation at deeper and wider levels. The Dalit women who populate my study were strategic and tenacious about leveraging their education for individual and social change, and envisioning new subjectivities beyond seeking 'better' marriages and domestication. The life history narratives have shown how Dalit women devised contextually specific and intergenerationally different sets of strategies to initiate processes of upward mobility that reshaped gender relations in public and private spheres of their lives. The networks and relationships they forged through the process of self (re)making and the strategies they employed to embark on paths of upward mobility were brave and inventive, and reveal new directions in which the exercise of power by subaltern women can be conceptualised, beyond the customary acquiescence/ resistance tropes (see chapters 4, 5 and 6).

The Older Generation of Dalit Women Strategists
The older women I researched followed a common process to establish themselves and negotiate power: they created an identity (pehchaan) as literate, self-confident, informed Dalit women, used that identity to build connections (vyvhar) and networks beyond their family and community, and ultimately leveraged these to reach powerful people and institutions (pahunch) to access benefits, opportunities for themselves and their families, and to play new societal roles (see chapter 4). The latter step crucially demonstrated how Dalit women exercised power and shifted gender and caste relations and the contexts within which they did this. In the 1990s, many of these older women who had been married at an extremely young age, were emerging out of bondage, fighting extreme poverty, were illiterate and were daily wagers. They battled on multiple levels: to find time within their daily grind of survival (time was a valuable resource as it meant giving up labour), against the wrath of their families and the ridicule of their communities to learn to read and write (which was also very challenging). They slowly built a sense of self-worth and the worth of their communities, beyond that of labouring bodies. While

Dalit men—their husbands, brothers and fathers—joined the BSP as grassroots political mobilisers, the Dalit women in my field area were in living a context where there had been no significant social reform (unlike the case of Maharashtra) and where they were not directly being politically mobilised. They were drawn into processes of social change through an unlikely channel: a state-feminist empowerment programme that had the empowerment of subaltern (mostly Dalit) women as its focus. Besaniya exemplifies this cohort, but was not the only Dalit woman I studied who negotiated a complex jaal of structures, systems and social relations to recast themselves using this strategy of pehchaan-vyvhaar-pahuch (see chapter 2, 4 and 6). For the older women it was the labour to uplift the community rather than merely for individual gain that was also important, which led to tensions between the younger and older generations of Dalit women, where the latter felt that the former was selfish and narrowly focussed on individual gains (recall Besaniya's case, chapter 4). Older Dalit women used these strategies, despite frictions to expand and manipulate the jaal.

The Young Dalit Women Tacticians

The younger generation of Dalit women I studied were adolescent girls when they came to the MSK, had never been to school or had dropped out early, some were already married, some were already daily wagers, and all of them were engaged in social reproduction work. One such group used the education they received tactically and creatively to recast their relationship with their fathers, who were also their detractors (see chapter 4).

The fathers of several of the young women were already emerging as local netas (leaders) in the 1990s, aspirations that they honed over the years. The neta fathers (for example Kanika's, Vimala's and Dipti's) were all illiterate, agricultural workers (and had even been bonded labourers in the past) and recast themselves as netas through political access, moderate economic gains and by promoting girls' education. After initial opposition they supported their daughters' education and then girls' education more generally, which gave them a progressive image and access a different circle of relationships (see chapters 4 and 5).

The young women established confrontational and then collaborative relationships (though tensions did not disappear altogether) with their neta fathers. They

contested their fathers for fixing marriages below their expectation and hindering their educational and professional aspirations. More than the economic gains of upward mobility, it was the manner in which the strategic alliance between fathers and daughters were forged, and how that altered gender relations that is of significance. In the development, literacy and empowerment literature, male and female familial relationships are narrowly scripted. Male family members (I have focussed on fathers) are often projected as the 'bottleneck' to girls' education, the upholders of patriarchal norms, whose diktats women and girls either acquiesce to or resist. While resistance and acquiescence are part of the testimonies I have recorded, these narratives go beyond that framework and show how the relationships were mutually reworked, highlighting the malleability of gender-power relations and tactics used to manoeuvre them. And also how the public visibility of these changing dynamics also shifted perceptions at a wider level.

Public, Private and Dalit Women

Dalit Women and the Public

A consistent theme in my dissertation is Dalit women's persistent attempts to establish themselves in the public domain in ways—whether as handpump mechanics, Anganwadi or ASHA workers, teachers, social workers or journalists—that were different to those that their caste identity typically tied them to, that is working in menial and stigmatised jobs, always public and available (which had sexual connotations).

The documentation and analysis of the struggles and of new constructions of the public and private spheres that my dissertation has provided has also lent itself to interrogating standard feminist theorisations. Fundamental to liberal and Marxist feminist theory, is the separation of the public and private spheres, where women are relegated to the private (where they perform unpaid social reproductive work), and are excluded from the public, and both result in their subordination. In the Indian context the public/private separation is premised on an upper-caste-class female figure (analogous to white-middle-class in a western context), as a docile homemaker circumscribed within the domestic sphere. By providing other powerful images, my research findings challenge this construction. I also argue that an interrogation of caste alongside gender is essential

to developing feminist theories about publics and privates beyond the dominant bourgeois liberal conceptualisations of both (see chapter 6).

My ethnographic material joins other scholarship in pointing out that most Dalit women rarely work only within the home, and this challenges the neat public and private separation as the standard. My research has also shown that Dalit women are not only 'included' within the public sphere in stigmatized ways but are simultaneously 'excluded' from certain public occupations and roles. Any category of work that engages with knowledge or is perceived as skilled work is strictly out-of-bounds for rural Dalit women, and embracing such work resulted in humiliation and reprisals of various kinds (see chapters 2 and 6). Thus recognising that individuals and communities are not excluded/included in the same manner and hold relatively different positions (in terms of power and status) within the public sphere is worth drawing repeated attention to. Further, reprisals from Dalit families against women joining such occupations, even as these are justifiably and strongly opposed, must also be understood within this broader structural context where Dalit women's physical labour (irrespective of what it is) and sexuality are negatively branded and invoked.

Similarly, the import of what Dalit women's entry into the public domain does and means must also be recognised, keeping in mind hierarchies of exclusion, which have implications beyond Dalit women's situation. For example, while the Dalit women journalists of KL shared their 'exclusion' from the media profession with all women, they simultaneously had to contend with the long history of exclusion of the Dalit community, especially Dalit women, from the 'political' public sphere. In chapter 6 we have understood how Dalit women's political voice as journalists—a profession traditionally restricted to the bourgeois upper castes—was painstakingly developed and the consequences of doing this. As not all 'publics' are similar, it is important to assert that the significance of reordering also vary, across castes and classes and the kind of public sphere being restructured.

Dalit Women and the Private

Just as the public is hierarchically differentiated, the private too is not a homogenous space, though it is overwhelming defined in upper-caste-class terms. Thus labouring class/Dalit private sphere/Dalit homes are juxtaposed against the intellectual class/upper

caste private sphere/upper caste homes, where the latter is a well-endowed, harmonious and orderly space and the former is unruly, fraught and depleted. By extension, Dalit women are found lacking as homemakers, having none of the skills required to establish domestic bliss. A further complication is the conflation of private with domestic (home), where in fact they are not analogous. Privacy is a luxury that most Dalit women did not have as Dalit homes are typically overcrowded, located in overcrowded and under resourced areas. Thus not only are Dalit women excluded from national conceptions of the public but they do not find a place in the national imaginary of the private either (see chapter 6). And further still, it is important to bear in mind that the conceptualisations of the public are in relation to the private, and therefore the history of exclusion of Dalits from certain kinds of publics and their role within it impacts the conceptualisation of the private sphere. Respectability within the home and public respectability are both denied to Dalit women. While I have said that the Dalit women in my research were not concerned about exclusive domesticity, my intention is to fracture a homogenised picture of Dalit women and upward mobility. The Dalit women that do seek domesticity must be understood within the contexts I have mentioned above.

How do my research findings speak to this context? In parallel with the experiences of how Dalit women included themselves and reconfigured gender and caste relations in the public sphere, my research documents changes in the nature of Dalit domestic spheres and gender relations within the institutions of family and marriage and the family.

At a basic level, in feminist theory, heterosexual marriage, the nuclear family and the arrangement of the domestic sphere have been critiqued as sites where power is exercised over several aspects of women's lives, notably sexuality and labour (see introduction). We have seen examples of this in my research as well (recall the testimonies of Kanika and Kalavati). However, what I am drawing attention to while concluding is how Dalit women and Dalit families reworked these relationships. I will point to three scenarios that reflect shifts in the institutions of marriage and family and its implications for determining the relationship between education, gender, and caste in processes of upward mobility.

Marriage as 'barrier'

In the first scenario, marriage was positioned as a 'barrier' to women and girls accessing education and was opposed by them and the feminist interveners and educators. The confrontational stance between daughters and family patriarchs was later altered to establish a mutually beneficial alliance between the two, even though conflicts may not have disappeared. An important gender norm that was shaken up in the process related to the deeply patriarchal concept of daughters being seen as paraya dhan (someone else's wealth). In North India the daughter after marriage becomes the 'property' of her husband and in-laws, the natal family can make no claims on her income or labour, and daughters' claims on their natal families are significantly reduced. The implications of daughters-as-paraya dhan are that natal families do not like to spend on their daughters even before marriage, as it is an investment with no future benefits and are resist intervening after marriage, even in life-threatening matters like domestic violence (see chapters 4, 5 and 6).

In the examples from my research the daughters strategically altered this relationship (discussed above), such that on the one hand they didn't allow the natal family to disappear from their lives as they continued to draw on these relationships (even if contentiously), and on the other, their status as working women afforded them a cache of power to loosen the control of gender relations in their marital homes, as Vimala and Dipti's examples show (see chapter 4, 5 and 6).

Marriage as 'enabler'

For the second scenario, I circle back to the father–daughter relationship but focus on the enabling role of marriage to initiate trajectories of upward mobility, that is best understood by contrasting the experiences of siblings (examples of Kanika, Manisha, Dipti from chapters 4 and 5). Kanika, the reader will recall, was paraya dhan, married off very early and once married, a 'burden' her father wanted to rid himself of (chapter 5). Marriage in Kanika's case came in the way of pursuing her educational and professional aspirations. Her younger sister, Sunita, on the other hand, rode on Kanika's struggles and achievements, her father's changed attitudes and her own academic abilities and became the centre of her family's quest for upward mobility. Sunita's marriage was delayed and carefully planned such that her education and employment were encouraged and

supported by both her marital and natal families even after marriage. This and other examples reflect how the Dalit domestic sphere was being realigned:

For the younger sisters, the time, space and resources made available that allowed them to single-mindedly pursue their education (sirf padhai or only academics as Sunita had put it) was important in countering stereotypical images of Dalit homes as fraught and depleted, and reflected instead an important aspect of upper-caste-class homes, where children have the quiet and luxury of making education a full-time pursuit (for girls domestic work was usually not negotiable).

Second, we see a different reworking of the paraya dhan concept (from the marriage-as-barrier example), which is best illustrated by returning to Sunita's case. Building on Sunita's academic competence, her father arranged a 'good' marriage for her, and consciously continued to provide her financial and other support even after marriage, calculating that if the social and economic prospects of his daughter's marital family improved, he could also partake of the benefits. The marital family also made adjustments. Her father-in-law ensured that gender norms were loosened in two ways: reducing the domestic duties for his young daughter-in-law and making sure she had the time and space to study; allowing his son to focus exclusively on the male 'protector' role and relieving him of his responsibility of performing his 'provider' role. As both these allowances were being made for a daughter-in-law (and wife) with a government job, respectability was not lost but gained. Sunita benefitted too, as she made sure her academic goals and aspirations for a badi sarkari naukri (big government job) were fulfilled. Thus a new kind of rearrangement of the domestic sphere was visible where a balance was struck between education, marriage and employment, which suited the woman and both families.

Third, the trends I have documented also reflect the creation of an emerging and strategic Dalit middle class. We find evidence here of families making assessments of the external environment, investing purposefully in girls' education, and loosening gender norms to 'hedge' their bets. Often the girls' natal and marital family had to strategize jointly to secure coveted employment opportunities, in a context where competition for employment was fierce. Such an emerging middle class is often referred to as the creamy layer—implying a section of a community that with class mobility captures all the benefits and turns its back on its own having acquired some of the trappings of middle-

class respectability—within the Dalit community. Indeed, the cases I studied, the fortunes of their individual families were carefully being built, and frictions were evident (as in the case of Besaniya) but I saw no evidence of such families being completely unresponsive to community concerns. In fact, many of the fathers drew on their family's upward mobility to enhance their community role and further Dalit politics.

Opting Out of Marriage Arrangements

The third scenario is one where women have moved out of marriage and traditional family structures (such as Kanika and Kalavati), again best understood through comparison. In the first case (marriage-as-barrier) despite intra-family friction, the women manoeuvre and alter gender relationships, while choosing to remain within the marriage structure. In Kanika's case the primary mode of engaging with marriage was to oppose the family and struggle against the various restrictions it placed on her educational aspirations and eventually to reject it.

Here it is useful to compare the journeys of the two sisters Kanika and Sunita, and the implications of the differing meanings ascribed to education, its purpose and what it enabled in terms of transforming gender relations. In Sunita's case, the strategic alliance that was built through her marriage enabled new types of domestic arrangements to emerge that kept the structural integrity of the patriarchal family and the institution of marriage intact. Sunita continued to play the dutiful mother and wife, even as she used the power of her badi sarkari naukri to negotiate her domestic responsibilities and influence other household decisions, which most women possibly would not have been able to do. She is the 'good girl' that education produced.

By contrast, in Kanika's case, education produces a 'bad girl', as it prompts her to transgress rather than maintain social norms, and break out from the traditional family structure. And though she had acquired fame through her job as a journalist, it didn't quite carry the same heft as a sarkari job. And as a result, her professional successes could only selectively and tentatively be absorbed into the family's narrative of upward social mobility. At a personal level Kanika was insecure about her status (or its lack) in the family despite all her achievements. Thus Kanika's embrace of feminist education led to fraught encounters between that vision and the dominant positivist vision of

education and empowerment for women: that education should produce 'good girls' (see chapter 5).

Intergenerational Shifts and Impact on Female Work Patterns

The story of the intergenerational shift in educational advancement amongst Dalit girls would be incomplete without highlighting its impact on intra-family female work patterns, specifically the additional burden on older women within the family. Several narratives from my research show that the costs and benefits of education are unequally shared between the women in the family. Kanika's mother, Dipti's mother, Vimala's mother and other women of their generation had taken on (often single-handedly) the physical burden of agricultural work. The older women in the upwardly mobile Dalit families I studied all worked on their own fields, the fields they had leased, as agricultural wage workers (if required), did all the ancillary agricultural work as well as caring for the animals, to make it possible for their children to study and for men to migrate or play other social and political roles. Thus while becoming educated had resulted in freedom from physical labour for girls and boys belonging to the younger generation of upwardly mobile Dalit families, the older generation of women had taken on the additional burden, both physical and emotional. In the area I researched, performing low-wage, backbreaking agricultural labour was increasingly becoming the lot of illiterate poor Dalit woman, a trend that has been documented elsewhere as well, but deserves further exploration (see chapters 4 and 5).

Thus in several of the examples from my dissertation, we see different 'visions' of education—feminist, caste mobility, mobility through mainstream employment—that were not just competing positions but allowed for powerful creative tension between contradictory ideological positions. We have learned about a process of realignment of patriarchal relationships particularly within the domain of marriage and the family emerge in a manner that is definitive yet tentative about the nature of social change. Arguably, what is visible here is a different kind of feminist consciousness, where the family as a site of unequal gender relations is not just being critiqued but also strategically reinvoked not just by the women but the men as well. My research thus points to the emergence of new ideas of the private and public and the place of Dalit women in them, and in changing them.

IV.   STUDYING POLICY AFTERLIVES

My final observations are around what using policy afterlives as a framework, has to offer towards deepening our understanding and theorisation of the processes of feminism-in-practice. The way I have studied policy afterlives, as mentioned earlier, is to examine the encounter between policy from above and the subjects of policy on the ground and by looking at the conceptualisations of women's education and empowerment well beyond the ideas contained in the policy-programme formulation. While I will bring together my earlier observations I will focus first on how partnerships were made and realigned by urban and rural feminists, and how feminism was being practiced by women on the margins, new understandings of feminism, feminist struggles, the formation of grassroots feminist institutions and practices of social transformation.

Empowerment: Beyond Effect, Outcome and Impact

I began this dissertation by describing a particular policy conjuncture where the vision that education would lead to women's empowerment, was an outcome of debates, negotiation, and an unlikely partnership between feminists and the state. The deliberations and contestations of a specific bureaucratic-feminist-activist nexus inflected policy discourses about education, gender and empowerment with a transformative feminist orientation.

I also traced in the introduction, how empowerment, initially developed as a transformative concept in global gender, education and development discourses, was appropriated by powerful international agencies, and became part of the rationalisation of neoliberal economic reforms. Scholars have variously argued that this led to the 'depoliticisation', 'instrumentalisation' and 'co-option', not just of empowerment but also of feminism itself, through the 'NGOisation' of feminist organisations and movements, for example. Further this 'take over' of empowerment also signalled an increased focus on measuring complex social phenomena—either quantitatively or through simplistic case studies—like the one I began this dissertation with.

Recent academic scholarship of the MS programme has interrogated empowerment as a neoliberal rationality and has been critical of the outcomes of the

hybrid state-feminist partnership. There are several critical readings of the MS programme and its eventual withdrawal (a process that unfolded during my research) or of the state's high-handed conduct with the programme's workers (sudden termination of contracts) that I agree with. However, as these research studies were already oriented towards a particular intellectual critique—that of governmentality—they leaned towards showing the domination of subjects by the state-feminist nexus or at best highlighting paradoxes.

Studying policy afterlives allowed me to go beyond the conceptual limits of empowerment as a tool of neoliberal governmentality or an uncritical tool of gender transformation. But more importantly, I also learnt that most of the subjects of my research did not use the language of empowerment, and instead represented their understanding of the processes they had undergone and their meaning (here too, result wasn't used) as a metaphor—jaal-judaav— reflecting both concrete and discursive aspects of their lived experiences.

What the metaphor offers and why it is important I have already summarised earlier but I now point to what it offers for a deeper understanding of empowerment. For instance, the narratives positioned the issue of caste as being central to the understanding of empowerment, which emerged both through the use of afterlives and the jaal-judaav metaphor. I posit that my research subjects unintentionally recouped the meanings of empowerment, by locating it within a web of power relations, and this provides us with a way out of the impasses of either agreeing or disagreeing about the credibility, use and potency of empowerment as a transformative concept. Instead what I have shown is that if you want to understand empowerment, then understanding how the jaal-judaav metaphor works is worthwhile and it shows that empowerment is not outside of power and therefore it cannot be depoliticised.

Secondly, coming to the issue of measurement, the field of adult women's education and literacy, driven by powerful institutions such as the state and international agencies, has been dominated by quantitative studies that assess literacy achievements, or behavioural change and its effectiveness in furthering developmental goals—such as lowering fertility rates or delaying marriage (see introduction). I avoided asking deterministic questions such as whether a particular intervention (such as learning to read and write) empowered women or not, or whether it lead to mobility or not, or whether it

was definitively beneficial to Dalit women or not. By following the lives of women I have avoided 'snapshot' pictures of impact. I have specifically revisited paradigmatic cases (for example Kanika's) and have shown the tentativeness and vulnerabilities reflected in these narratives, but also how narratives are told in different ways by the protagonists—and therefore that they are mediated and constructed. And finally to avoid an overemphasis on personal triumph, I have shown how many of the struggles are not just individual struggles but collaborative ones, specifically those forged with the feminist partners who joined the venture (Kanika's testimony, chapter 5).

The Crucible of Feminist Change: Relooking at Partnerships and Institutions

The particular policy conjuncture at the heart of my thesis, as I have mentioned before, was also marked by a time in the history of the women's movement driven by contradictory impulses towards its engagement with the state. The friction was the outcome of the antagonistic historical legacy of the autonomous women's movement having emerged out of the mid-1970s political crisis (see introduction); and the openness for collaboration came from a largely urban movement wanting to expand its footprint, make its politics relevant to rural women and shed its elitist image. To experiment with a state-feminist partnership, feminists adopted the 'in and against the state' strategy (chapter 1). The journey I have traced tells us about the spread and practice of feminism, in the context of grassroots democracy and the evolution of state-society relations.

New Networks and Relationships Beyond the Family

In my concluding observations I have so far highlighted the generative aspect of the jaal metaphor from the perspective of the networks and partnerships my Dalit women informants (re)built within their families and communities. However, a crucial aspect of how their journeys unfolded is what transpired as they were exposed to feminist politics, and how they used that to challenge entrenched gender norms. A central theme throughout is the role played by the feminist interveners and educators. All the testimonies I have shared in this dissertation reveal how my informants built long term-commitments—albeit of different intensities, using different means and towards different ends—to furthering the project of feminism and feminist education.

The story my dissertation tells about roles of various feminists and feminist educators, also reflects another dimension of the intergenerational story—that of feminist institution building. The first-generation of feminist interveners (who were urban, upper caste, elite), engaged with and helped build a crucial second-generation feminist cadre, who were rural, Dalit and labouring class. In the process, feminist knowledge, politics and praxis was transferred and transformed (see chapter 2, 3 and 6).

All my informants were supported in their individual struggles, first by feminist activists, trainers and educators, and then later by the local MSK teachers, sahayoginis and MS staff. The latter were second-generation rural feminists who identified with the feminist education and political project that they were introduced to through the trainings and literacy programmes and ultimately were critical in mobilising local women and working directly with them. And finally we see the emergence of a crucial third generation, where several of the MSK graduates eventually moved into playing mentoring and leadership roles to promote a narivadi nazariya (feminist perspective).

I return to Kanika's example (chapters 5 and 6) to remind us of how this process unfolded. As a young girl she tapped into what were initially power-laden interactions: where urban, upper caste educated women within a state-run programme were interacting with rural, Dalit, illiterate women and their families, by humanizing a distant relationship with an abstract state, breaking it down into people whom she related to independently and repeatedly called on to support her. She also reached out to the next generation of women such as her teacher, who belonged to her own community, to make sure she could attend the MSK. Later at various points she drew on MS staff, members of Vanangana, Nirantar and KL to help her deal with her vulnerabilities and support her in breaking gender norms within public and private realms of her life, before taking on such roles herself (see chapters 5 and 6).

Thus, her testimony exemplifies the personal 'struggle' aspect and the parallel process of building new relationships and cementing support networks beyond her family and community. Kanika's tenacity and her attempts to educate herself were recognised by the feminist educators, who were equally invested in creating rural feminist subjects (see chapter 5). In the end, while her case has been considered a classic example of a success story, it doesn't belong to the 'personal grit and success against all odds' genre of neoliberal accounts, nor is it solely a success story for the interveners, a common trope in policy and programme reports. It represents instead a collaborative

venture between the protagonist and the interveners, where both were critical to fulfilling each other's agendas, not necessarily perfectly. These relationships were then channelized into building the next generation of feminist institutions—KL, Vanangana, Dalit Mahila Samiti, for example—who espoused and practised new types of contextually determined feminisms.

Transformative Potential of Feminist Education and Institution Building

Feminist movements, especially since the onset of neoliberal policies, have frequently been analysed in terms of their co-option or NGOisation, or in terms of neoliberalism's paradoxes and unintended outcomes. Such analyses have largely focussed on national and transnational movements (see introduction). Ironically, my research has shown how a diverse feminist institutional landscape (which undoubtedly has its own problems) emerged out of a state-feminist led imagination and then diverged—a development that has largely been ignored in existing research using the governmentality framework.

The trajectories of new institution building can be seen as a process of cleavages and (re)convenings—encompassing shifting ideologies, people and new sites of feminist action. I will briefly recall a couple of examples to establish my point. With the growing recognition of caste as a determinant of women's experiences—whether in terms of their place in the public domain, or representation in educational material, or in taking up cases of violence or the handpump programme—addressing the politics of caste alongside gender became imperative. Subsequently, key members of MS (first generation urban, upper caste feminists and second generation rural feminists) left and came together to set up Vanangana who then went on to also establish the local Dalit Mahila Samiti.

The second reconfiguration emerged as a response to the representation of rural women's voices and co-creation of knowledge through literacy interventions. I have traced the partnerships between MS, Nirantar and local women that traversed a primer development process, to the experiences of the MSK curriculum development, and onto establishing the *Mahila Dakiya* broadsheet (see chapter 3). The idea of a potential newspaper (*Khabar Lahariya*) triggered a rupture with MS and a new arrangement between the women reporters of *Mahila Dakiya* and Nirantar. Eventually this led to the development of a local language newspaper—beyond a framework of women's

development and empowerment—which brought first, second and third generation of feminists together to set up a rural media organisation.

Through these examples, I show how new entrants to feminism—rural feminists who do not have their antecedents in 'agitational politics' and may even have a more 'dubious' origin story, emerging out of a state-led programme—are actually creating new political spaces and subjectivities: in discursive and physical sites of action, where their standpoint is interrogating inherited, hegemonic forms of political praxis.

Further, through this institutional metamorphosis, initially rooted in a national and transnational feminist imagination (see chapter 2 and 3) we see its evolution, and local incorporation through new vocabularies. And here I am thinking of the ghumna (roam), ghusna (to get into) and nazariya (perspective) strategy that was employed by the journalists, where they turned their gender and caste identities to shape feminist politics in a space where they were not welcome (see chapter 6). This process constituted new feminist political subjectivities and new engagement with the state.

Thus by examining the organic evolution of feminist institutions and practices emerging out of an apparently contentious policy conjuncture of actors and partnerships, but going well beyond that configuration, my research provides fresh insights into studying grassroots feminisms, feminist movements, and new fields of Dalit feminist action and leadership. My thesis shows the broad landscape of lives and theorisations of feminist subjectification-in-the-making and feminist movements that have been eclipsed and remain occluded. Examples from the margins do not find a way into standard feminist movement historiographies, making my research an important addition to the narrative of the Indian feminist movement. In the end, my research privileges an understanding from below of the relationship between gender, caste, education and empowerment for individuals, and beyond that to broader processes of social mobility and feminist politics.

Achooth	'Untouchable'
Adivasi	Tribal, term preferred by the community
Anaaj	Grain
Andar	Inside, internal, private
Anganwadi.	Early childhood care centre in the Government's Integrated Child Development Scheme
Anganwadi Sahayika	Helper at the Anganwadi Centre
Anganwadi Worker	Woman in charge of the Anganwadi Centre
Angootha chaap	Thumbprint, illiterate
Anusuchit jati	Scheduled Caste
ASHA worker	Acronym for Accredited Social Health Activist. A community health worker with the National Rural Health Mission (Ministry of Health)
Asmanjas	Inner turmoil
Atmavishwas	Self confidence
Azad/i	Free/freedom
Badi jati	Upper caste
Badi naukri	Literally a 'big' job, high paying-high status job
Badi sarkari naukri	High-level Government job
Bahar	Outside, external, public
Bahu	Daughter-in-law
Bandhan	Bond or tie, can have both negative and positive connotations
Bandhua mazdoor	Bonded labourer
Bandhua mazdoori	Labour performed under debt bondage
Bhaari kashth	Heavy or great (bhaari) suffering (Kashth)
Bheja	Brains
Block	Administrative sub-unit of a District
Brahmin	High caste
Bundeli	Local language of Bundelkhand
Bundelkhandi	Belonging to the Bundelkhand area
Chamar	Dalit sub-caste, traditionally been associated with occupations such as leatherwork, tanning and shoemaking, considered to be a politically powerful sub caste in UP
Charpai	Cot
Choti naukri	Literally a 'small' job, low-paying low status job
Chuachuth	Practices of untouchability
Dabang	Literally all-powerful, feudal
Dabis	Feeling of intense oppression
Dacoit	Armed bandits
Dadu	Upper caste landlord
Dai/daigiri	Midwife/midwifery
Dalit	A self-ascribed term used to replace pejorative terms, formerly 'untouchables', considered to be the 'lowest' or' outside the Hindu caste system.

Dandavat	An act of obeisance, classically to lie prostrate in front of a deity
Daroga	Sub inspector of police
Darwaza	Door, doorstep
Dehati	Rustic, often used as pejorative
Didi	Older sister, term used out of respect
Duniyadaari	Worldly-wise person
Federation	Pyramidal structure bringing several village level collectives onto a common platform, term commonly used in women's development, empowerment and microcredit programmes
Gaon	Village
Gaondaari	Someone who looks out for the interests of the village
Gauna	When the bride is formally sent from her natal home to her marital home and the marriage is consummated
Ghumna	To roam about
Ghusna	To enter, with some degree of intention
Gobar	Cowdung
Gram Panchayat	A village level unit of self-government comprising elected representatives
Haq	Rights
Hindutva	Predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India, a political ideology to establish Hindu supremacy espoused by the Hindu Right
Integrated Child Development Scheme	A national level early childhood care scheme also called the Anganwadi programme.
Itihaas	History
Jaal	Web
Jagah	Space
Jankari	Information
Jati	Caste
Jatil	Complicated, complex
Judaav	Attachment(s) or connection(s)
Kabza	Encroachment, Illegal control
Kamzor	Weak
Khabar	News
Khabar Lahariya	Literally, news waves, a Bundelkhand-based chain of local language newspapers started in 2002, currently a digital rural news channel, run by a rural, women-led media collective
Khadi boli	Pure, 'official' form of Hindi
Khatola	Cradle
Khush	Happy
Kirana	Provisions store
Kismat	Fate
Kol	Tribal group inhabiting central India and Bundelkhand (Madhya Pradesh and Southern Uttar Pradesh
Kota	Fair Price (Ration) shop
Kotedar	Fair Price Ration dealer

Mahila	Woman
Mahila Samooh	Women's group or collective
Mahila Dakiya	Literally, Post Woman, a broadsheet, produced by newly-literate women
Mahila Samakhya	Government of India programme (Ministry of Human Resources Development) for women's education and empowerment, started in 1989 and closed in 2016.
Mahila Shikshan Kendra	Residential non-formal education centre for women and out of school adolescent girls run by Mahila Samakhya
Maika	Natal home
Majboor	Under compulsion
Mazdoori	Wages
Mehnat	Effort, labour, hard work
Mudda	Issue, problem
Narivadi(s)	Feminist, feminists
Naukri	Job
Nayi Batein	New words or thinking
Nazariya	Perspective
Neta/netagiri	Leader, politician/Being a neta or leader
Nidar patrakar	Fearless journalist
Nirantar	Delhi-based feminist resource centre working at the intersections of gender, sexuality and education
Niti Aayog	Government of India's national level planning body
Padhai likhai	To study or to read and write
Padhi likhi	Literate, educated
Pagal/pagalpan	Mad/madness
Pahunch	Reach
Panchayat	Village level elected local bodies (same as Gram Panchayat)
Paraya dhan	Someone else's wealth
Patrakar	Reporter, journalist
Patta	Land deed
Patwari	Land Revenue Officer
Pehchaan	Identity
Pradhan	Elected head of the Gram Panchayat
Public Distribution System	National level food security programme through which rations distributed
Pucca	Permanent, concrete (when referring to housing)
Purva	Village neighbourhood or hamlet, usually caste based
Rajmistri	Mason
Rivaz	Custom
Roti	Flat bread
Saanth-gaanth	Nexus
Saas	Mother-in-law
Sahayogini	Field level coordinators of 10 village sanghas (Mahila Samakhya)
Sakhi	Village level volunteer of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

Saksharta	Literacy
Samantvadi	Feudal social relations
Samiti	Committee
Samjhauta	Compromise
Sampark	Connection or relationship
Samuhik samajh	Collective thinking or understanding
Sangathan	Village level collective, can also mean federation of women's groups
Sangha	Women's collective
Sangharsh	Struggle
Sarkar(i)	Government
Sasur/Saas	Father-in-law/Mother-in-law
Sasural	Marital home
Sathin	Village level animator (WDP, Rajasthan)
Sava ser	1.25 kilogram
Shiksha	Education
Sirf padhai	Only studies or academics
Soch	Thinking, perspective
Sukh-dukh	Happiness-sadness
Sukh-dukh bantna	Sharing happiness and sadness
Sukh-suvidha	Happiness-material comforts
Tehsil	Administrative unit for Revenue purposes, smaller than a district
Tendu patta	Leaves used to make bidis or local cigarettes
Thana	Police station
Training	Pedagogic and educational strategy, in MS used to mean a process that fostered critical reflection and reflected a broader transformative vision of education
Unchi jati	Upper Caste
Unchi padhai	Higher education
Unpadh	Uneducated
Vanangana	Feminist organization working on issues of gender, caste, violence against women, located in Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Uttar Pradesh
Vyavhar	Someone with whom you have connections, otherwise behavior
Zilla	District
Zimmedari	Responsibility

ABBREVIATIONS

AISHE   All India Survey of Higher Education
ANM   Auxilliary Nurse Midwife
ASHA   Accredited Social Health Activist
AWC   Anganwadi Centre
AWH   Anganwadi Helper
AWW   Anganwadi Worker
BPL   Below Poverty Line
BSP   Bahujan Samaj Party
CSWI   Committee on the Status of Women In India
EFA   Education for All
GAD   Gender and Development
GOI   Government of India
ICDS   Integrated Child Development Scheme
IPCL   Improved Pace and Content of Learning
KGBV   Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya
KL   Khabar Lahariya
LGM   Learner Generated Material
MDG   Millennium Development Goal(s)
MHRD   Ministry of Human Resources Development
MP   Madhya Pradesh
MS   Mahila Samakhya
MSK   Mahila Shikshan Kendra
NAEP   National Adult Education Programme
NCERT   National Council for Education Research and Training
NEP   National Education Policy
NGO   Non Governmental Organisation
NLM   National Literacy Mission
NLS   New Literacy Studies
NRHM   National Rural Health Mission
NUEPA   National University for Educational Planning and Administration
OBC   Other Backward Castes
PDS   Public Distribution System
SAP   Structural Adjustment Policy
SC   Scheduled caste
SHG   Self help group
SDG   Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SP   Samajwadi Party
SSA   Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST   Scheduled tribe
TLC   Total Literacy Campaign
UP   Uttar Pradesh
WDP   Women's Development Programme
WID   Women in Development

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

(In Alphabetical Order by First Name)

[* name changed]

- Anarkali (KL reporter), Karvi, March 19, 2015
- Anasuya (Dalit rights activist, former MSK teacher), Karvi, October 13, 2014
- Avdhesh (Vanangana leadership team, former literacy teacher), Karvi, December 5, 2015
- Besaniya * (Anganwadi Helper, MSK graduate), Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, October 11, 2014, October 15, 2015
- Besaniya's oldest daughter-in-law, (Agricultural worker, homemaker), Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, November 18, 2015
- Besaniya's oldest son, Rampal* (Mason), Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, November 18, 2015
- Besaniya's neighbour, Shivkalia (Former sangathan member), Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, November 15, 2015
- Besaniya's youngest son, Pradeep* (Kotedar, Besaniya's youngest son), Baghora village, Chitrakoot District, October 15, 2015, November 17, 2015
- Chandrakanta (Acting District coordinator Chitrakoot), Chitrakoot, October 30, 2014
- Deepa Dhanraj (Film maker), Bangalore, May 15, 2015
- Dhokhia (Staff member Vanangana, former sakhi), Chowkipurva village, Chitrakoot District, February 23, 2015
- Dipta Bhog (Educationist, founding-member Nirantar), New Delhi, March 18, 2016; March 22, 2016; May 26, 2017
- Dipti * (Anganwadi worker, MSK graduate), interviewed by author, Kothilihai village, Chitrakoot District, March 18, 2015).
- Dipti's father, interviewed by author, Kothilihai village, Chitrakoot District, October 15, 2015;
- Disha Mullick (Co-founder KL, formerly with Nirantar), Delhi, March 22, 2016
- Durga (Anganwadi worker, former sahayogini and literacy facilitator), Karvi, April 25, 2015
- Farah Naqvi (Writer and activist, founding member Nirantar, former National Consultant MS), New Delhi, April 27, 2017
- Ganga (Senior Consultant Mahila Samakhya UP), Lucknow, September 9, 2015
- Geeta (Literacy teacher and sangathan member), Baghora village, November 18, 2015.
- Jaya Sharma (Activist, founding Member Nirantar), New Delhi, March 21, 2016; April 4, 2016
- Kalavati * (KL reporter, MSK graduate), Bhawanipur village, Banda District, February 21 & February 22, 2015; May 21, 2015
- Kalyani Menon Sen (Gender consultant, National Resource Group member and), New Delhi, August 8, 2015
- Kanika* (KL journalist, MSK graduate), On train journey Karvi to Delhi (March 19, 2014), Banda (March 23, 2014, February 21, 2015, March 20, 2015, October 12 & 13, 2015)
- Kanika's father, Ram Avtar* (Local leader), Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, December 11, 2015

- Kanika's mother (Agricultural worker and homemaker), Kunjanpurva village, March 21, 2014 & 22, 2015, February 22, 2015
- Kanika's elder brother, Manoj (Job seeker), Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, March 21, 2014
- Kanika's younger sister, Sunita* (Government school teacher), Gobarhai village, Chitrakoot District, March 20, 2015
- Sunita's sister-in-law, Nirmala (Job seeker), Kunjanpurva village, Chitrakoot District, March 21, 2014
- Karwariya (Landlord), Marayyan village, Chitrakoot District, December 13, 2015
- Keta* (ASHA worker, MSK graduate), interviewed by author, Unchadih village, Chitrakoot District, August 31, 2016
- Laxmi Krishnamurthy (Former Mahila Samakhya National Resource Group member, Trainer), Bangalore, May 25, 2015
- Madhavi Kuckreja (Activist and social entrepreneur, founding member Vanangana, former MS Chitrakoot District coordinator), New Delhi (April 17, 2017); Lucknow (March 23, 2014 & March 28, 2014)
- Manisha* (Senior KL reporter), Banda, March 20, 2014, November 1, 2014
- Manisha's mother (Daily wager, homemaker), Nai Duniya village, Chitrakoot District, February 28, 2015
- Meena (Secretary Sahjani Shiksha Kendra Lalitpur, former MSK teacher), New Delhi, April 20, 2017
- Meenakshi (Freelance gender trainer, former MSK coordinator and MS District coordinator), Karvi, April 25, 2015
- Meera Jatav (KL co-founder, former MS sahayogini), Karvi, April 26, 2015; Mau, December 11, 2015
- Mehrunissa (Former literacy teacher, former KL reporter), Karvi, October 14, 2014
- Mohammad Amin* (Retired land record officer), Karvi, December 11, 2015
- Monika (Daughter of informant, B.Ed student), Mau, Chitrakoot District, December 11, 2015
- Munni *(BDC member, former sangathan member), Bartarapurva, Chitrakoot District, December 18, 2015.
- N. Sarojini (Feminist health activist, founder SAMA-Health Resource Centre), New Delhi, April 4, 2016
- Naina* (Government school teacher, former MSK teacher), October 12, 2014)
- Nishi Mehrotra (Gender and education consultant, former State Project Director MS- UP), Lucknow, September 8, 2015
- Pachiniya (Leader Dalit Mahila Samiti), Bhauri village, Chitrakoot District, March 24, 2015
- Poonam (Anganwadi worker, former literacy teacher), Karvi, May 24, 2015
- Pramila (Former KL reporter, MSK graduate), Banda, February 21, 2015
- Prashanthi (MS- Andhra Pradesh State Project Director), New Delhi, February 26, 2016
- Prema (Agricultural worker, former handpump mechanic), Dandi village, Chitrakoot District, February 23, 2015
- Purnima Gupta (Senior Programme Officer Nirantar), New Delhi, April 18, 2017

- Pushpa (Vanangana leadership team, former MSK teacher), Karvi (October 18, 2015), Banda (March 3, 2015, September 9, 2015, February 6, 2017), Delhi, January 10, 2016
- Rajbul (Gorakhpur District coordinator), interviewed by author Lucknow, September 9, 2015
- Rajkumari (Handpump mechanic, leader Dalit Mahila Samiti), Dandi village, Chitrakoot District, October 4, 2015
- Rajni (Local union leader) interviewed by author, Banda, October 1, 2015,
- Renuka Mishra (Social Activist, founding member Nirantar), New Delhi, April 24, 2017
- Rita * (Senior Consultant Mahila Samakhya UP), Lucknow, September 7, 2015
- Safiya (MS-UP Consultant), Lucknow, September 9, 2015
- Sampat (Shikshamitra, Former MSK teacher), Mau, Chitrakoot District, April 26, 2015
- Santosh (Vanangana Literacy coordinator), December 12, 2015
- Shalini Joshi, (Regional Programme Manager Meedan, co-founder member of Khabar Lahariya), New Delhi, April 5, 2016
- Sharda Jain (Educationist, Trustee Sandhan, Jaipur), Jaipur, April 25, 2017
- Shivrani* (Leader Dalit Mahila Samiti, former sakhi), Saraiyya village, Chitrakoot District, October 9, 2014, March 16, 2015, December 18 and 19, 2015).
- Shivrani's oldest daughter-in-law, Saraiyya village, December 18, 2015.
- Smriti Singh (MS-UP State Project Director), Lucknow, September 9 & 10, 2015
- Srilatha Batliwala (Scholar-Activist, former State Programme Director Mahila Samakhya Karnataka), Bangalore, May 25, 2015
- Suman (Local union leader), Banda, December 7, 2015.
- Surajkali (Vanangana staff member, MSK graduate), Karvi, October 17, 2015,
- Sushila (District resource person MS, former MS sahayogini), Manikpur, Chitrakoot District, December 12 & 13, 2015
- Urmila (Vanangana staffer, former MSK student), Karvi, October 2, 2015.
- Varsha (Resource person MS State Office, formerly resource person Banda District,), Lucknow, February 8, 2016
- Vimala Ramachandran (Educationist, former National Project Director, Mahila Samakhya), Jaipur, April 25, 2017
- Vimala* (ASHA worker, MSK graduate), Nanha ka Dera village, Banda District (February 2, 2015, April 24, 2015); Karvi (March 2, 2015); Gureh village, Banda District (September 30, 2015, October 14, 2015)
- Vimala's father, Naresh* (Local leader), Nanha ka Dera village, Banda District, September 30, 2015
- Vimala's mother, Nanha ka Dera village, Banda District, April 24, 2015

Focus Group Discussions/Workshops
- Dalit Mahila Samiti leaders, Karvi, March 22 -23, 2015
- Women from Dalit purva, Dandi village, Chitrakoot District, February 23, 2015
- Men and women Dalit purva, Bhauri village, Chitrakoot District, March 24, 2015
- Daughters of Dalit Mahila Samiti women, Karvi, December 6, 2015
- Mahila Samakhya National Workshop, Patna, July 27-29, 2015
- Group discussion with mechanics, Karvi, December 20, 2015

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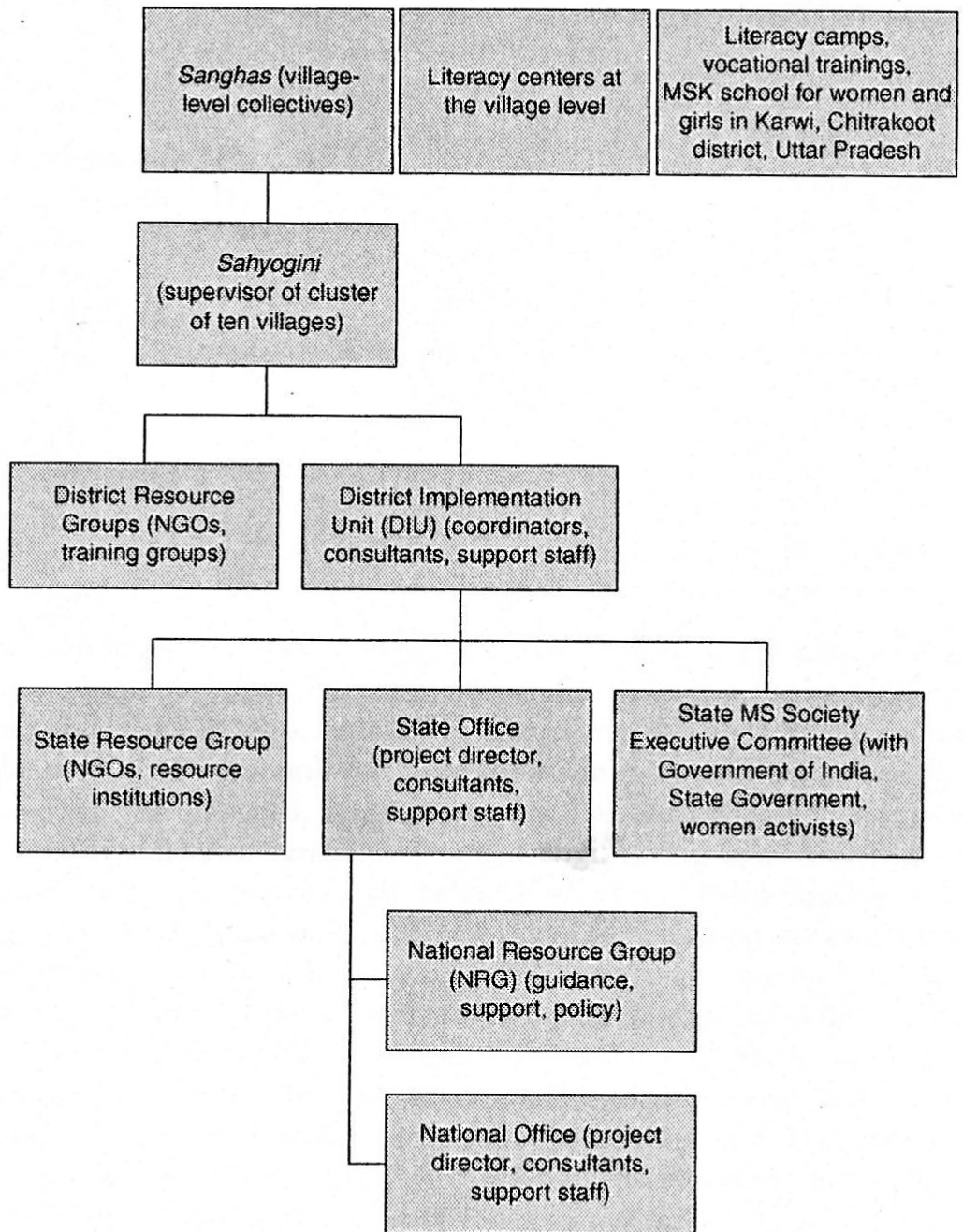
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ANNEXURE 1:

## OVERVIEW OF MS STRUCTURE

Level	Structure & Role	Role of Women's Groups
National	National Project Office (NPO), Ministry of Human Resources Development (Delhi). Headed by National Project Director, IAS level (except the first National Director). Staffed by consultants with backgrounds in women's development. NPO monitored, provided programme direction, coordinated with states, represented MS within the government at state and national levels.	National Resource Group (NRG). Composed of well-known women activists and academics. Played an advisory role, provided direction, supported research and review processes, direct involvement in programme, and members of state level Executive Committees.
State	State Project Office (SPO). Autonomously registered society. Headed by State Project Director, not from the Government. SPO staffed by consultants, resource persons etc. SPO provided direction to the state-level programme, determined strategy, coordinated with districts represented the state within the bureaucracy.	Members of Executive Council. Supported programme in training, research, review etc.
District	District Implementation Unit (DIU) Headed by a District Coordinator. Staffed Resource persons. Provided direction to the district programme. Sahayogini: Field level coordinators	Members of NRG, women's groups and NGOs interacted with district programmes in the early years through activities like training, planning, reflection, and later mediated by the state office.
Village	Mahila sangha (village level collective)	Women's groups were instrumental in determining the vision of the mahila sanghas and later the federated structures of mahasangh.

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│ Sanghas (village-│  │ Literacy centers│  │ Literacy camps,     │
│ level collectives)│  │ at the village  │  │ vocational trainings,│
│                 │  │ level           │  │ MSK school for women│
│                 │  │                 │  │ and girls in Karwi, │
│                 │  │                 │  │ Chitrakoot district,│
│                 │  │                 │  │ Uttar Pradesh       │
└─────────────────┘  └─────────────────┘  └─────────────────────┘
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Sanghas (village-level collectives)

Literacy centers at the village level

Literacy camps, vocational trainings, MSK school for women and girls in Karwi, Chitrakoot district, Uttar Pradesh

Sahyogini (supervisor of cluster of ten villages)

District Resource Groups (NGOs, training groups)

District Implementation Unit (DIU) (coordinators, consultants, support staff)

State Resource Group (NGOs, resource institutions)

State Office (project director, consultants, support staff)

State MS Society Executive Committee (with Government of India, State Government, women activists)

National Resource Group (NRG) (guidance, support, policy)

National Office (project director, consultants, support staff)

Source: Shubra Sharma 2011

ANNEXURE 2: MAP OF BUNDELKHAND (LOCATION OF CHITRAKOOT DISTRICT IN UTTAR PRADESH
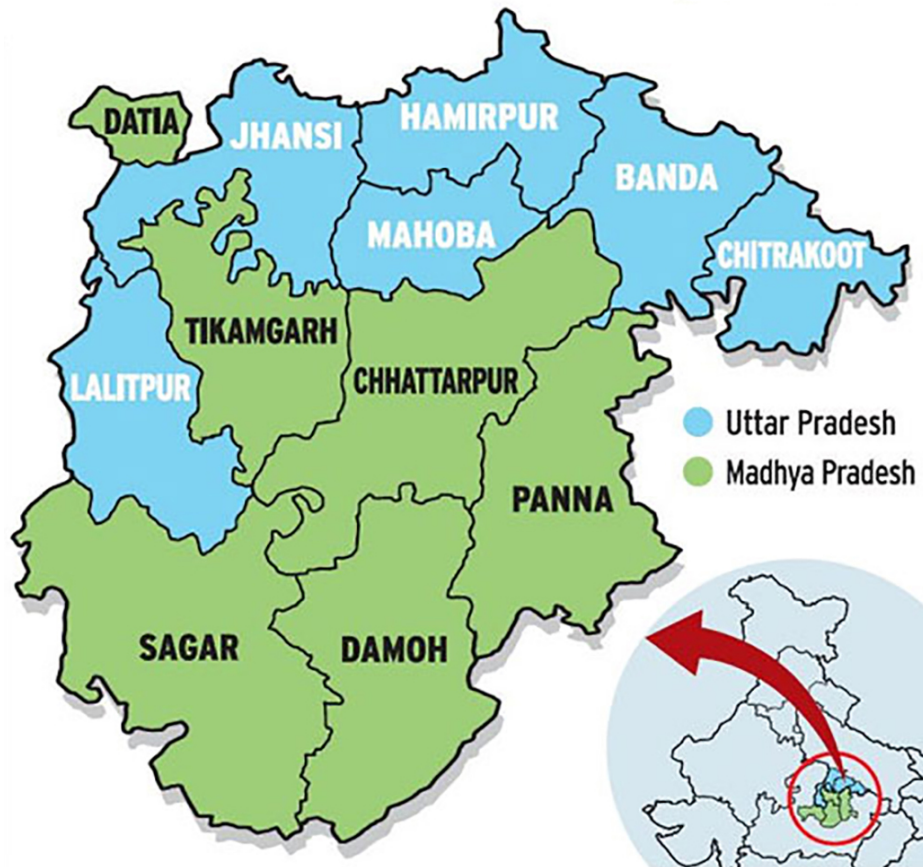
Source: www.bundelkhand.in

ANNEXURE 3:

INSTITUTIONAL MAPPING: AN OVERVIEW (1989-2015)

Year	Institutional Map
1989	- MS initiated through partnership between MS-GOI- local NGOs- Jagori (National Feminist training organization)
1992	- Partnership breaks - Independent MS District Unit established - First handpump training (Partnership between MS- UP Jal Nigam and UNICEF)
1993	- Vanangana (Local feminist NGO) registered. Members included erstwhile MS district leadership, staff, teachers and handpump mechanics
1993-1997	- Mahila Dakiya, broadsheet produced by newly literates initiated in 1992 (MS-Nirantar, New Delhi, Resource Centre for Gender and Education) - First batch of MSK (MS-Nirantar) - Vanangana & MS work collaboratively for a while. Vanangana gets activated and separates from MS, 1995
2001	- Khabar Lahariya established as a rural newspaper led by Dalit women who had attended literacy interventions in partnership with Nirantar (2001)
Upto 2015	- Vanangana established Dalit Mahila Samiti (2012) as an independent entity. - KL separates from Nirantar (2013). Registered independently, works as a digital media platform reporting local news in UP (2015)