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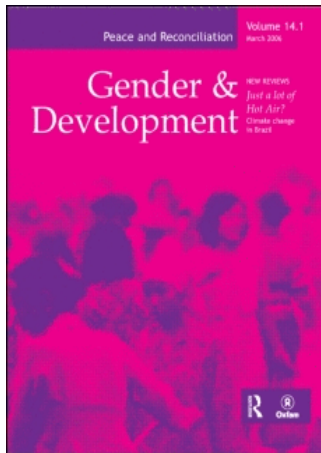
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## The politics of the marginalised: Dalits and women's activism in India

Radhika Govinda

*The assertion of Dalit interests has posed new challenges for the women's movement in India, which has been criticised for its lack of engagement with Dalit women and their interests. Some women's activists have begun to respond to this critique. Yet this article argues that caste identity still determines the place that women activists – upper caste and Dalit – are given by villagers in their fieldwork and within women's organisations. The article also explores how Dalit women are using their caste identity, alongside their identity as village-level activists, to further their interests beyond the realm of women's activism. By doing so, they are celebrating their personal experiences as political.*

Kalawati, aged 35, is a Dalit woman who works with a women's organisation in a small town in Southern Uttar Pradesh. Married at the age of 11 to a poor agricultural labourer, she was expecting her first child when she appeared for higher secondary school examinations. The support of her natal family and her in-laws later enabled her to complete her undergraduate studies. She was a mother of three when Mahila Samakhya, a government-sponsored women's development programme, set up a Non-Formal Education Centre in her village. Kalawati joined Mahila Samakhya as a teacher assistant in 1992. Since 1996, Kalawati has been working for another women's organisation, engaged primarily with Dalit women and their concerns. She says she had no idea about her own identity when she first joined this organisation. She just knew she was Harijan.<sup>1</sup> Today, she is proud to call herself a Dalit village-level activist. She has traveled to many places within and outside the country as a representative of her organisation. This year, she was elected as a member of the local village council. Having made this journey on her own, she is an inspiration to many women in her village.<sup>2</sup>

Mayawati, aged 49, is a Dalit woman who is the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) that has a significant support base in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Born in the low-caste Chamar community, Mayawati studied law and went on to become a teacher before embarking on her political career. Protégé of former BSP President and Dalit ideologue, Kanshi Ram, she rose in the party ranks and took on Kanshi Ram's political

mantle. On 14 April 1995, unmarried Mayawati, aged 39, became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. It was the first time in the history of Uttar Pradesh that a woman (particularly a Dalit woman) had come to occupy the most important post in the state. An icon for Dalit voters, Mayawati has emerged as a symbol of their dignity and aspirations after years of oppression at the hands of caste-Hindus.<sup>3</sup>

While most people in India have heard of Mayawati and her rise to power, few know of Kalawati and her battle to survive. However, these stories of Mayawati and Kalawati are about more than individual transformation. They speak of the struggles of marginalised people, and of how caste and gender identities cross-cut each other in the experience of marginalisation. They also speak of the challenge that confronts the contemporary women's movement in India to include Dalit women and their interests in women's activism.

This article explores the struggles of Dalit women such as Kalawati and Mayawati. It examines the dilemmas their experiences present for the Indian women's movement, and considers how women activists and their organisations are responding to these dilemmas in the context of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>4</sup> The article suggests that even in the process of engagement with Dalit women, women workers carry their caste identity into their activities, whether as caste-Hindu, middle-class, urban-educated heads of these organisations, or as Dalit village-level activists. I also suggest that Dalit women are using their caste identity alongside their identity as village-level activists or members of women's self-help groups. They are doing this in order to take their interests beyond women's activism, into local electoral politics. I argue that by entering local electoral politics, the personal experiences of Dalit women can also be celebrated as political. The article draws on observations made during interactions with activists working with women in rural and urban areas of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>5</sup>

## The Dalit question and the women's movement in India

Over the past few decades, social and political Dalit movements, specifically the BSP-led Dalitbahujan Samaj movement, have placed the category of 'Dalit' on the national and international agenda. Literally meaning 'poor and oppressed' in several Indian languages, the category of 'Dalit' has been imbued with different meanings by Dalit and non-Dalit scholars and activists (Guru 2001). Eleanor Zelliott defines the category as representing 'those who have been broken, ground down by social groups above them in a deliberate manner' (Zelliott 2001, 264). Ghanshyam Shah writes that Dalit movements have been mainly confined to ex-untouchables; those who are called Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Shah 2001). In this article, I refer to Shah's understanding of the category of 'Dalit'.

The main aim of the Dalitbahujan Samaj movement has been to win equal rights, and better access to socio-economic resources for the Dalits. For this purpose, the movement has sought to consolidate its ranks in electoral politics through the Indian

state guarantee to reserve a certain number of seats for Scheduled Castes as part of the Panchayati Raj Act.<sup>6</sup> The BSP's emergence as a strong regional party under the leadership of Mayawati has led to a significant rise in confidence within Dalit communities, including a number of Dalit women, who have begun contesting elections on reserved seats. Threatened by such Dalit political assertion, caste-Hindu men *and* women have increasingly attacked men *and* women of Dalit communities (Tharu and Niranjana 1999).

For the women's movement, these political developments have thrown up several challenges: those involved in women's activism do not know how to deal with Mayawati – who has done little for women and their interests – as their role model and leader. That women have been actively involved in caste violence has shattered the movement's assumptions that women are inherently peace-loving, that gender identity is more important than caste identity, and that 'sisterhood' will prevail among women (Menon 2004, 166–203; Morgan 1970). Further, Dalitbahujan activists and others have criticised the women's movement for the lack of representation of women from marginalised communities, and for its lack of engagement with the caste identity of women. Activists have pointed out that as caste-Hindu, middle-class, urban-educated women have been at the helm of the women's movement, this has resulted in their perspectives dominating the movement, often at the cost of women from marginalised communities (Balmiki 2005; Rao 2003; Torat 2001). Those involved in women's activism have now begun to acknowledge that women's issues are connected to identities other than gender. Dalit women are gradually becoming involved in women's activism and their concerns are being addressed by the women's movement. However, such engagement has confronted the movement with new dilemmas.

The state of Uttar Pradesh is populated by over 170m people. Of this, Dalits constitute nearly 20 per cent (NCAER 2003). Uttar Pradesh has been the nerve-centre of Dalit political assertion since the mid-1980s under the leadership of the BSP (Pai 2002). Such assertion has made caste the mainstay of social and political relations in Uttar Pradesh. It has, in fact, transformed caste from being purely an instrument of oppression in the hands of caste-Hindus to also being a tool of political mobilisation creating solidarities among the oppressed. This article is based on a study of those involved in women's activism with Dalit women, in the political context of Uttar Pradesh. This context gives rich insights into how the Indian women's movement has engaged with the challenges thrown up by Dalit assertion, and into how such engagement has posed new dilemmas for the movement.

### Negotiating 'caste' in women's activism

There is a clear focus on poor and marginalised women belonging to rural Dalit communities in the work of women's organisations in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Notable among these is Mahila Samakhya.<sup>7</sup> There are also other non-government

organisations and women's political organisations that focus on rural Dalit women. Engagement with this constituency of women has often taken the form of self-help groups, micro-enterprise programmes or other such time-bound projects. A large number of self-help groups are exclusively Dalit women's collectives.

Dalit women have also been employed as grassroots/village-level workers for co-ordinating these ventures. One of the main reasons why they have been employed is because of their caste identity; it is considered that they can better mobilise women of their own community than caste-Hindu men and women, who tend to head the organisations. Sukhia, a Dalit village-level worker, confidently exclaims, 'The *mahila samuh* (women's collective) women tell me that they can talk to me freely because I am a woman and because I am of the same community as theirs. They know I will pay heed to their demands. They tell me that only I can do their work . . . The men folk in the village also say that they have seen my work with the women and that they trust me.'<sup>8</sup>

While the caste identity of women like Sukhia helps enhance their self-confidence and sense of empowerment through their work among women of their own caste communities, it continues to remain a source of discrimination in interactions with women of castes and sub-castes other than their own.<sup>9</sup> For example, when another Dalit village-level worker called Madhulika had gone to conduct a meeting with women in a village of Sitapur district, a caste-Hindu woman insisted on taking Madhulika to her place for tea. The caste-Hindu woman was under the impression that Madhulika, being from a Brahmin-dominated village, was herself a Brahmin.<sup>10</sup> But when Madhulika – who had been taught since childhood to wash the utensils after use in the house of a caste-Hindu – offered to wash the cup in which she had been offered tea, the caste-Hindu woman realised that Madhulika was from a Dalit community and told her off for not having clarified her caste at the outset (Singh and Nagar 2004).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, Sandhya's experience reflects the advantage accrued to her in the field as a result of her caste-Hindu identity, and the hidden personal dilemmas this advantage carries for her and others involved in village-level activism with women. Sandhya had been working among Dalit women for several months, trying to address the issue of untouchability, especially in terms of their eating habits. One day, Shakuntala, a Dalit woman of the same village, remarked to Sandhya, 'When you people have something to eat or drink at our place, we feel very honoured' (Singh and Nagar 2004, 95).<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Shankuntla made this remark because Shankuntala and Sandhya shared a relation of mutual respect and appreciation, or (also) because Shakuntala considered herself privileged that Sandhya, as a Brahmin, had consented to eat at her home (Singh and Nagar 2004).

These subtle dilemmas point to how caste identity informs the field of women's activism in complex ways. While Sukhia can discuss breaking caste-rules with women of her own community, and Sandhya is appreciated for breaking such rules in the

presence of lower-caste women, Madhulika has to pay the price of breaking such rules in the presence of higher-caste women.

The caste identity of grassroots-level workers also plays a critical role within the organisations in which they are employed. Although Dalit women have been employed by a number of organisations, the fact remains that in the majority of the cases, these women have not risen in the organisational hierarchy past the level of village workers. When asked about Dalit women in the higher levels of his organisation, the head of one such organisation stated, 'Having got deeply involved in overseeing the smooth functioning of self-help groups, promoting Dalit women workers has not been a priority for the organisation'.<sup>13</sup>

A member of another organisation explained that her organisation has been keen to promote Dalit women workers, but has found it difficult to do so because such workers commonly lack the necessary qualifications and skills required for occupying higher posts in the organisation.<sup>14</sup> Social mobility cannot be manufactured by the policies of one organisation; it is a process that usually takes many years. Of course, the fact that there are organisations making efforts to promote Dalit women workers to higher posts contributes to the process of social mobility. These efforts need to be examined in greater depth so that we can gain fuller understanding of the dynamics of the process. But it is clear that, for now, just as the structure of society is fractured on caste lines, those involved in women's activism are also split by caste.

### Crossing over, from activism to politics

A number of Dalit women workers are using their caste identity in conjunction with their identity as village-level workers, and moving beyond the realm of women's activism. They are doing so by participating in local electoral politics. Using their caste identity, these women are able to use the Panchayati Raj Act, by which one-third of the seats in elected bodies are reserved for women and the marginalised. Their identity as village-level activists makes it possible for them to gain the support of the villagers. Furthermore, Dalit women village-level workers who are contesting elections are literate, earning members of their families. As such, they appear to be better placed to exercise their voting rights and to make other significant decisions than the majority of Dalit women contesting elections (Pai 1998).

The Panchayati Raj Act clearly empowers Dalit women to contest elections. Dalit women village-level workers, involved in overcoming structural power inequalities as part of their social activism, appear to be further empowered. They tend to be more aware of processes of governance and village development as a result of being involved in social activism. However, such awareness in Dalit women village-level workers contesting elections is perhaps more relevant *after* rather than *for* being elected into office. Strong kinship ties, group support structures, money and muscle power seem crucial for winning local elections, with the result that Dalit women village-level

workers have often succumbed to pressures from caste-Hindu leaders and *dacoits*<sup>15</sup> who maintain power over the rural voters.

Basania, a Dalit village-level worker who was contesting the *Pradhani* (female village-head) elections, last year said just after she had filed her nomination papers: 'I have the full support of the women of my village. They are the ones who convinced me to stand. They consider that I will be the best person to represent them. I also have the support of the men of my community ... Of course there is opposition from the *Thakurs* and *Brahmins* (powerful caste-Hindus) in my village but I am confident I will win.'<sup>16</sup> However, support from her community was not enough. Pressures from local *dacoits* whose relations were also contesting the elections resulted in her having to withdraw her candidature. Basania was not the only village-level worker to have felt dejected by the *Pradhani* elections last year. Sukhia was another such worker.

Dalit women village-level workers' participation in local electoral politics has posed new dilemmas for women's organisations and for scholars. While some organisations have welcomed these developments, imparted training to village-level workers on the Panchayati Raj Act, and even campaigned for them, other organisations have preferred not to get involved in such matters. The latter have considered that explicitly supporting these women may be seen as taking sides with a particular group on caste lines. Scholars who do approve of these women contesting elections have raised questions about their doing so on seats reserved for 'Dalit women' i.e. through a system of quotas within quotas. Their use of such a system is seen as 'division' of women into categories like 'Muslim' and 'Dalit'. The argument offered is that quotas for Dalit women will segregate them from the mainstream, and will further entrench them in their 'caste' identity. Such an argument presumes that 'women' can be clearly demarcated from 'caste', 'class', 'religious' or 'regional' identity. But the very challenge posed to the women's movement's notion of 'sisterhood' by Dalit women, demonstrates that such demarcation is not possible (Menon 2004).

Some scholar-activists have also been wary of interpreting Dalit village-level workers' participation as wholly positive on the grounds that these women may not survive the 'harsh' ways of politics for long.<sup>17</sup> The shortcomings of Dalit women like Basania and Sukhia in the Panchayat elections have only strengthened their argument. However, both Basania and Sukhia, when asked about what made them contest the *Pradhani* elections, said that it was their desire to 'make a difference' and to 'change the system'. This confirms that they are aware that political society operates differently from civil society.<sup>18</sup>

Further, when asked if their social activism as village-level workers did not already enable them to contribute to the process of change, Sukhia said: 'The organisation is there, of course, and it is doing good work. But to access the different government-sponsored schemes for village development, and to influence the different authorities in favour of one's community, one needs political power. The poor and the Dalit should also have someone of their own representing them otherwise the *Thakurs* and

*Brahmins* take away all the benefits coming from the government.’<sup>19</sup> Sukhia’s response reflects that she is not only aware of the difference in how civil and political society operates, but *because* of such a difference, she wants to engage with political society by contesting the Panchayat elections.

In their determination to capture political power, Dalit women village-level workers seem to have been strongly influenced by broader political developments linked to Dalit assertion of identity. The growing grassroots process of ‘Ambedkarisation’<sup>20</sup> in the countryside has also played an important influencing role. Studies reveal a tremendous growth in the consciousness of Dalits about the life and ideas of Ambedkar (Pai 1998). Dalit women village-level workers like Basania and Sukhia have often been active agents of ‘Ambedkarisation’. Basania, for instance, has been participating, for the past few years, in street theatre campaigns conducted by the women’s organisation over issues of untouchability, Dalit identity and politics, and Ambedkar’s engagement with these issues.<sup>21</sup>

Several of the village-level workers in women’s organisations and members of village-level women’s collectives who contested the recent Panchayat elections, claimed to have been inspired by the example set by Mayawati in their efforts to capture power for furthering the interests of their own community. That Dalit women involved in village-level women’s activism are inspired by Mayawati has been a matter of concern. When in power, the Mayawati-led Uttar Pradesh government did little to ameliorate the condition of women, or of Dalits. In recent years, the BSP has increasingly promoted populist policies under Mayawati’s leadership (Srivastava 2002). But perhaps one of the best ways in which those involved in women’s activism can address this, is by promoting their own Dalit village-level workers as local leaders and role models.

## Conclusion

The issue of ‘caste’ continues to raise concerns for the women’s movement in India. However, the nature of these concerns has changed as a result of the efforts made by state and non-state actors to include Dalit women and their interests in their work. Women activists – caste-Hindu, Dalit or otherwise – carry their caste identity into their organisation and field of activism. Their experiences differ depending not only on their caste but also on the context in which they are operating.

In addition, Dalit women activists, who had been marginalised in the women’s movement, are beginning to use their ‘caste’ identity along with their identity derived from working as village-level activists, in order to take their interests beyond the realm of social activism. By participating in local electoral politics, they are unquestionably also using their own agency and sense of empowerment derived from their involvement in women’s activism.



Such participation in local electoral politics by Dalit village-level workers offers a particularly relevant insight into changes that are emerging in the Indian women's movement as a result of its own efforts to include Dalit women and their interests, and due to broader developments outside of it (for example the Panchayati Raj Act, and the BSP-led Dalitbahujan Samaj movement). Over many years, the personal experiences of caste-Hindu, middle-class urban-educated women – who have dominated the women's movement in India – have been celebrated as political. The individual journeys of Kalawati, Basania and Sukhia, and their forays into electoral politics from the realm of social activism, demonstrate how Dalit women are creating ways in which their personal experiences can also be celebrated as political.

Furthermore, such initiative on the part of Dalit village-level workers to venture into local electoral politics shows that these women consider that the capture of political power can bring about change in the condition of their own community, in ways that organisations involved in social activism may not. Although it is difficult to reach firm conclusions without further research, it seems that their participation in local electoral politics might be a way to improve their own situation, specifically by overcoming the 'caste-ceilings' present in social activism.

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## Notes

- 1 'Harijan', which literally means 'people of God', was the term by which M.K. Gandhi called the untouchables. In contrast, B.R. Ambedkar, himself an untouchable, preferred to address untouchables as 'Dalit.' While both Gandhi and Ambedkar worked for the betterment of the condition of the untouchables, their approaches differed significantly. See Shah (2001).
- 2 This biographical narrative has been constructed on the life of a village-level worker who currently works for an organisation in Southern Uttar Pradesh. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.
- 3 'Caste-Hindus' refers to those belonging to castes above the untouchables in the caste system in India.
- 4 As the author of the article, I alone take responsibility for the comments made here. Neither the organisations nor the individuals cited may necessarily be in agreement with these comments.
- 5 I am grateful to the members of Vanangana, Uttar Pradesh for their support and co-operation in my fieldwork, and for many ideas generously shared.
- 6 'Panchayati Raj' means local self-governance. It has its roots in pre-modern India, when a group of five elders provided leadership and representation in the villages they lived in. This concept got legal sanctity in independent India after the passing of the

- 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution in December 1992. Panchayati Raj became applicable all over the country from April 1993, but each state had to frame and bring into force its own enabling Panchayati Raj Act.
- 7 Mahila Samakhya started as a pilot project of the government of India with joint funding from the Royal Dutch Government in ten districts in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka. Mahila Samakhya's mission has been to mobilise and empower rural women, particularly those from the marginalised sections of the society.
  - 8 Excerpt of an interview with a village-level worker on 12 August 2005 in Karvi. The name of the worker has been changed to protect her identity.
  - 9 Untouchability is practised not only between caste-Hindus and Dalits but also between sub-castes existing within different Dalit communities.
  - 10 In the caste system, Brahmins have been traditionally regarded as the highest-order caste, involved originally in the study of Hindu religious scriptures.
  - 11 Own translation of text originally in Hindi.
  - 12 Own translation of text originally in Hindi.
  - 13 Excerpt of Ram Moorat Singh's interview on 12 August 2005 in Karvi.
  - 14 Based on interaction with a member of Vanangana during a field visit to Karvi in November 2005.
  - 15 'Dacoit' refers to a member of a robber band or gang in India.
  - 16 Excerpt of interview with another village-level worker on 11 August 2005 in Karvi. The name of the worker has been changed to protect her identity.
  - 17 For a theoretical elaboration of the distinction between civil and political society, refer to Chatterjee (1997). Also see Menon (2004) for an analysis of the debate on women's reservations in India using the distinction offered by Chatterjee.
  - 18 Based on interviews of Basania and Sukhia, on 11 and 12 August 2005 in Karvi.
  - 19 Excerpts of Sukhia's interview on 12 August 2005 and of responses given by her during a group discussion on 24 November 2005 in Karvi.
  - 20 'Ambedkarisation' refers to the tremendous growth in the consciousness among Dalits about the life and ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who played a catalytic role in promoting the rights and interests of Dalits in India.
  - 21 Based on Basania's interview on 23 November 2005 in Karvi.

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