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What is This?

In the Name of 'Poor and Marginalised'? Politics of NGO Activism with Dalit Women in Rural North India

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Abstract

Assertion by the Dalits or ex-untouchables is one of the most significant developments in contemporary India. Dalit women have actively participated in Dalit movements and in women's and development NGOs activism. However, their voices and perspectives are said to have been marginalised by movements and NGOs alike. This article unpacks the complexities, contradictions and challenges that are produced, reproduced and subverted in NGO activism with Dalit women by examining a women's NGO and its relations with Dalit women, the state and international donors in rural Uttar Pradesh in north India. Which factors contribute to an NGO choosing to work with Dalit women? Specifically, what implications does having roots in a state-sponsored initiative have for the NGO under study? Does external funding necessarily change the character of activism with Dalit women? Can Dalit women take on leadership roles in NGO activism with other Dalit women? The article explores these questions using interviews, observations and documentation collected and analysed in my doctoral research.

INTRODUCTION

Assertion by marginalised Dalits or ex-untouchables has been one of the most significant developments in contemporary India. Dalit women have actively participated in Dalit movements and in the activism of women's and development-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs),[1] which have emerged since 1985

and are working in rural India (Govinda 2006). These NGOs' professed aim has been to empower 'poor and marginalised' women. However, neither the Dalit movements, nor the NGOs seem to have accorded Dalit women's voices and perspectives the respect and prominence that they deserve. Dalit movements have focussed on caste issues (Dietrich 2003; Gorringe 2005), while women's and development NGOs have tended to prioritise gender over caste. In brief, in their struggle against one kind of inequality, they have been held guilty of neglecting and often even reproducing inequality of another kind (cf. Still, this volume).

This paper unpacks the politics of NGO activism with Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Dalit women make up approximately 21 per cent of the total UP female population (Census of India 2001). Singularly positioned at the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies, largely uneducated and paid less than their male counterparts, Dalit women constitute the majority of landless labourers and scavengers (Human Rights Watch 1999). Female Dalit consciousness is high given the forms of caste and gender discrimination that punctuate their daily life (Gorringe 2005). While very few NGOs and fewer donors recognise the caste identity of these women, and its implications for activism, the NGO sector cannot be taken as monolithic and acting in a unified manner (Fisher 1997). Neither can it be seen as a static space. Hence, NGO activism cannot be adequately understood in its complexity if divorced from ethnographic particulars. In order to critically examine the struggles and contradictions that women's NGOs may generate in their engagement with Dalit women, the paper looks at one such NGO (hereafter, VMS) operating in the rural areas of southern UP.

I first examine why the NGO chose to work with Dalit women and their livelihood concerns, the significance of its roots in a state-sponsored initiative and the possible implications for its activism. Next, I explore whether accepting funding from government and international donor agencies necessarily changes the character of activism with Dalit women. Finally, I ask whether NGO activism can contribute to structural social change, whether Dalit women can represent themselves in NGO activism, and how far Dalit women manage to occupy positions of power and leadership in the NGO's activities (see Steur, this volume, for similar arguments about adivasi movements).

By examining the fluid and changing relations between the NGO and NGO workers, the constituency—in this case, Dalit women—they choose to work with, the donors and the state in the context of rural Uttar Pradesh, I hope to contribute to the burgeoning scholarly literature on women's and development NGOs in India. The paper draws on interviews, observations and documentation collected and analysed for my doctoral research on Indian women's movements.[2] For reasons of confidentiality, institutional names have been changed and individuals quoted in this article are referred to only by their broad designation.

WHO ARE 'POOR AND MARGINALISED' WOMEN?
DALIT WOMEN, THE STATE AND NGO ACTIVISM

Women's movement scholars and activists identify 'empowerment' as a trans-formatory process that challenges not only patriarchy but also the structures of class, race, and ethnicity, which determine the condition of women and men in society (Kabeer 1994). In the Indian context, it is regarded as challenging caste and religion too (see Batliwala 1994 for a more detailed discussion of the concept of empowerment). Almost every development NGO today claims to be working for the 'empowerment' of the 'poor and marginalised' sections of society. It is as if the moral unassailability of the development enterprise is secured by making copious references to these nebulous but emotive goals (Cornwall and Brock 2005). VMS is one of the few NGOs working with 'poor and marginalised' Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh, which is also recognised in NGO circles as making concerted efforts to listen to the voices, perspectives and caste identity of these women.

VMS has set up several service provision initiatives with the women, to empower them economically and to address their everyday concerns. It also organises against violence against women—taking up cases of domestic abuse, bride-burning, dowry deaths, girl child abuse, rape and mental and physical harassment, etc. In recent years, it has put together initiatives to make Dalit women aware of the history of Dalit protest and to encourage them to take a lead in fighting for their own rights. After the Gujarat riots in 2002, VMS also mobilised around the problem of com-munalism, and set up forums for interaction between the different caste and religious communities in the region. Its understanding of, and engagement with, women's 'empowerment', in general, and with Dalit women's 'empowerment', in particular, has evolved and expanded over the years. The NGO initiatives discussed in this paper use differing definitions of empowerment.

To analyse and unpack the politics of VMS's activism towards the 'empower-ment' of Dalit women, I first examine why it chose to focus mainly on Dalit women and their concerns—a focus that needs to be understood in the context of the emergence of VMS from the partially state-sponsored women's development pro-gramme, Mahila Samakhya (meaning women's equality) and in the broader context of changes in the mainstream development discourse in India.

In the late 1980s, the term 'empowerment' entered the mainstream develop-ment lexicon in India. It has since become a buzzword, and is used by individuals and organisations of many hues to refer to many different things—from increased participation in household decision-making and the market economy to increased capacity for self-reliance. But its first avatar came from a select group of feminist activists and organisations who worked with the state through government-sponsored programmes to promote women's equality and to mainstream gender issues. Launched in 1989 by the Department of Education, Government of India,

with joint funding from the Dutch government, the country-wide Mahila Samakhya programme was one such collaboration. UP was among the first states where it was launched. Mahila Samakhya was designed to empower 'rural women, especially those belonging to the most socially and economically marginalised groups', by imparting basic literacy skills through non-formal adult literacy centres and raising consciousness by organising them into village-level women's collectives (Mahila Samakhya 1997).

In Banda (which was later split into Chitrakoot and Banda districts)[3] as well as in most other districts of UP where Mahila Samakhya became operational, mainly Dalit women came to be identified as 'the most socially and economically marginalised groups'. After all, Dalit women constituted nearly a fourth of the female population of Banda (Census of India 1991). Speaking about Mahila Samakhya's initial years in the district, one activist, formerly associated with Mahila Samakhya Banda and now with VMS, observed:

> The first two to three years (at Mahila Samakhya) were spent in getting to know the area… We wanted to challenge, in a non-confrontational fashion, the stereotype of a Dalit woman as *juta-chappal* (shoes-sandals) of everybody. She had no space, no identity in those days. The question before us was 'how do you give these faceless women an identity?'. (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

When the programme began in 1989, literacy was not seen as an urgent need for Dalit women in the district. Located in Bundelkhand region, Banda was distinguished by a hilly terrain, vanishing forests, sparse natural resources and a harsh climate (UP District Gazetteers 1988). It was agriculturally backward (with inadequate irrigational facilities) and virtually no industry. The political economy was (and still is), controlled by a criminal nexus between powerful upper-caste landlords and gun-toting bands of dacoits. Dalits, at the margins of the economy, mostly work as agricultural wage labour on lands controlled by the upper castes. In these conditions, the programme was trying to mobilise women who were more interested in issues of 'survival'—drinking water, ration, minimum wages, minor forest produce and violence (Nirantar 1997: 8)—than in literacy. Their most urgent concern was water: the hand pumps in their *bastis* (hamlets) were out of order and they were not allowed access to the water sources used by the upper castes; they had to travel long distances to fetch water. The workers from Mahila Samakhya who went from village to village, trying to mobilise the women to join literacy camps, ended up organising camps to train women in fixing hand pumps instead of teaching them to read and write (Ghose 2002).

The hand pump mechanics programme was a big success. The women got a contract to supervise the functioning of 1,000 hand pumps from the local water board authority. From the women themselves, later, demands for numeracy and literacy skills arose (Ghose 2002). The Mahila Samakhya programme was widely

acknowledged as the first state-wide initiative to make rural Dalit women the centre of its activism in UP. However, Mahila Samakhya, as a partially state-sponsored programme, could go only so far as imparting training to the women. The hand pump mechanics needed further support in obtaining contracts and liaising with local water board authorities. Mahila Samakhya in Banda was also a time-bound initiative; a local women's organisation was needed to take forward the work it had started. This is how VMS was registered: to oversee the work and interests of the hand pump mechanics (Nagar 2000).

VMS inherited from Mahila Samakhya its feminist perspective and focus on Dalit women as well as its emphasis on their immediate concerns. Initially, the NGO intended that these women should feel sufficiently empowered to take up technical vocations and responsibilities, otherwise considered male preserves. This would help them address some of their livelihood concerns. VMS not only continued to support the women who had been trained as hand pump mechanics, it also organised other such women into self-help groups and encouraged them to launch micro-credit enterprises to address their concerns about savings, debt and lack of adequate income. VMS began a catering service that ran as a restaurant at meal times and also operated as a tiffin system for offices in Karvi, and launched some other similar time-bound projects.

VMS also inherited Mahila Samakhya's rhetoric. It claimed, in official parlance, to mobilise 'poor and marginalised' women. Its initial documents and reports do not explicitly mention that the NGO was, in fact, working with poor 'Dalit' women (VMS 1996, 1997). Whilst Dalit women are amongst the poorest and most marginal women in the district, poor Muslim women also come under the rubric of the 'poor and marginalised'.[4] But this seemed to have gone unnoticed in both Mahila Samakhya and VMS. Both these organisations did not engage much with Muslim women. Significantly, when asked to explain the NGO's initial engagement with mainly poor Dalit women, several VMS fieldworkers even today explain this *not* by reference to the Dalit women's poverty but with the observation that they could mobilise Dalit women to join self-help groups more easily than poor women from upper castes. Contrasting her experience of mobilising Dalit women with mobilising upper caste women, one of the VMS fieldworkers observed:

> Dalit women, they come out more easily, to trainings, to rallies since they go out to work whereas women from *badey ghar* (literally big homes but also upper caste homes) don't get out of the house at all'. (interview, 10 August 2005)

While it may be true that Dalit women have 'far more personal autonomy and much greater physical mobility than do women from better-off, higher status castes even in the same villages' (Kapadia 2002: 3), a more worrisome facet to this narrative of VMS's engagement with Dalit women needs to be emphasised. The activist

previously associated with Mahila Samakhya Banda and presently with VMS, (also quoted earlier in the paper) candidly admits:

> I think it has to do with Hindu majoritarianism within the women's move-ment... In our worldview, we saw *only* Dalits as 'poor and marginalised'. In (Mahila Samakhya), it wasn't even a criterion to choose villages with large rural Muslim populations… In those days (when I was working with Mahila Samakhya) also there were huge debates about why Dalit women, why not poor Brahmin women, why not poor Yadav women. But there was never a question about poor Muslim women… We were, actually we still are, a majority as Hindus, actually upper-castes leading the (women's) movement. You have blinkers, where you come from and what you want to prioritise. (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

That the NGO staff and leadership were strongly influenced by Mahila Samakhya is understandable. VMS is a product of Mahila Samakhya. VMS leaders—and most of its staff —had served in Mahila Samakhya Banda and later Chitrakoot. How-ever, even after leaving Mahila Samakhya, they failed for nearly ten years to engage critically with the understanding and approach that they had inherited from it vis-à-vis their choice of constituency and concerns for activism. The implications of the NGO having roots in the state-sponsored initiative were, in this sense, grave. That post-Gujarat riots, VMS has begun working with Muslim women is, of course, a step towards their inclusion in activism.

Nevertheless, what I am pointing to are the convoluted reasons for women's NGOs' engagement with Dalit women in the name of 'poor and marginalised': donors, international agencies and even the state ignore the subjectivity of Dalit women and overlook the role of caste in women's development. They continue to conceive of projects and programmes (in this case, the partially state-sponsored Mahila Samakhya) as 'poor and marginalised' women's empowerment. Therefore, state-sponsored and NGO initiatives dependent on external funding and keen on working with poor Dalit women use the same discourse. This is a well-rehearsed, oft-repeated argument by critics of funded NGOs (see, for instance, Tharu and Niranjana 1999). But pressures from funders are not the only reason for this. Most women's and/or development NGO initiatives even today are led by upper-caste, urban educated middle class Hindu women. Their religio-cultural proximity to Dalit women also results in a preference—conscious or sub-conscious—to engage with women from poor Dalit and not religious minority communities when trying to empower 'poor and marginalised' women (Agnes 1995).

Even though NGOs engage with Dalit women in the name of working with 'poor and marginalised' women, they may not heed Dalit women's perspectives. NGO activism may not contribute to long-term change in their everyday lives (Anupamlata et al. 2006). They tend to place the blame primarily on the pressures from funders.

They blame these pressures not only for decisions about which constituency of women they work with, but also for the issues they focus on and the strategies they employ with that constituency and on those issues. In the next section of this article, I examine how far funding from government and international donor agencies has changed VMS's activism with Dalit women and whether such activism has contributed to sustainable social transformation.

POLITICS OF EXTERNALLY-FUNDED NGO ACTIVISM: PROJECTS AND DONOR DOMINANCE

Examining VMS's trajectory as a women's NGO, changes in its financial position and activist agenda offers important insights into the pressures of funding and their implications for NGO activism with Dalit women. VMS was registered as an NGO in 1993 to oversee the work and interests of those poor rural Dalit women trained by Mahila Samakhya as hand pump mechanics. VMS also started a women's catering service, its only source of financial sustenance for many years. Their biggest contract for supplying food on a regular basis was from Mahila Samakhya itself. VMS also organised mostly Dalit women into savings and self-help groups (VMS 1996).

With other local NGOs, VMS accepted, in 1996, a contract to implement the Government of India and World Bank funded Swajal Scheme in Chitrakoot and Banda districts. Its main objectives were to deliver health and hygiene benefits and sustainable water supply in some of the most water-scarce rural areas of UP through the construction of hand pumps, water tanks and toilets. The World Bank funded 90 per cent of the construction costs, but the villagers had to cover the remainder. Those of them not in a position to do so would have to contribute through manual labour. A committee of villagers was to oversee the implementation in every village and participation of women was a critical component of the scheme.[5] In 1999, VMS associated with another World Bank/Government of India scheme called Swashakti, whose objective was to 'empower' women by organising them into savings and self-help groups.[6] The aim was to increase their autonomy by placing them on a secure financial footing.

According to VMS staff and leadership, its main motive in taking up externally-funded Swajal and Swashakti schemes was to emerge from the shadows of Mahila Samakhya and attain financial independence and stability. The two schemes were also considered excellent opportunities for VMS to widen its constituency. To quote one senior leader of the NGO:

> We wanted to be independent. We thought it would help us establish our identity as an independent NGO. Also, we already had a working partnership with the *sarkar* (government) because of our work with the hand pump mechanics and, at some level, we really valued that partnership… We also felt that we needed to work with other communities. Not just the Dalits…. (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

Articulating similar reasons for taking up the two schemes, a VMS facilitator said:

> In the beginning, our NGO had no funds. Swajal was the first project that VMS got. It was thought that since the *sanstha* (organisation) had been working on the issue of water (through the hand pump mechanics programme) for many years, taking on this project would make sense… (group discussion, 24 August 2006)

However, engaging in such time-bound, single issue-oriented, project-based activism also exposed VMS to the dangers of partnerships with donor agencies whose mission and approach did not coincide with its own. VMS had hoped that, in Swajal, women would be at the forefront and that the rural communities would be encouraged 'to lead and manage the projects *at their own pace*' (VMS 2003: 17). VMS's annual newsletter from 2002 stated:

> The objective of this (Swajal) scheme was that all work would involve community participation. But it was difficult to inculcate this belief among the people of the village because of the time-bound nature of the scheme…The distance between the rich and the poor has remained. The poor have benefited very little from the scheme. (VMS 2002: 6)

In a similar vein about the Swashakti scheme, a facilitator at VMS said:

> It takes a long time to recruit women to join S(elf)H(elp)G(roup)s, to tell them about savings, convince them about it, and we have to link this with their own *mudde* (issues). The (Swashakti) scheme required that we had to make the women so empowered in 3 years that they can do all their work on their own… *Unka yahi tha ki* button *dabao* press press press press *aur uddesya aa jayega* (they thought that you press the *button press press press press* and the goal will be reached). But we don't work like that. (group discussion, 24 August 2006)

According to VMS's 2002–3 Annual Report, this resulted in 'constant clashes between the needs of the group and the orders coming from above'. The report revealed that if the set targets were not attained, the fieldworkers' salaries and the interest earned by the self-help group on its savings were held back (VMS 2003).

Till this point, the narrative of VMS's trajectory sounds like that of any other NGO that has chosen to fund its activism through external aid. Critics contend that 'donors, as resource providers, dictate programs that NGOs adopt and implement' (Subramaniam 2007: 558). Whilst donors differ in their priorities and strategies and cannot be seen as homogenous, there are widespread findings that show that direct and indirect pressures from international donor agencies and national governments often result in NGOs standardising their objectives and generating statistics and

regular reports of accomplishments (Nagar and Raju 2003). Documentation of activities and periodic evaluation of projects are often conditions for further funding and additional resources. Women's empowerment is imagined as a concrete thing that can be measured, quantified and reproduced. Women's empowerment through micro-credit initiatives like Swashakti is assessed by how many women were enlisted in self-help groups, the increase in household incomes and the rates of return to investment activities, without any attention to whether such programmes really 'empower' women by including them in the programme's design. In this environment, organisational purpose and goals often get submerged in the rush to achieve quantifiable targets and short-term goals (Desai 2002; Menon 2004).

However, arguments by critics of funded NGO activism tend to ignore that NGOs may continue to depend on external funding but can certainly choose to reject the dominance of donors in carrying out their activism. The point is that NGOs once established locally and in the development sector, as such, can (if they want to) negotiate their own terms with the donors for accepting and even proposing projects. They can use their discretion in choosing to work with donors who do not compel them to function solely as per the conditions and agenda of their (the donors') choosing. How VMS, its staff and leadership dealt with funders once the pressures of funding became unmanageable for them can substantiate this point.

VMS's difficult partnership with Swajal and Swashakti compelled its leadership to rethink its policy on funding and project-based activism. According to a senior leader at VMS:

> We had a lot of debates about funding, taking and not taking up projects. Work had become very project-oriented. I am not saying that money is not important. You do need money to work. The financial constraints involved in doing activism are very tricky. We needed the money then. But when we worked with them (the government, the World Bank and the International Development Forum), we realised that it was all about targets, reporting. There was no space for creativity. We had a very bitter experience…We learnt that it is very difficult to fight such pressures if you work with them. (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

'We felt we were straying away from our mission,' added one VMS facilitator (group discussion, 24 August 2006). Also around this time VMS staff and leadership started questioning its focus on service delivery and income generating programmes vis-à-vis its engagement with Dalit women. Even after years of being part of the self-help groups set up by VMS, some women showed neither collective identity nor ownership of the groups. They continued to perceive the groups as mostly conduits for credit and as run by VMS (field notes, July–December 2005; July–September 2006). Further, these women depended on the *VMSwali didi* (fieldworker from VMS) to manage their accounts and liaise with the bank. They were mostly illiterate or semi-literate, and lacked the necessary skills to handle bank procedures on their

own. Such a situation was not novel as far as externally funded NGOs are concerned. Integrating women into the process of development without examining what produced the inequalities in the first place, as the Swajal and Swashakti schemes were doing, has been dismissed by several critics of funded NGO activism (Bessis 2003). Many NGOs no longer see credit as the answer to women's empowerment (Kabeer 2005; Lairap-Fonderson 2002). Equating women's access to credit for economic activity with economic power by itself does little for changes in gender and caste relations (Agarwal 1994; Subramaniam 2007).

The VMS staff and leadership felt that the state and World Bank officials responsible for Swashakti were operating with the assumption that credit by itself would enhance the status of women and decrease their vulnerability to domestic and communitarian violence. Further, Dalit women continued to be sidelined in the construction work undertaken as part of Swajal where upper-caste men and women were also involved. These issues contributed to caste tensions which came to a head in February 2002 in a violent caste encounter, when Dalit men, women and children were brutally beaten and some of the women were assaulted by powerful upper-caste leaders in Sanvri village[7] of Chitrakoot district (where VMS operated).

The violence was not directly related to the World Bank funded Swashakti scheme, but it did aggravate the caste rivalries caused by the increasing politicisation and upward socio-economic mobility of Dalits in the region. In February 2002, several altercations took place between a Dalit political leader's supporters and those of an upper-caste leader during the State Legislative Assembly election campaigns. Eventually, killers hired by the upper-caste leader murdered the Dalit leader, and his supporters were brutally assaulted (interviews with Dalit self-help group members, 8 August 2005, 25 November 2005, 20 and 21 August 2006).

Several of the women who were assaulted were members of the self-help groups set up under the World Bank funded Swashakti scheme, and since the Bank claimed to be serious about protecting and promoting their rights, VMS was taken aback when the Bank officials overseeing the scheme refused to intervene. The matter was apparently outside their purview. At this point, the NGO decided to refrain from getting involved in this and all such schemes that, according to its staff and leadership, failed to protect the interests of the women they mobilised (group discussion, 24 August 2006). As others have argued, NGOs' legitimacy depends upon their usefulness, consideration and the relationships that they are able to forge with local constituencies (Sheth and Sethi 1991). By taking the side of the women members of the self-help groups and victims of the caste encounter in Sanvri village, VMS was able to win the confidence of its local constituency—Chitrakoot's Dalit women.

In 2002 VMS quit Swashakti and decided not to renew its contract for Swajal. Doing so has not meant the end of its activism with Dalit women. VMS claims that the self-help groups, though operational, are no longer its main focus. VMS has initiated a rain-water harvesting and conservation project sponsored by a Japanese foundation. NGO staff and leadership assert that, unlike in the case of Swajal, having greater say in how this project is implemented has enabled VMS to place

Dalit women squarely at the project's centre. Dalit women from VMS's self-help groups occupy leadership positions while Dalit men play a supportive role in the village-level committees that oversee the project. A check dam has already been constructed, and two water tanks are under construction in the villages identified for the project. Further, the NGO also claims to be attempting a deeper and lasting engagement with the Dalit women's caste identity and the issue of caste-based discriminatory practices, specifically untouchability. I examine these claims in the final section of the paper.

By the time VMS had taken '(the) decision not to take up any such projects or schemes that imposed limitations the way Swajal and Swashakti (had done)' (group discussion, 24 August 2006), it had already established itself as an important actor in women's and social activism in southern UP. It was financially stable and could negotiate its own terms for accepting and even proposing projects, and seeking funding from national and international agencies. Refusing schemes like Swajal and Swashakti would have been inconceivable for VMS in its initial years when it had been desperate to secure funding to simply stay afloat. Based on VMS's trajectory thus far, this case study confirms the argument that NGOs dependent on external funding may be in a better position to negotiate with respect to funding once they have established themselves and their credentials in the development sector and amongst other NGOs in the region (Uvin et al. 2000).

Dalit Women and Initiative and Leadership in NGO Activism

In a caste-ridden society, upper-castes discriminate against Dalit castes and higher Dalit castes discriminate against lower Dalit castes, and the locality a person may inhabit, the respect the person may be accorded and the party he/she will vote for are all more or less determined by his/her caste. In such a context, no NGO can bring about sustainable, long-term change in the lives of Dalit women without a lasting engagement with their caste identity and caste-based discriminatory practices, specifically untouchability. It is to their credit that the VMS staff and leadership openly recognise their previous lack of engagement with the issues of caste identity and discrimination. A fieldworker observed to me:

> *Haan, Dalit mahilaon ke saath kaam karne ka naam to bahut bada tha lekin dekha jaye to kaam kuch nahin tha* (Yes, the NGO was known for its work with Dalit women, but if one were to see not much was being done really). (interview, 10 August 2005)

One of the senior VMS leaders had also observed, in this regard, 'Earlier, we said, Dalit community *ke saath kaam* (work with the Dalit community) but our focus on *jati* (caste) and all has come now' (interview, 18–21 September 2006).

By 2002, when VMS quit the Swajal and Swashakti schemes, it appeared to be capable of moving beyond service delivery-oriented engagement with Dalit women. Statements made by a senior leader of VMS acknowledged this:

> Till 1999, we were still setting up things, building *janadhar* (popular support). The team of workers doubled in 2000. We started having a lot of debates within the organisation about funding, project-based activism…We were asking ourselves how far have we come? Where do we want to go from here in the long run? In all these years, we realised the untouchability issue had changed in the office space but in the community it hadn't happened at all… (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

This suggests that the VMS leadership perceived its previous lack of and present engagement with the above issues not so much as a failing of the NGO but as a logical transition in its activist journey. As described earlier, they realised that collective ownership had not emerged among the women of self-help groups launched by VMS under the Swashakti scheme, who still depended on VMS fieldworkers and perceived the groups as mere sources of credit. For a sense of collective identity and ownership to emerge, the Dalit women that VMS had been mobilising would themselves need to be at the forefront of activism. To quote another senior leader, 'In terms of leadership, VMS was still on the top, mobilising people. We wanted to get the people to take on the lead' (interview, 18–21 September 2006).

VMS set up the Dalit Mahila Samiti (Dalit Women's Association) in 2004 (VMS 2005). Their motive was to encourage Dalit women themselves to take on leadership roles in addressing issues such as caste-based discrimination and untouchability. The Samiti is a federal structure that brings together approximately 1,200 women of VMS's self-help groups. VMS staff consider that establishing the Samiti as an entity independent of VMS—in the minds of the women themselves as well as the rest of the village community and district authorities—is crucial. They hoped that this would lead the women to experience a sense of collective identity and strength (group discussion, 24 November 2005). Organising women from self-help groups in the form of people-centred federations, led and managed by representatives democratically elected from within the groups has been endorsed by several women's NGOs as an effective means of getting women to perceive the self-help groups as more than just credit mechanisms (Menon-Sen 2004).

VMS has encouraged the women of the Dalit Mahila Samiti to engage with the local state, adopting different postures—at times challenging, resisting its agents, at other times legitimising or supporting them. Most recently, members of the Samiti marched up to the District Magistrate's office to protest the inaction of the local state authorities regarding the distribution of job cards under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme Act, which guarantees 100 days wage employment to every rural household. The women handed over to the District

Magistrate's representative a petition—though drafted by the staff at VMS—issued in the name of the Dalit Mahila Samiti (field notes, 4 August 2006). One fieldworker present at the protest explained:

> *VMS sanstha back mein hai, Dalit Mahila Samiti ko agey rakhna hai* (VMS is stepping back, Dalit Mahila Samiti needs to be kept in the front). These demands (on the petition) are theirs. This has to be done through their *pehchan* (identity/image). (field notes, 4 August 2006)

However, he also added that the press statement on the Samiti's petition to the District Magistrate would have to carry VMS's name since the *presswallahs* were still not familiar with the Dalit Mahila Samiti. VMS's preoccupation with becoming dispensable, encouraging the women to overcome their dependency on the NGO, even if slow and gradual, suggests that NGOs can encourage and help create conditions for long-term, social, structural change.

This preoccupation has occasioned an internal critique too, and the number of Dalits employed at VMS has also been hotly debated among the staff and leadership. One fieldworker observed:

> We were just 4–5 Dalits (to begin with). The rest were all *badi jaat ke log* (people of higher caste). There was a lot of fuss over this in the organisation. If the organisation claims to be working with Dalit women shouldn't they find a place of importance in the organisation?! (interview, 10 August 2005)

VMS has now employed several Dalits as its staff to facilitate its engagement with rural Dalit women. A main reason for their recruitment is because of their caste identity; it is considered that they can better mobilise women of their own community than upper caste Hindu men and women (Govinda 2006). A Dalit fieldworker at VMS confided:

> The *mahila samuh* (women's collective) women tell me that they can talk to me freely 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. (interview, 12 August 2005)

The caste identity of the Dalit staff may enhance their acceptability among the Dalit women mobilised in the villages. But how are Dalits treated within the NGO? What place do caste considerations have within the organisation and how does VMS compare to other NGOs working with women in India?

Opposition to casteism may be among the organisations' non-negotiable principles but discomfort and perhaps even collective guilt amongst NGO leaders, who

are usually from urban middle class, upper caste backgrounds, keeps caste and casteism inside organisations from being openly discussed at NGO gatherings and elsewhere. Dalit staff members are also reluctant to speak their minds on these issues. While an unsaid fear of being laid off or removed from favour seems to discourage many of them, others seem to be sceptical whether voicing their concerns about these issues will make any difference at all (Gandhi and Shah 1999).

However, VMS's staff and leadership acknowledge that merely adopting a principle of opposition to casteism is not enough basis to argue that their Dalit workers do not face caste-based discrimination. In recent years, the staff and leadership have tried to go beyond the formal commitment, and have re-examined their organisational structure and day-to-day interactions to remove 'all traces of casteism'. VMS's policy of the team's own members cleaning the office toilet once a week on a rotational basis was cited by many staff members as an example of how VMS practices its politics of caste equality and anti-untouchability. Some also pointed to the NGO staff and leadership sharing and eating food together, and washing their own utensils after eating their meals at the office, irrespective of their caste or the post that they occupy in the NGO. 'This is perhaps the most fundamental level at which transformation needs to take place, as it touches on the beliefs and value systems of individuals and is thus the point at which the personal really does become the political in organisations' (Ahmed 2002: 307).

According to a senior VMS leader, instituting these policies has not been without struggle. Organisations do not have a monolithic culture, despite their public face, but are made up of 'sub-cultures' and 'counter-cultures' which will either facilitate or resist efforts to integrate new perspectives in the organisation (Sweetman 1997: 7). Opposition to change from staff members must be expected, since people do not leave their culturally defined perspectives and attitudes at the gates of the organisation—they enter with them, having a significant bearing on the organisation's own perspective (Sariola, this volume; Gandhi and Shah 1999). VMS leaders realise that change cannot be pushed from the top alone, and that the staff needs time and collective support to promote and practice sensitivity towards the caste identities of individuals within and outside the office.

Practices like eating and drinking together or cleaning toilets need not mean that the problems of caste dominance have been eradicated. Visible and latent power structures tend to remain embedded in most organisations. How does VMS fare on this account? What posts do Dalits occupy within the organisation? Does the NGO encourage them to occupy positions of power and leadership in its staff and initiatives? In 2006, a third of the workers at the NGO were Dalits, several being Dalit women initially mobilised as fieldworkers by Mahila Samakhya who subsequently joined VMS. Over the years, VMS has made a conscious effort to hire Dalits, taking a policy decision to appoint only those—preferably women rather than men—from Dalit or Muslim communities to all posts falling vacant after 2004. However, none of the Dalit staff members occupy a leadership position in the

organisation. Two urban-educated, middle class women, an upper-caste Hindu and a Muslim, direct the work of the NGO.

VMS underwent an organisational overhaul, with the leadership seeking to delegate its powers and decentralise organisational procedures. It promoted members of its staff to form a second rung of leadership. But few Dalits are to be found even in this rung; most of them being employed as fieldworkers or office assistants, with the exception of a Dalit man recently appointed as an accountant. A senior VMS leader claims that though the organisation has wanted to promote female Dalit workers, this has been difficult. With the exception of a Dalit caseworker selected from VMS to be the regional representative for a state-wide Dalit network, no Dalits represent the organisation in external forums.[8]

Most Dalit workers lack the necessary qualifications and skills required for occupying higher posts in the organisation. As a senior leader at VMS said:

> A number of the female Dalit workers were barely literate when they joined VMS. *Unko padhna nahin tha, zabardasti padh gaye…* (They weren't meant to go to school. Somehow they managed to). Their families didn't want to educate them. We (at VMS) can't forget all that. We have supported several of them to complete their studies. They have also picked up a lot in training programmes and capacity building workshops. But it is like they have to make up for 18–20 years of their life. (interview, 18–21 September 2006)

Hence, 'despite going through the same process of training in (the) NGO, it is impossible for fieldworkers from Dalit and Sawarn (caste-Hindu) backgrounds to emerge as activists in the same ways' (Anupamlata et al. 2006: 125).

The differences between Dalit and non-Dalit activists within the organisation need to be understood in terms of intersections of competing forms of inequality of caste, class and gender. Rural-based, less formally educated and often poor Dalit workers find themselves at the margins of institutional spaces while urban educated middle class and invariably upper-caste Hindu women tend to head women's NGOs (Biswas 2006). These differences are compounded by the increasing professionalisation of women's NGOs; project logic and the pressures of time and resources tend to push towards upward vertical participation and not downward horizontal participation, and further concentrate power in the hands of urban, educated middle class women (Jad 2007; Subramaniam 2006).

Writing about their own experiences as Dalit and non-Dalit workers in an organisation that also emerged from a state-sponsored women's development programme, Anupamlata et al. (2006) claim that while Dalit women may rise in the organisation to help handle the work of the NGO at the local level, urban educated middle class women are still needed to provide the critical interface with donors and other NGOs and development practitioners working on similar issues elsewhere in the country. This is more or less true with respect to VMS too. While

Dalit workers may now be present at the meetings with the funders or be involved in preparing the annual report for the funders, VMS's urban educated middle class women leaders remain the first point of contact and 'middle-people' between the NGO and the outside world.

The so-called development experts from international development institutions, representatives from donors' organisations (many of which are foreign-based) and bureaucrats working for the Indian government may not discriminate on the basis of the Dalits workers' caste identity but they expect and often require that those with whom they deal with from the NGOs can fluently read and converse in English, and have the cultural capital that an urban middle class English-medium upbringing provides. 'Formal education, especially at the university level, is the main avenue through which people acquire advanced reading, writing, speaking and analytic skills, and colleges and universities are settings in which many individuals absorb new ideas from different cultures' (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 175).

If Dalit workers do interact with development experts, donor representatives and bureaucrats, they remain on the margins because most of them lack the necessary cultural skills and the ability to converse in English. The same happens at training programmes, workshops, meetings and international conferences conducted by NGO networks. The Dalit workers may, at best, make 'guest appearances' in a speech or an intervention made by the urban, educated middle class women (Guru 2003). These differences in competencies among the Dalit and non-Dalit members of NGOs arise from the constraints of their gender, caste and class backgrounds. NGOs are caught in this complex web of constraints and expectations from various quarters.

Even 'committed' NGOs like VMS, which try to promote leadership among their Dalit staff, come across practically insurmountable roadblocks. Such organisations cannot avoid these considerations, but they need means of offsetting their negative consequences. Some scholars suggest that the solution lies in conceptualising organisational structure and leadership itself in a different fashion from what has been the norm. Morris and Staggenborg (2004), for instance, claim that four ideal types of leadership tiers exist in most movement organisations: Leaders who occupy the top formal leadership positions; those who constitute the immediate leadership team of the formal leaders; bridge leaders who mediate between the top two tiers of leadership and the vast bulk of followers, turning dreams and grand plans into on-the-ground realities and; organisers who, in addition to building connections between members of a challenging group and helping them develop organisations, routinely engage in leadership activity.

In this perspective, the contribution of the Dalit women fieldworkers is significant, as they are often the ones producing development on the ground. Their socio-spatial embeddedness allows them uniquely to analyse the multiple webs of power in which the everyday lives of their fellow Dalits, their struggles and aspirations are inserted. Their contribution to the NGO is as important as that of those liaising with the donors etc. As Anupamlata et al. (2006) argue, however, the thrust of this

argument is that NGOs need to devise ways of recognising the contributions of ground-level 'leaders' and distributing money, labour and respect equally to all their members. Perhaps this is how VMS can offset the negative consequences of considerations of skill and hierarchy when it comes to its Dalit staff members?

Conclusion

This paper examined how individual and organisational actors engage with women of Dalit castes through NGO activism. It exposed several complexities, contradictions and challenges that are produced, reproduced and subverted in NGO activism with Dalit women by examining the case of a women's NGO in rural UP. I argued that women's and development NGOs mobilise Dalit women in the name of 'poor and marginalised' women not only because of influence (and often pressures) from the state and donor agencies but also because of a Hindu religio-cultural dominance in women's NGOs in India.

I also showed that though funding pressures are real, they are not completely inescapable. Accepting funding from government and international donor agencies may change the character of activism with Dalit women, but NGOs can use their discretion in identifying which donors to accept funding from, and to negotiate terms for accepting and even proposing projects. NGOs can provide service delivery and also participate in transformative politics for sustainable social change. However, the paper also suggests that, despite creating opportunities for Dalit women to realise their full potential, NGOs often get caught in a web of constraints and expectations based on socio-economic inequalities over which they have little control. For long-term structural social change in the lives of Dalit women, repeated questioning and transparent and honest initiatives from within the NGO sector are needed. NGOs working with and employing Dalits need particularly to acknowledge that their (Dalits') contribution is as important as that of those, often from upper caste backgrounds occupying the higher echelons in the organisation.

Notes

1. NGOs are 'self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared towards improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people' (Vakil 1997).
2. Fieldwork was carried out from July to December 2005 and from July to September 2006 in Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Uttar Pradesh. The paper draws on six thematic focus group discussions and 17 individual interviews with VMS's Dalit and non-Dalit staff members, ten interviews with others who had been associated with VMS in some or the other capacity, 17 group discussions with village-level VMS-supported self-help groups, long recorded conversations with one of the two VMS leaders, and numerous informal interactions with all of the above. VMS's own annual magazine and reports were also a rich source of data. Interviews with other women's and development NGO leaders in Chitrakoot, Lucknow, Sitapur and Delhi helped me contextualise my data from VMS.

3. Chitrakoot district was carved out of Banda district when Mayawati was Chief Minister of UP (see 'The politics of new districts', *The Tribune* 28 December 1998).
4. The Sachar Committee Report suggests that Muslims' condition is worse than that of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and nearer to that of the Scheduled Castes (SCs). See http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/newsite/sachar/sachar.asp, Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India (accessed on 29 September 2008).
5. See India: The Swajal Project, Uttar Pradesh available at: http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/09ByDocName/swajal_cs/$FILE/IndiaSwajalProject UttarPradesh.pdf (accessed on 4 February 2007).
6. See http://wcd.nic.in/an/2006/Chap%2002.pdf, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (accessed on 4 February 2007).
7. Name changed to retain confidentiality.
8. Dalit workers from the NGO do participate in workshops, training programmes and conferences conducted by other NGOs at the local and national levels.

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