



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Reinventing Dalit Women's Identity?

Citation for published version:

Govinda, R 2008, 'Reinventing Dalit Women's Identity? Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 427-440.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930802472772>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/09584930802472772](https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930802472772)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Contemporary South Asia

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Contemporary South Asia, 2008. Copyright Taylor & Francis, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/> 10.1080/09584930802472772

Govinda, R. (2008). Reinventing Dalit Women's Identity?: Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India. *Contemporary South Asia*, 16(4), 427-440

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Re-inventing Dalit Women's Identity? Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India

Radhika Govinda, University of Cambridge

Address: Wolfson College, Barton Road, Cambridge CB3 9BB, UK

Telephone number: +44(0)7981739224

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Prof. Geoffrey Hawthorn for having read and commented on previous drafts of this paper and to VMS for support extended during fieldwork.

Abstract

Dalit or ex-untouchable women's voices and perspectives have been marginalized not only in Dalit movements but also in upper caste Hindu-led women's movements. This paper aims at exploring the unheard voices and perspectives of Dalit women in the context of Dalit assertion in the state of Uttar Pradesh, north India. Scholarly writing examines the different facets of Dalit political assertion led by the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. Few scholars, however, examine the ways in which individual and organisational actors engage with women of Dalit castes through social activism in the state. This paper is an attempt to do so. Specifically, it examines, with special reference to issues of culture and identity, the engagement of a grassroots women's NGO with rural Dalit women in southern Uttar Pradesh. The paper begins with an enquiry on why engagement with issues of culture and identity is necessary for social activism with Dalit women, and how it is carried out. It then examines whether social activism and electoral politics with Dalit women cross-cut each other, and also what implications does this or its lack have on the women. Finally, it asks how far activism and politics can go towards re-inventing Dalit (women's) identity.

Introduction

Half a dozen women wearing white caps and green and white badges pinned to their saris stand huddled over a big saucepan. The labels on the caps read: *Chamar, Jamadar, Sonar, Yadav, Thakur, Brahmin*. The badges all have a picture of 19th century social reformers Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule and the caption *Dalit Mahila Samiti*. The women are standing on stage, preparing *hulwa* (sweet-dish) together. This *hulwa* is to be distributed among the congregation of mainly Dalit women. This is a snapshot of the inauguration of the Dalit festival organized in February 2006 by a

grassroots women's NGO working mainly with Dalit women in Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh (UP), north India.

In the Hindu social order, food and drink are closely linked to the practice of untouchability. Upper-castes do not eat food made by ex-untouchables. That women of different castes and sub-castes were cooking and eating *hulwa* together; that the green and white badges indicated they were members of the Dalit Mahila Samiti (Dalit Women's Association); that they were there because the women's NGO had arranged a *Dalit* festival are no insignificant detail. They raise several questions about women and Dalit assertion, specifically, in the UP context.

Unlike in western and southern India where social and political movements for Dalit assertion have had a long history, it is only recently that such a movement has taken form in the northern plains. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit-based party, has been at the fore of this movement in UP. Recent scholarly writing examines different facets of the movement in the state. Scholars such as Sudha Pai (1) and Christophe Jaffrelot (2) focus their studies on the BSP, its emergence, ideology, programmes, mobilisational strategies and electoral progress. Badri Narayan delves deeper into the cultural symbols, heroes and narratives used by the BSP for mobilising Dalit castes (3). Recent work by Manuela Ciotti examines Dalit women in the BSP (4). Few scholars, however, examine the ways in which individual and organisational actors engage with Dalit women through social activism in UP. This paper is an attempt to redress such lacunae in scholarship on Dalit and women's movements in contemporary India.

To re-present, understand and analyse some of the voices, perspectives and concerns of women in the politics of Dalit assertion, the paper specifically engages with three questions: First, why is engagement with issues of culture and identity

necessary for social activism with Dalit women, and how is it carried out? Second, do social activism and electoral politics with Dalit women cross-cut each other? What implications does this or its lack have on the women? Third, how far can activism and politics go towards re-inventing Dalit (women's) identity? The paper draws on semi-structured and open-ended interviews and observations, conducted as part of a case study of the grassroots women's NGO, hereafter VMS, towards my doctoral research on women's movements in India. For reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for the names of institutions and individuals referred to in the paper.

Dalit women, NGO activism and culture: constructing 'collective identity'

VMS began its work with 'poor rural women', mostly from Dalit castes in 1993 in southern Uttar Pradesh. Distinguished by hilly terrain, vanishing forests, sparse natural resources, and a harsh climate, the districts in this region rank near the very bottom of national and state averages in income and sex-ratio (5). Poverty, criminality and socio-economic inequalities thriving in the region combine to generate conditions of caste, class and gender-based oppression. This oppression is experienced in highest measure by Dalit women. They constitute 26.6% of the female population in the district where much of the NGO's engagement lies (6).¹ Largely uneducated, they frequently suffer from malnutrition, live in hutments on the village periphery, and make up the majority of landless labourers.

While there were several other local organisations which claimed to be working with these women, VMS sought to combine, in its activism, the women's

¹ It is useful to read these figures along side those for the country and the state: Dalit women make up 16.3% of the total Indian female population and approximately 21% of the total female population of UP.

local context and concerns with a feminist perspective. It trained the women as hand-pump mechanics to repair broken hand-pumps in order to address their concern about water scarcity. It organised the women into self-help groups and encouraged them to launch micro-credit enterprises to address their concerns about debt and inadequate income.

These initiatives, though fairly successful in addressing the women's immediate concerns, have not sufficiently challenged deep-seated, caste-based oppression, whose most obvious manifestation is the practice of untouchability. Dalit women have often felt sidelined in initiatives where upper castes have also been involved. United social action even among Dalit castes has been difficult given that higher Dalit sub-castes practice untouchability vis-à-vis lower sub-castes. Even after many years, a sense of 'collective identity' and ownership seems to have failed to develop among a number of the women towards the initiatives. By collective identity, one refers to 'the process whereby social actors recognize themselves – and are recognized by other actors – as part of broader groupings' (7).

Many women from the self-help groups continue to perceive the groups as conduits for credit, *run by* VMS (8). Mobilising mostly illiterate or semi-literate women using hard activist discourse and abstract concepts of development and human rights (by themselves) has not proved to be effective. These concepts need to be adapted to the cultural specificities of the social world that the women belong to. In a caste-ridden society, where upper-castes discriminate against Dalit castes and higher Dalit castes discriminate against lower Dalit castes, where 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, mobilising Dalit women as 'poor, rural women' alone – as VMS has tried to do – does not seem to have been very successful.

A deeper and lasting engagement with the women's caste identity and caste-based discrimination, specifically untouchability, seems to be inevitable if the NGO desires to confront these challenges and contribute to structural social change. Interestingly, the staff and leadership of VMS do openly recognize their lack of engagement with these issues in the past, and have recently begun addressing them. Fieldworker, Reema observes in this regard, 'Yes, the NGO was known for its work with Dalit women, but if one were to see not much was being done really' (9). NGO director, Sanjana Gupta observes, 'Earlier, we said we worked with the Dalit community but our focus on *jati* (caste) has come now. We realized the untouchability issue had changed in the office space but in the community it hadn't happened at all...In terms of leadership, VMS was still on top, mobilising people. We wanted to get the people to take on the lead' (10).

In 2004, a federal structure called the Dalit Mahila Samiti was set up, bringing together women from the self-help groups. The NGO hopes that the Samiti will have its own *pehchan* (image and/or identity), independent of VMS. Every woman seeking membership to the Samiti is required to take oath, touching an enlarged photograph of Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar. The women are then given a green and white badge each, with a photograph of social reformers Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule and the caption 'Dalit Mahila Samiti' on it. At the monthly meetings, they greet each other with the expression 'Jai Bheem' and sing songs in praise of *Baba saheb* (as Dalits affectionately refer to Ambedkar). As much of social movement literature tells us, 'collective identity needs to be constantly constructed and negotiated through ritual means of interaction' (11). 'Identification rituals' such as oath-taking, distribution of badges, greeting and group-singing are of great importance in this process (12). They enable the group to be recognised by others and reinforce a sense of unity.

Icons and symbols are crucial for generating collective identity. The NGO has used Ambedkar as an iconic symbol to create a homogeneous 'Dalit' identity amidst Dalit women in UP. Though belonging to the Dalit caste of *mahars* from the state of Maharashtra, his stature and work has made him widely known and respected among Dalits of all sub-castes across states (13). The NGO workers also claim that since they work with women, it is all the more important to promote female Dalit icons such as Savitribai Phule who struggled to unite, organise and educate Dalit women.

The identification rituals and symbols are also intended to convey social and political messages. Social activism is, after all, pre-eminently about moral vision, about how the world should be, but is not (14). The wording of the oath clearly evidences this: 'I am a member of the *Dalit Mahila Samiti*. I take oath in the name of *Baba saheb* that I will walk on the path shown by him. I will not discriminate against anyone... I will fight to secure my rights, and will support others in securing theirs. Food and water is necessary for everyone to live. I will not practice untouchability against anyone in matters of food and water and will not endure it either' (15). Further, the NGO employs oath-taking given that, traditionally, people of the region give a lot of importance to oaths. Linking them up, in this way, with elements from the women's own cultural milieu, the NGO tries to make these identification rituals meaningful for rural Dalit women in southern Uttar Pradesh. Furthermore, the rituals are in the local dialect Bundeli (not Hindi) that the women easily follow.

In February 2006, the NGO organised a three-day long Dalit festival at the local Ramlila grounds, where the Hindu mythological text, Ramayana is performed every year. The organisation of the festival at a venue traditionally used for events sponsored by upper-caste Hindus and Hindu nationalist formations amounts to transgression of and symbolic assertion in public space, where Dalit women have

otherwise been constantly marginalised. Social relations, as Massey (16) observes, 'always have a spatial form'. In this particular context, public space serves as a site where and through which attempts are being made to create a new identity and to contest old ones.

Several local Dalit women were also felicitated at the festival for their contribution to Dalit women's struggles. Gaining (self-) respect in public space in this way was also expected to 'act as an antidote to the everyday humiliation they face at the hands of the upper-castes at the grassroots level' and often also at the hands of men in their own homes (17). That the District Magistrate gave away the felicitation certificates was also expected to increase the festival's prestige in the eyes of non-Dalits, especially the upper-castes, and to signal increasing awareness and assertion among Dalit women.

Dalit women also participated in a last rites ceremony at the festival. Some of them were asked to stand on stage, around what was supposed to be a funeral pyre. They placed, on a bier, material items such as *pattal* (leaves people eat on) and *jhadu* (broom they sweep with) they associated with the practice of untouchability. Carrying the bier, they then walked around the pyre, chanting '*Chuachut na karbe, sath sath rahibe!*' (We will not practice untouchability, we will stay together!) Next, they placed the bier on the pyre and set it aflame (18). Traditionally, men, not women, perform the Hindu last rites ceremony. They carry the bier chanting '*Ram nam, satya hai!*' (The name of Ram is the truth). Dalit women performing the ceremony and chanting '*Chuachut na karbe, sath sath rahibe!*' symbolically challenges gender bias in Hindu customs and attempts to de-marginalize Dalit women in public space. It also initiates an alternate Dalit custom. By getting women of different Dalit castes to chant

‘*Chuachut na karbe...*’ the NGO tried to cement in their psyche a sense of Dalit unity vis-à-vis other castes.

The above discussion suggests that engaging with issues of identity and culture is necessary for bringing about social change of a structural kind in the lives of Dalit women. Nevertheless, whether VMS’s attempts at doing so have been successful or not, and whether or not they complement, conflict or combine with the BSP’s attempts are separate concerns which will be addressed in the subsequent sections of the paper.

‘The constituency is not dumb’: dynamics of social activism and electoral politics

Mayawati first came to power in UP in 1995. For the first time in the history of independent India, a Dalit and that too a woman had become the chief minister of the state. In practically every Dalit *basti* (hamlet) that I visited, the women said, Mayawati is ‘one of us’, ‘from our own *biradari* (clan)’ (19). There was graffiti of Mayawati, Ambedkar and the blue elephant (BSP’s electoral symbol) on water tanks in some Dalit *bastis*, Ambedkar and the late BSP founder-leader, Kanshi Ram’s portraits in others. Often there was a statue of Ambedkar near the *basti*. Interestingly, I also found that people greeted each other saying ‘Jai Bheem’ and sang songs eulogizing Ambedkar and the Phules at local BSP gatherings. The Samiti women, as we know from the previous section, also do the same. Mayawati’s popularity and the aforementioned similarities between the NGO and the BSP’s engagement with (women of) Dalit castes, prompted me to explore the relational triad between VMS, the BSP and the women. While one recognizes that voices from the BSP would have significantly enriched this exploration, it was beyond the scope of my doctoral

research. The perspectives of the NGO and the women it mobilises, nevertheless, offer rich insights into the triad.

Wanting to gauge the NGO's stance on its real and perceived relationship with the BSP, I quizzed Sanjana Gupta. Given that she is the founder and director of VMS, her comments represent the NGO's vision as well as the official stance taken by the NGO staff, and are thus quoted at length below (20).² I began by asking Gupta about the presence of a certain member of UP Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the BSP at the Dalit festival. Didn't the MLA's presence have to do with his belonging to the BSP? 'Our constituency is their [BSP's] constituency. So the people we work with, our *janadhar* (popular support) is from the people who're voting for the BSP. That's very clear. So obviously somewhere there is also a political affinity towards the BSP... And there are some things we [VMS and the BSP] both talk about like Dalit identity, land to the Dalits, etc.' observed Gupta. Her remarks seem to suggest that the BSP and the NGO must inherently cross-cut each other given that both engage with Dalits. She also seems to consider that there is a level of ideological resonance between the two.

Is it advisable for an NGO to be so closely linked to a political party the way VMS is linked to the BSP? 'Any organisation that wants to work at the grassroots has to be politically strategic, build political relationships, take political stances if [it] want[s] to survive... we've learnt that... you have to neutralise some powers. You can't have everyone on the other side. Wheeling and dealing, you can call it,' she said. Discussion with Gupta revealed that the NGO-BSP relationship is, in fact, one of mutual strategic benefit. 'We are a force to reckon with so at election time they

² The NGO staff's statements during field interactions regarding the BSP-VMS relationship mostly echoed Gupta's statements.

choose to come to us. They need our support,' she said. Given that Dalit women constitute an important segment of the population voting for the BSP and that VMS, as a result of years of engagement, exerts a certain level of influence over them, Gupta considers that maintaining good relations with the NGO is of importance to the party too.

Gupta's observations challenge the idealisation of NGOs by NGO proponents as 'disinterested apolitical participants in a field of otherwise implicated players' (21). While women's NGOs may belong to the lineage of autonomous organisations formed by women who left political parties in the late seventies and early eighties in India because they felt marginalized therein (22), Gupta's observations also suggest that NGOs operating in grassroots contexts and wishing to exercise such autonomy need to do a fair amount of tight-rope walking, challenging and collaborating with those in political power. To quote Gupta, 'We choose which issue, which event to invite and not invite them to... It's not even a partnership, it's a friendship. The reason why it's a friendship is because we also have problems [with them]. Otherwise, wouldn't we all become BSP members!'

But do Dalit women mobilised by the NGO also interpret the relationship between the BSP and the NGO in the way Gupta does? Don't the lines between NGO-led social activism and BSP's political stratagems apparently blur given that both use several Dalit cultural symbols in common for mobilising (women of) Dalit communities? To quote Gupta, 'I don't feel that there is any problem. They [BSP leaders] talk about Ambedkar, its fine. We talk about Ambedkar, its fine. I think they probably spread Ambedkar more than we did in the past anyway... They [do] get swayed. But I don't think that the community is any less politically astute [than us]'. Gupta's remarks suggest that she has full confidence in the women's abilities to

discern the NGO-BSP relationship. Commenting on the manner in which Dalit women mobilised by the NGO adulate Mayawati, she says, 'We've had discussions with the women about how BSP does a lot of lip service and that not much changed even when Mayawati came to power... questioning the BSP even if you are basically supportive of it is important. The constituency is not dumb'. Her remarks also suggest that the NGO realises the women will vote for the BSP. While as an NGO its mandate is not to intervene in that choice, it can, however, help the women make that choice an informed one and to be in a position to demand that the BSP leaders heed their concerns.

With Dalit women, I began exploring their interpretation of the relationship between the BSP, VMS and themselves by asking about their use of the expression 'Jai Bheem' and the songs they sang in praise of Ambedkar:

Myself: Where did this expression 'Jai Bheem' come from?

Chunia: Earlier *Baba saheb* and his struggles were buried. We didn't know about him... Things have changed since we started celebrating Jayanti (Ambedkar's birth anniversary) in every village. Ever since the BSP came into being, we learnt about 'Jai Bheem' and all other benefits.

Myself: So the expression and the songs come from the BSP? How is it that the same songs are sung at BSP and Samiti gatherings?

Chunia: Earlier, we believed that Ram is God. Take the name of Ram. But now we have information that *Baba Saheb* made the Constitution... He awakened the people, so today songs have been composed in his praise... Savitribai's slogan, *Baba saheb's* slogan, the NGO has told us everything about these. Did the party tell us all this?! ...Sanjana didi got everyone to do 'Jai Bheem' (23).

It may seem as if Chunia is contradicting herself when, only a little after having explained how the expression 'Jai Bheem' became popular with the rise of the BSP, she says that the BSP didn't tell them about 'Jai Bheem' and the songs but that VMS did so. What may appear as a contradiction, in fact, demonstrates that while Ambedkar's life and times and the expression 'Jai Bheem' had become known to the Dalits ever since BSP's emergence, it was VMS that made it relevant for the struggles that Chunia and Sukhdaiyya were spear-heading.

Further, Chunia considered that both the BSP and the Samiti created by VMS believed in the ideals of Ambedkar and the Phules. Hence, those from the BSP may use the expression 'Jai Bheem' because of their relation to the party whereas women like her employ the expression because of their association with the NGO. 'So the thing is that the party is separate, the NGO is separate but the path of the party and the NGO is one and the same', she said (24). Chunia's observations clearly echo Gupta's on this issue.

Excerpts of my conversation with Chunia, her son Afsal and her husband Suren are presented below to argue how, the women and their families perceived the BSP and the NGO, though apparently alike in terms of ideology and identification rituals, as being different when it came to Dalit women.

Suren: Earlier, women didn't get out of the house. Ever since the NGO has come women have become quite *jagruk* (aware).

Afsal: Earlier, even if there was a party function, their men would say 'where are you going? You have not to go!' Now if there is any program of the NGO then no one says anything. 'You are going? Okay, go.'

Chunia: The party is taking along those who are literate/ educated. Men are literate. Women are not. So it is taking with it the men. That men come into the

party, join it, become politicians. And the NGO is organising illiterate women. So, in the beginning there was Mahila Samakhya.³ Some women studied there. Having studied they came forward a bit. Then they formed collectives in villages. Then more women joined the collectives. Now the Samiti's work is taking place. So in this we have got a big strength. So, now, in every home, women, men, both have got *takat* (strength) ...Now, politicians also want that women's crowds are formed. But it is the NGO which has worked the most in awakening women (25).

'The gendered geography of social and political space in India [has traditionally] confine[d] women to the home' (26). Rural women are expected to cook, fetch water and collect fuel. Such activities would be neglected if a whole day were spent in political activity. Further, BSP gatherings usually occur on the roadside or in other public spaces, removed from where the women live. '[F]or women to even participate in [such] group meetings often requires them to challenge and overcome the constraints of social norms, to face the disapproval and wrath of their husbands and other family members' (27). In Chunia and her family's perception, VMS has, in contrast to the BSP, created a 'legitimate' space for Dalit women. Representative of this space, Dalit Mahila Samiti is embedded in localities and seeks to address their concerns.

Chunia's remarks suggest that the BSP is interested in women only so far as they form a 'crowd' at party gatherings and are constitutive of its loyal vote-bank, and

³ Mahila Samakhya is a state-sponsored women's education and empowerment programme that was launched in 1989 and that is currently operational in nine Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Uttaranchal, and Jharkhand.

not in mobilisation for social change ‘from below’ in the way VMS is. Her remarks tally with Sudha Pai’s scholarly observations that the BSP is only ‘interested in capturing political power in order to introduce change ‘from above’ and conceives of empowerment of Dalits, purely in *political* terms’ (28). Dalit women like Chunia claim that in addition to recognising their identity as Dalits the way the party does, VMS encourages them to use their personal agency for emancipation. While Dalit women’s presence as a crowd is important, their voices also need to be heard. Yet when asked which party they would vote for in the following legislative assembly elections, the women still said, ‘BSP’. When asked, Sukhdaiyya said: ‘They all come to us for votes. We tell everyone yes, yes, but finally we vote for *hathi* (elephant)... Whichever party will get development done, we are with it’ (29).

The women recognize that the party and the NGO play separate but complementary roles in their lives. The BSP is part of the political spectrum and represents them in the state-level and national agenda whereas VMS operates at the grassroots and assists them in their everyday struggles. While the women associate the BSP with Dalit political power, they also consider party gatherings a male bastion. Repetitive use of words ‘*jagruk*’, ‘*takat*’ and ‘*pehchan*’ when describing the NGO in contrast to the BSP suggests that it is with the NGO that the women associate grassroots Dalit women’s empowerment. If the party offers them a sense of belonging to a larger collective as Dalits, the NGO, while recognizing their identity as Dalits, also values their identity and personal agency as women. However, this realisation about the party and the NGO is accompanied by dilemmas, some of which will be discussed in the next and final section.

‘What’s in a name?’: NGO activism and re-invention of Dalit women’s identity

At the outset of the paper, 'Dalit' was cursorily translated as 'ex-untouchable'. In this section, it will be used as a trigger to explore answers to how far social activism and electoral politics as embodied by VMS and the BSP, respectively, go towards re-inventing Dalit (women's) identity. One is, of course, aware that the term by itself is not equivalent to all that constitutes Dalit identity. Nevertheless, one considers that the meaning and use of the term by different actors, especially the BSP, the NGO and Dalit women themselves reveal important aspects about Dalit identity.

Dalit implies 'those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, *karma*, and justified caste hierarchy' (emphasis in the original) (30). In the 19th century, Marathi social reformer, Jyotirao Phule, used this term to describe the outcastes and 'untouchables'. Although Ambedkar also used the word, in the colonial period he preferred to use legal terms such as 'depressed classes' and 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs). A percentage of seats in public administration, government-run educational institutions and elected bodies of governance are reserved for the 'SCs'. Gandhi coined the term 'Harijan' to denote them. While Ambedkar saw their advancement through the abolition of the caste system, Gandhi held that the caste system could be cleansed of untouchability. According to Ambedkar, Dalits, tribals and backwards were 'natural allies' due to their deprived position (31).

'The term 'Dalit' has been reinterpreted... to include all the oppressed classes in society' (32). Dalit Panthers' manifesto defined Dalits in 1973 as all SCs and STs, landless labourers, small farmers and nomadic tribes, committed to fighting injustice stemming from political power, property, religion and social status. 'While the word 'Dalit' [was being] used in Maharashtra, particularly in the 1960s due to the Dalit Panthers, in U[ttar] P[radesh] and many other parts of the country it became current

only in the 1980s' (33). For BSP founder-leader, Kanshi Ram, who drew heavily from Ambedkar, the term 'Dalit' did not mean only untouchables, but all the exploited and oppressed.

Interestingly, VMS's interpretation of the term is different and narrower than that of the BSP. Gupta said,

'Dalit' is a very new word for VMS. We used 'SC' and 'Harijan' for a long time. 'Dalit' came to VMS from various sources: Dalit movements in Maharashtra and the south [of India], the Durban conference⁴, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, the National Coalition of Dalit Organisations, and the rise of the BSP, of course. But we have a very different definition of 'Dalit'. They say 'Dalit' is anyone who is socially, economically and politically deprived. So [according to them] all women are Dalits. We are very clear that 'Dalit' has a lot to do with Chamar. If you are a Chamar, you are a Chamar! Just because you say you are feeling marginalised doesn't make you a Dalit (34).

For the NGO, 'Dalit' is thus synonymous with ex-untouchable and must primarily have to do with 'caste' identity.

Having said this, it is still important to explore how the women themselves interpret the term 'Dalit' and engage with Dalit identity as imagined by VMS and the BSP. As ex-untouchables, they have long been denied a voice and have been variously labelled as Harijans, Dalits, Depressed Classes and SCs. 'Emphasizing the

⁴ Gupta's reference to the Durban Conference is about several Indian individuals and organisations arguing that caste-based discrimination be considered as racial discrimination during the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, 2001.

participants' own perceptions of Dalit [identity and] mobilisation [would] ensure that we do not neglect the agency and consciousness of the actors themselves' (35). Excerpts of a conversation with Samiti leaders, Sukhdaiyya and Chunia, and fieldworker, Sukhia are presented below to examine their views:

Myself: This word 'Dalit', where did it come from?

Ramdiayya: I don't like this word at all. Sanjana didi has told us so we say it.

Sukhia: It has not been given by Sanjana didi. In the entire country people use this word. Look at the TV, Mayawati has been using this word from the beginning.

Myself: So what does 'Dalit' mean?

Chunia: Those who suffer.

Myself: Do you really believe that you are suffering?

Sukhdaiyya: Our badge says so.

Chunia: We don't like the name 'Dalit Mahila Samiti'. Getting us to take the oath, wear the badge, the name 'Dalit Mahila Samiti' was given to us. So now we have to say 'Dalit Mahila Samiti'.

Myself: So you did not choose this name for the Samiti?

Chunia: No, we did not. These people (pointing to Sukhia) brought the badge... and we put it on. That's it.

Myself: Can you tell me why the association is called 'Dalit Mahila Samiti'?

Chunia: We haven't been told what the thinking is behind this name. No, we don't have knowledge about it on our own for us to be able to tell you (36).

Their discomfiture vis-à-vis the word 'Dalit' is evident. It comes across as an NGO imposition. Further, the women seem to link their identity as Dalits with their association with the Dalit Mahila Samiti. The women relate to Ambedkar's life and

struggles but this, nevertheless, does not seem to be enough for them to appreciate the name of the Samiti, the oath and the badge, as such. Proponents of the participatory approach (37) would argue that this may be because of the women's lack of involvement in naming the Samiti, conceptualising the oath and the badge, as such.

However, this is not to say that the women do not recognise the benefits of their identity as Samiti members. If Chunia said that she did not like the name 'Dalit Mahila Samiti' and that the Samiti women hadn't got any prior information about the content and character of the oath or the badge, she also said, 'In the literal sense, we are 'Dalit' (crouching to a foetal position) but when we walk as the Dalit Mahila Samiti, we say *Dalit* Mahila Samiti (emphasizing the word Dalit and raising her hands in a celebratory pose)' (38). On another occasion, Chunia had explained with great pride how the bus conductor charged her less now that she wore the badge.

The NGO works with women from mostly the Chamar caste of Dalits. It became evident during fieldwork that they strategically chose which identity or label to favor depending on the nature and purpose of interaction. Sukhdaiyya, for instance, said, 'If by calling ourselves 'Dalit', people will make us sit on a chair, give us equal status, then we'll call ourselves 'Dalit'' (39). The upper-castes and higher Dalit castes were said to use the appellation 'Chamar' to denigrate them. Hence, amongst themselves, the women spoke in terms of 'Chamar' but when asked which terms they would prefer when addressed by others, their response was 'Dalit' or 'SC'. This highlights that '[t]he labels we apply constitute our understanding of the world [and how we'd like the world to perceive us]' (40).

Chunia's husband, Surendra Kumar's observations are presented below to shed light on the intricate web of social (Chamar), political (Harijan and Dalit) and administrative categories (SC) that men and women like Surendra Kumar and Chunia

have to negotiate with in their everyday lives. When asked to explain his choice from the above categories, Kumar said,

Bheem *Baba* (Ambedkar) gave us the Constitution and in it we are called SCs. So we would like to be called 'SCs'... They say that our own ancestors coined the term 'Dalit'. But I don't really know. '*Harijan*' is a name that Gandhiji gave us. We didn't choose it. He said we were the children of God. So the others, are they not the children of God?! As for why we use the word *Chamar*... even if we wanted to, we can't escape it. On our caste certificate, the one which will get our children into schools, get us free ration, etc... when the BDO (Block Development Officer) asks what is our caste, we have to say *Chamar, not SC, not Harijan, Chamar!* (41).

Kumar's statement exposed the complex and contradictory ways in which untouchables have been constituted within the political agenda of the developmental state, the social movement and the NGO under discussion. Although, as per legal norms, Kumar was only required to state that he was SC for the purpose of the caste certificate, it was not surprising that the local state officials, also part of a caste oppressive social fabric, demanded that he specify that he belonged to the Chamar caste, humiliating him even as he attempted to access development benefits expressly intended for his kind. In this sense, the constitutionally created category of SC that Kumar so wanted others to associate him with, was, paradoxically, also being used in ways that reproduced his marginality. Further, Kumar's tirade on Gandhi and Harijan identity closely resounded the anti-Gandhi propaganda mouthed by Mayawati and other BSP leaders in UP late 1980s onwards when the BSP leaders began to use the term 'Dalit' in place of 'Harijan'. 'Its use was deliberate and meant to construct a new identity' (42). Gandhi's use of the term 'Harijan' was perceived as patronizing.

Interestingly, compared to the women the NGO engages with, the NGO's Dalit staff is at a different stage of conscientisation. While the former are still struggling with the term 'Dalit' and Dalit identity, the latter now proudly proclaims to be 'Dalit'. This may be attributed to the Dalit staff being more closely associated with VMS, getting greater opportunities to engage with and internalize Dalit identity. To quote case worker Sonam,

When I first joined work here, I didn't know what 'Dalit' meant. I have got to know about this word only since the last three-four years. I knew we are Harijan, Harijan, Harijan... but not Dalit. Since the time I was made the local coordinator [for the Dalit network] I have started thinking differently. Why hesitate in stating one's caste? A Pandey or Brahmin will say [it] without hesitation... then why is there such a feeling of deprivation in the Dalit... (43).

Dalit identity is more than just about the use of the term 'Dalit'. When it comes to the caste-discriminatory practice of untouchability, both VMS's Dalit staff and the women it engages with are confronted with dilemmas. Both fear they will be socially ostracized if they fail to conform to the practice of untouchability. Yet, while the women feel bound by the oath they've taken, VMS's Dalit staff feels it needs to abide by the NGO's vision and objectives. The staff and leadership had, prior to launching the Samiti, had taken an oath about what all they were willing to do in their own life space. Gupta claimed, 'We are putting into the community what we can do. We are not asking of the community anything more' (44). However, the very fact that the NGO's Dalit and non-Dalit staff was asked to take the oath first demonstrates that the demands Dalit identity as imagined by VMS places on the staff are greater. In comparison to the women it engages with, then, the staff is at a different stage of conscientisation.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore NGO activism with Dalit women in southern UP. While it is difficult to mobilize Dalit women alongside upper-caste women, the former do not constitute a homogeneous group, either. Inculcating a sense of collective identity and ownership of initiatives among the women has thus been a challenge for the NGO in question. Engaging with issues of identity and culture is crucial for bringing about lasting change in Dalit women's lives.

Electoral politics and social activism crosscut each other given that both the BSP and the NGO mobilize Dalits and use several identification rituals in common. VMS considers its relations with the BSP a necessity given its operational context. Field interactions with Dalit women suggest that they realize that the party and the NGO play different but complementary roles in their lives. While, the BSP provides the women a sense of being politically represented, VMS promotes their identity and agency as both Dalits and as women.

The women seem to link the term 'Dalit' and their Dalitness to the Samiti set up by VMS. However, negotiating Dalit identity as imagined by the NGO in relation to the other identities they are (self-)defined by is tension-ridden. While the women display discomfort with the term 'Dalit', they also recognize the benefits of their association with VMS. Their identity is being transformed slowly but surely. That Chunia's son and husband proudly state that Samiti members now travel to meetings; that Chunia and Sukhdaiyya both attribute this to their association with VMS are all illustrative of this process. The NGO can only go so far as creating enabling conditions; it is upon the women to determine the pace of the process.

Perceived and real identities of actors involved in both social activism and electoral politics are dynamic. While Dalit women like Chunia and Sukhdaiyya may be resisting the term 'Dalit' today, the NGO's Dalit staff appears to be embracing it. It is also possible that, in a few years' time, the women may imagine themselves as neither SC nor Dalit and may pride in others calling them 'Chamar'. Recent studies (45) claim that BSP women activists in UP and Liberation Panthers-led Dalit movement members in Tamil Nadu have already begun doing so.

Radhika Govinda is a doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge. Her dissertation examines the politics of women's activism in the backdrop of Dalit assertion, Hindu nationalist politics and an increasingly liberalized economy in contemporary north India.

Endnotes

1. S. Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002).
2. C. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003).
3. B. Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).
4. M. Ciotti, 'At the margins of feminist politics? A comparative analysis of women in Dalit politics and Hindu Right organisations in northern India', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2006, pp. 437-452.
5. Government of India. (GoI.), *Census of India* (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2001). <http://www.censusindia.net/>, accessed 5 March 2007.
6. *Ibid.*
7. D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) p. 85.
8. Fieldnotes, July-November 2005.
9. Interview with Reema, 10 August 2005.
10. Interview with Sanjana Gupta, 18-21 September 2006.
11. H. Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 275.

12. Della Porta and Diani, *op cit*, Ref 7.
13. Pai, *op cit*, Ref 1.
14. J.M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
15. Fieldnotes, July-September 2006.
16. D. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) p. 168.
17. Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 3, p. 74
18. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
19. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 8.
20. Interview with Sanjana Gupta, *op cit*, Ref 10.
21. W.F. Fisher, 'DOING GOOD? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 26, 1997, p. 442.
22. R. Kumar, 'From Chipko to Sati: The Contemporary Indian Women's Movement', in *Gender and Politics in India*, ed. N. Menon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1999) pp. 342-369.
23. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
24. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
25. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
26. Gorringer, *op cit*, Ref 11, p. 233.
27. B. Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 43.
28. Pai, *op cit*, Ref 1, p. 20.
29. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
30. E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996) p. 267.

31. G. Omvedt, 'Peasants, Dalits and Women: Democracy and India's New Social Movements' in *People's Rights, Social Movements and the State in the Third World*, eds. M. Mohanty, P.N. Mukherji with O. Tornquist (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994) p. 224.
32. G. Shah, 'Dalit Movements and the Search for Identity' in *Dalit Identity and Politics*, ed. G. Shah (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) p. 209.
33. Pai, *op cit*, Ref 1, p. 25.
34. Interview with Sanjana Gupta, *op cit*, Ref 10.
35. Gorringer, *op cit*, Ref 11, p. 38-39.
36. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
37. S. Purushothaman, and M. Jaeckel, eds. *Challenging Development: A Grassroots Women's North-South Dialogue* (On behalf of GROOTS International, Bangalore: Books for Change, 2000).
38. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
39. Interview with Sukhdaiyya, 20 August 2006.
40. Jasper, *op cit*, Ref 14, p. 85.
41. Fieldnotes, *op cit*, Ref 15.
42. Pai, *op cit*, Ref 1, p. 226.
43. Interview with Sonam, 10 August 2005.
44. Interview with Sanjana Gupta, *op cit*, Ref 10.
45. Ciotti, *op cit*, Ref 4 and Gorringer, *op cit*, Ref 11.