Between Strategies and Contingencies: Boundaries Between Subaltern Women in Rural North India

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Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, news programs reporting on India have shown many bodies covered with white cloths waiting to be cremated. Were they killed by the virus? Were they killed by the loss of their livelihoods during the pandemic? Or were they doomed for reasons completely apart from the pandemic, that is, due to the deprivations that preceded it? It is impossible to hear the voices of the dead who have lost their personality under the cover of cloth. My focus in this study will also be impoverished labor caste women living in rural north India, whose lives are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as the recent pandemic, or political and economic turmoil. However, these women have not completely lost their voices. In the rapidly and dramatically expanding capitalist economy under India’s economic liberalization, they are using their limited resources to confront poverty and devise livelihood strategies for survival. In this study, I will critically rethink the subaltern's agency, piecing together a fragmented ethnography of those who seize the opportunity to escape their dismal lives while participating in welfare programs, those who struggle to seize that opportunity but fail to do so, and those who are skeptical and hopeless about that opportunity. Specifically, I will describe the strategies used by subaltern women to overcome poverty and social oppression through a women’s welfare program known as Mahila Samakhya (MS), as well as the pain of those women left behind. The fragmented and discursive ethnography that this study illustrates proves that welfare programs
under neoliberal governance have produced complex boundaries and, therefore, new subalternities.

The Subaltern’s Agency and Resilience in Development and Welfare

Since the liberalization of the country’s economy, beginning in 1991, the local economy has been incorporated into national and global markets, and disparities have rapidly expanded between those who have access to opportunities to gain economic capital, and those whose economic resources or social networks have diminished and who have, therefore, become marginalized from India’s growing economy (e.g., Shah et al. 2018). In the face of this growing disparity, government distribution of resources determines the survival of those subalterns who are systematically excluded from economic growth. However, in India’s development planning since liberalization, the state’s welfarism (and its underlying concept of justice through distribution) have been neglected in the development ideology, with state welfare initiatives shifting to non-state actors as NGOs (Nayak 2018). This transition, as noted by Gupta and Sharma (2006), is consistent with the neoliberal agenda of smaller government and market-based competitiveness.

In contrast, in the hybrid situation of open competition under neoliberalism and protection by state welfare policies, economic globalization has lately produced divisions within marginalized groups, between those who are somewhat able to adapt to global capitalism and those who are relegated to the periphery of the capitalist economy. For their part, marginalized people have employed various strategies to improve their lives, such as investing in education, engaging in politics, and participating in development and welfare programs (Jeffery and Young 2014). Their daily struggle to ensure their well-being has brought about a transformation in their consumption behavior, and accordingly, they have transformed their social identities in terms of class, race, and gender (e.g., Ciotti 2010, Mullard 2014, Doron 2014). Conversely, those who fail to seize such opportunities are not only excluded from the development process but are also increasingly impoverished because they are at the bottom of a structure of inequality (Nayak 2018). Even NGOs, the new bearers of distribution, are finding it difficult to bridge the aggressively widening disparity found in a competitive, capitalist society. Thus, the situation of subalterns cannot be uniformly captured, and their boundaries are constantly being redefined.

The boundary that is created between subaltern women indicates that one coherent unit is divided and classified into different categories; in most cases, there is a hierarchy between the categories. Gupta (2012) analyzes the process by which these boundaries are created in the field of development and welfare. The Indian government has adopted various development and welfare measures for vulnerable groups who constitute the bulk of the population, covering education, health care, sanitation, pensions, employment, and income generation. Nevertheless, many of these people remain impoverished, with only some benefiting from welfare policies.

As the main reason for this, Gupta (2012) refers to the discrepancy between the disciplined action plans and bureaucracy of the Indian state and the actual field of aid, which is ruled by contingencies and chaotic settings. He suggests that individual
capabilities are required, ranging from mobility to access welfare facilities, the bargaining power to overcome bureaucratic authority, the ability to accurately gather information and build networks, and even luck (Gupta 2012:13–14). This implies that welfare programs under neoliberalism, which are based on the individual’s capacity, mask the issue of unequal distribution by the state and non-governmental organizations as the providers, and attribute the failure to receive welfare benefits to the lack of capacity, effort, and bad luck of the beneficiaries.

Mahila Samakhya, discussed in this study, is a program that was launched in earnest after economic liberalization. Its unique feature is that it does not provide goods or money, but knowledge and thinking skills, enabling subaltern women to resist their oppressive and impoverishing situations. Sharma (2008) argued that the program reduced the dependency of subaltern women on the government by empowering them to become self-reliant individuals under a low-cost management structure. She also highlighted the similarities between this minimal burden or intervention by the government, fostering of individual independence, aspirations to live better than other individuals, and a competitive drive and the neoliberal ideology. Sharma (2008) then illustrated that women are not necessarily monolithic and harmonious and are not passive beneficiaries of the program, through ethnographic case studies in which women members of the MS program engage in bickering, backbiting, and subterfuge to gain their own benefits. This study draws inspiration from Sharma’s analysis of the agency of beneficiaries, and also refers to the discussion of an increasingly hegemonic ethos of resilience in global capitalism by Neocleous (2012) and Bracke (2016) to discuss the agency of MS participants more critically.

In resonance with Spivak’s argument on the role of academia in identifying resistance, and thus agency (Spivak 1984), there has been a significant increase in research since the 1990s that focuses on women’s subjectivity and agency and depicts the resistance of subaltern women (See Kumar 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994; Basu 1998; Kabeer 2000). The rich ethnographies have demonstrated that Indian women are not monolithic entities and that they have the strength, suppleness, and negotiating wisdom to resist and exploit patriarchal structures. One important issue, however, is that regardless of how much researchers depict the agency of subaltern women, the domination-subjugation relationship that exposes them to structural violence, as Gupta (2012) refers to it (p. 19–21), has not been eliminated. In contrast, in the flourishing neoliberal economy of today’s India, many women may not be able to resist being driven to the bottom of the economic ladder and may need to struggle harder than ever for survival.

Bracke (2016) argues that in the development paradigm of the neoliberal era, the centrality of resistance to the concept of agency has rapidly eroded in favor of resilience, which emphasizes elasticity and flexibility. She suggests that the concept, which implies quick and easy recovery from misfortune, shocking accident, and illness among others, has a strong affinity with the feminized role of reproduction. In other words, subaltern women are expected to “endure and overcome whatever happens in their lives” such as poverty, domestic violence, or the death of their husbands (Bracke 2016:849–50).

According to Neocleolus (2012), the economic development of neoliberal subjectivity and the political development of resilient citizenship are interconnected and are presented as a gateway to subjectively overcome the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capital. “We can be collectively anxious and structurally resilient, but
not mobilized politically,” and therefore “resilience training” is required to be prepared to deal with the insecurities and anxieties that will come in the future without bothering anyone (Neocleous 2012:192). This trend is more or less followed in MS programs under the name of “women’s empowerment,” although not explicitly stated.

Thus, in a critical rethinking of subalternity of those who are newly integrated into the political, social, and economic circuits in neoliberal India, this study examined the boundaries that subaltern women produce both visibly and invisibly through various daily practices concerning the MS program. In the next and subsequent sections, I provide an overview of the region and the program and then examine the contradictions of development wherein subaltern women who are actively involved in the program differentiate themselves, either intentionally or incidentally, from other women in the group and are therefore empowered. I explore instances where the power of those empowered is directed against the more vulnerable women, rather than against the patriarchal structures that enforce strict norms on women’s lives, or against the state that cannot adequately manage poverty alleviation and makes them marginal and impoverished. I then examine the logic behind the perceptions of those who are marginalized and unable to successfully benefit from the group. In addition, I will discuss how to understand the expression of silence when women who fall off the ‘success path’ of the program are not willing to speak much and their agency cannot always be clearly identified.

**Summary of the Field Sites**

The villages of Navidabad and Sitapur, where I first began fieldwork in 2003, are 7 km from Mughalsarai, the largest city in Chandauli district, eastern UP, a Bhojpuri-speaking region. The eastern UP districts, including Chandauli, have experienced a very low level of industrial development, and approximately 30% of the households in these districts live below the poverty line. Consequently, the district’s authorities have come under political and economic pressure to respond to unemployment, low productivity, and limited utilization of natural resources, as well as low mobility of human resources, poor infrastructure, and low capital expenditure (Sarkar 2018). The only city in the district that has experienced rapid urbanization during the course of India’s economic liberalization is Mughalsarai, which is built around a railway station and has become one of the busiest and most crucial hubs of the East Indian Railway.

Since beginning fieldwork in Navidabad and Sitapur in 2003, I have continued to visit the villages. Navidabad has approximately 7,500 people (1,200 households), subdivided into several castes, including Brahmin, Thakur, OBCs, scheduled castes (SC), and a few Muslim households. Sitapur, with a population of 1,930 people (290 households), is within a kilometer to the west of Navidabad and is considered a Bind hamlet (Bind basti) by neighborhood residents.

The Bind is a caste classified as OBC (Other Backward Class) and engages mainly in house building and peasant farming. Bind is a caste sub-group belonging to the same category as Suraia, Nisadh, Kulawat, Mallaah, Guria, Kewat, and spreads across eastern UP, Bihar, West Bengal, and Northeast India. While Nisadh and Kewat were traditionally fishermen and Mallaah boatmen, the Bind are known to have moved away from riverside life, and many of them have been engaged in small, landless farming and
unskilled labor. In recent years, overcrowding in Mughalsarai has led to the expansion of the city to the outskirts, increasing the price of land in the vicinity and causing more people to sell their land. The landlord and merchant classes are further increasing their capital by migrating to larger cities or accessing businesses opportunities as the capitalist economy grows. However, many of those from the lower caste that used to work for the Brahmin and Thakur castes as unskilled agricultural laborers and sharecroppers have inevitably lost their employment. While some of these people still work as casual laborers in the agricultural fields of landed proprietors, others work at construction sites related to house building in neighboring villages, or as rickshaw pullers/porters in Mughalsarai’s central area. Other people from lower-caste groups engage in unskilled manual work provided by the village assembly (gram panchayat) under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Many Bind women work as casual laborers, like their husbands. They offer physical labor to owners of farmlands and livestock—planting rice, sowing vegetable seeds, pasturing livestock, and collecting grasses—and gain in-kind rewards. However, recently, landowners have tended to employ seasonal workers from neighboring regions at lower salaries during cropping and harvesting seasons, depriving local Bind, especially women, of their income sources. The recent development became a political issue for the UP government, following a decision by the ruling Samajwadi party in 2004 that economically and socially backward groups, including the Bind, who were categorized as OBC, should be included among the SC, to obtain the benefits of reservation. However, this attempt failed, as the UP government’s decision was rejected by the central government. Therefore, unlike Chamar, a SC group which also benefits from the reservation and has a strong political platform, the Samajwadi party, OBCs such as the Binds, who are impoverished, but excluded from economic networks and political benefits, have been forcefully marginalized.

Social Change and Social Welfare

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government came to power in 2014, and with a BJP government in UP, the people in Navidabad began to speak positively about certain social changes. For instance, villagers claimed, “Electricity has been more stable, as if we are living in a city,” and “Expenses for gas cylinders have been subsidized by the government for the poor.” Due to the extensive infrastructure supply policy by the BJP state government, the rate of electricity supply in UP increased by 175% from 2014 to 2018, compared with the 143% increase from 2010 to 2014. The government has also introduced a policy called the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to provide free gas cylinders, and subsidized toilet installation under the Swachh Bharat, which is gradually transforming village life. The stable supply of electricity, gas, and related applications has significantly changed the lives of those who can purchase gas stoves and domestic appliances such as spice blenders, refrigerators, and electric heaters. Furthermore, home appliances, cooking utensils, the outsourcing of “housework” (e.g., milling rice and grains), and online shopping have simplified domestic work, allowing rural middle-class women to maintain their interest in cooking and income generation. Moreover, with cable TV antennas installed, soap operas have become “the entertainment for bhabhis (daughters-in-law),” relieving them from the boredom of being confined to domestic spaces. Mobile phones, smartphones, the Internet, and social media have enabled women to communicate with their natal families and...
husbands working away from home, and broadened their access to society beyond their conventional relationships and networks. Such consumption behavior and lifestyle changes have ironically facilitated the maintenance of women’s norms (e.g., pardah) by allowing them to stay conveniently at home and accomplish their roles as wives and mothers effectively.

While state policies to improve the well-being of the citizens provide opportunities for the rural middle class to improve their quality of life, they have widened the gap between them and lower-class families, like those of the Bind in Sitapur. Electricity supply improvements and gas cylinder subsidies are useless to families that cannot afford electrical wiring, appliances, or regular gas refills. Women remain overwhelmed by domestic work, and sowing and harvesting, their sole income source, have been taken over by machines and migrants. To alleviate poverty, public and private welfare programs have been implemented in Chandauli. Such initiatives have attempted to empower subaltern women through microfinance, income generation, and literacy education. MS, a semi-governmental program, has operated in Navidabad, Sitapur and the neighboring villages since the 1990s, implementing empowerment programs for subaltern women by encouraging them to (1) recognize the problems that emerge in daily life, (2) discuss problems with other women to build a sense of solidarity, and (3) through the acquisition of knowledge and thinking skills, gain courage and confidence, and (4) become independent individuals able to deal with current issues. Starting in 2003, I attended MS meetings and daily basic education sessions for adolescent girls in Sitapur for 19 months, formed personal friendships, and interviewed 50 women, including MS members, MS workers, and their family members.

When I began fieldwork in 2003, MS programs were being conducted in 120 villages in Chandauli. The founders, including feminist activists and intellectuals, envisioned the expansion to include marginalized rural women of a women’s movement that had previously been conducted by educated women in urban areas. However, upon its initiation, MS’s strategy of questioning and transforming local gender norms was inevitably criticized by residents. Numerous villages in Chandauli, including Sitapur, saw incidents of sabotage and hatred, such as threats, intimidation, and ridicule, involving villagers in relation to MS programs and their members; since then, MS has taken a cautious approach to avoid negative local reactions.

MS social workers are called saheyogini; they visit 10–20 households every two weeks, gather (10–20) women, and organize meetings that provide participants with information on administration and law, and literacy education, health education, vocational training, counseling on family issues, and deposit procedures for microfinance. Saheyogini are facilitators who inform marginalized women in rural areas on national education policy and possibilities for female empowerment. It is assumed that relevant MS program activities will be implemented over a 10-year cycle, after which the program will be withdrawn. The program, which started in 2002 with 18 women and continued until 2016, is now in its second phase with a renewed membership in Sitapur. Although MS emphasizes solidarity among women, certain disparities and boundaries have appeared among MS members in Sitapur. Next, I examine how these boundaries formed during the programs’ implementation, through an ethnographic approach using the narratives of MS-trained women and others in Sitapur.
Disparities and Intimacy in the Welfare Program

MS members have varying positions within MS programs and differing attitudes toward these programs. Some women assume leadership or play a central role in the group. For example, some may assist in meeting preparations, inform saheyogini when problems occur among women in their village, or attend a block and district meeting when necessary. Others only occasionally attend meetings and return home to do housework while the meetings continue. Here, I argue that the boundaries arising in MS programs are caused by multiple contingent factors, not just individual motivation and ability.

For example, Sharda, a woman from the only Nai family in Sitapur regularly, helped the saheyogini to call other members before a meeting started and visited the MS’s block office to consult with the saheyogini about village issues. The following is part of an interview with Sharda, illustrating that her active participation was motivated by a strong hope for a better income.

When the savings (in a microfinance program) mature, we will get money, so we can buy something with the money and do business with it. We can buy tableware, rent a field, and cultivate it, or rent a trolley and convey something. I want to work on conveying something with a trolley when I get money. When you get something, people can do things. So, you can get more... I told Didi (a saheyogini) that I also want things that other people are getting... Let us do that too because we’re humans too. But who listens to us as we are so many?

Sharda’s narrative shows her desire to take advantage of economic opportunities. In the block where Sitapur is located, as many as 3,000 members participating in MS activities in each village seek benefits. Sharda wanted greater program involvement than other members, for a better chance of obtaining benefits from MS. Her active involvement in MS, such as supporting other members and visiting the block office to develop better relationships with MS staff, reflects her agency in asserting herself as a willing individual rather than a nameless subaltern who is merely registered as a welfare subject and obliterated by the state (Gupta 2012). In situations of uncertainty and competitiveness involving a combination of social welfare and neoliberal approaches, Sharda provides one example of how subaltern women have attempted to acquire what is necessary for their survival.

Gayatri, another woman involved in MS, also hoped for economic benefits from MS, and for upward social mobility. Rani, a saheyogini in charge of Sitapur and also from Bind, used to visit Gayatri’s house first because it was located near the village entrance, where she passed whenever she visited. When Gayatri saw Rani coming, she had her children tell the village members that the meeting was about to begin. Gayatri showed the most leadership potential in the group, proactively answering Rani’s questions, and cooperating with her by keeping drowsy participants or those chatting with others during a meeting alert by calling out “Hey! Listen!” She also assisted Rani by sitting next to her and keeping a roster, collecting passbooks from participants and adding further information about what Rani had said. Proactive participants, such as Gayatri, also acquired knowledge of the MS philosophy concerning a critical perspective on the patriarchy, and an awareness of the need for gender equality. It was as though such participants created a self-image of what an MS-informed woman was supposed to be.
through their assimilation of MS philosophy. In an interview about the behavior of men in Sitapur when making threats to MS women and interfering with the program, Gayatri said:

23 [Narratives: Gayatri (10 February, 2004)]

We said, “Do you think it’s good to drink alcohol, beat women, or steal something like a thief? We’re telling you if you don’t hear what we say, or if you don’t have a decent life, we will gather all the members and beat you.” ... “If you play with fire, your children will do the same. If your mindset goes wrong, your little ones also might steal, gamble, or sell your house. If you won’t raise your children correctly, that will happen, but if your children study, they will have a potential for the future. Stop your bad habits. Otherwise, everyone (in your family) will also go in a bad direction.”

24 In Gayatri’s narrative, she expressed how she confronted the village men who had accused MS women of holding meetings in public spaces, and it appears that her story reflected MS philosophy concerning the importance of education for children and working to correct deleterious habits among male villagers. Gayatri herself did not actually speak to the villagers but talked about a situation where the saheyogini made the statement above as though she had made the statement herself. She projected an image of the saheyogini as strong, brave, and prepared to resist male authority. Yet, this self-projected image has led to the praxis of resisting her husband. Gayatri recounted how she persuaded her husband to let her attend meetings:

25 [Narratives: Gayatri (10 February 2004)]

Previously, my husband didn’t let me join the meeting. “You are not going. You’re a woman. What are you going to do (at the meeting)?” He opposed me many times. I said I’m going. I told my husband, “I’ll do anything, but I’m going to join them.” My husband told me, “If you go to the meeting, go back to your parents’ home.” I crouched on the ground and said, “Please let me go. If you don’t let me go, I’ll leave the house.” Then he knew I would go. He says nothing now. He started to do the right thing.

26 Ciotti (2010) describes the process of embourgeoisement of SC women in Varanasi through the emulation of urban middle-class women’s behavior (p. 218–26). Gayatri’s emulation of a saheyogini can also be considered an aspiration to improve her social status by integrating herself among educated middle-class women. In the 1980s, girls’ education became popular in India among upper- and middle-class households to improve their marital prospects, well ahead of national education reforms in the 1990s. Many of these educated women have become employed as field workers within social welfare programs, including MS (Kanno 2017). Field workers, such as saheyogini, necessarily become involved with the personal matters of the program participants, such as birth control, family health, and physical abuse by their spouses. This involvement creates emotional ties and dependencies between saheyogini and members. Gayatri’s central position in the group allowed her to establish an intimate relationship with Rani, who also relied on Gayatri the most. Gayatri’s re-identifying herself with a more highly educated woman like Rani rather than with women from her own class made it possible for her to differentiate herself and create a boundary between herself and other MS women and other women in the village.

27 However, some of the members were not pleased with Gayatri’s Saheyogini-like behavior. When I revisited Sitapur on the day of the regular MS meeting in February 2006, Gayatri and the other members started arguing. Someone said out loud that Gayatri was talking to the members in a bossy manner and was the only one who
always went to the block office or participated in events, and the other members supported this complaint. Gayatri responded by shouting, and the place was in an uproar; I could do nothing but watch the proceedings in silence. This was a moment full of anxiety, frustration, and anger, as Gayatri was the only one left to benefit from the program. It overwhelmed women members because their sense of solidarity was disturbed by Gayatri’s breaking of the tacit synchronicity among the members and the fact that only Gayatri benefited from the program, leaving them behind.

28 Gayatri’s sister-in-law, Veena, had an unassuming personality, but by participating in the meeting with Gayatri and thanks to her husband’s understanding and support, it was easier for her to join the program. Her husband expected that her participation in the program would help her learn to read and write, and potentially provide her with a source of income. She also accompanied Gayatri to the block office when problems arose in the village and to the special training on law and herbal medicine-making, and thereby gained the trust of Rani and the group members.

29 With the withdrawal of the program in 2016, most of the members returned to their normal lives. Sharda, who had hoped to set up a business using the MS savings program and had been making efforts to achieve this goal, drifted away from the program, as she needed to take care of her sick husband and the heavy burden of housework, including livestock care and farming, without family support. She passed away in 2018 without having started her business. When I visited Veena and Gayatri in 2019, Gayatri’s mud house (kaccha makan), once open to the alley, had been replaced by a brick house fenced and gated around an angan atrium. Gayatri had withdrawn from the program since a stroke had left her paralyzed; she was living a retired life at home, taking care of her grandchildren.

30 The MS meetings are now held in the walled compound of Veena’s home, and when I visited, Veena showed me a room in which, a fan was running and her daughter was watching a TV program with her baby. Their lives had changed significantly compared to ten years ago, when they did not own any such appliances. Veena and Gayatri had worked at cooking and serving school meals at a secondary school in Navidadab with MS support since 2012. Gayatri resigned when she fell ill, but Veena continued after the program’s withdrawal. Gayatri’s husband had been earning a small income by hauling bricks for house construction, and partly due to MS’s encouragement, her eldest son graduated from high school and is now responsible for assembling bricks, earning more than his father. Her second son enrolled in intercollegiate studies after high school, whereas many children in Sitapur do not complete primary education. Veena had the opportunity to run a small kiosk in front of her house. She also became a member of the gram panchayat, conveying issues faced by village women to the local assembly.

31 Their achievements in terms of economic and social improvement through MS programs can be linked to several contingent conditions, including the support of understanding spouses, their family structure, home location, and their personalities. Sharda, who continued to participate actively in MS to gain additional benefits, worked in place of her sick husband and died of illness. Meanwhile, Veena, who was modest and quiet, benefited substantially from MS, as she was offered a job, becoming a member of the village council (Panchayati Raj) and a leader of the second phase of MS programs, through the support of her husband and by following in the footsteps of her sister-in-law, Gayatri. Even in a program like MS, which claims solidarity and unity among women, it appears that invisible boundaries emerge between those who have
been able to obtain opportunities to access socio-economic resources and those who have not; a situation where both contingency and strategies for survival are intricately interwoven.

The Fate of the “Have-nots” in Neoliberal Society

Neoliberalism, combined with welfare programs, has created disparities and boundaries between these marginalized women. As in the cases of Gayatri and Veena, those who have been able to take advantage of personal qualities, relationships within their surroundings, and various beneficial contingent factors as resources beyond economic capital have seized opportunities for socio-economic improvement. They may still be positioned as subaltern people in the broader context, but differentiation within the group of subaltern women has allowed for the formation of new identities with which they strive upward with hope. In government and NGO reports, they might perhaps be referred to as “success stories.”

By contrast, many others who have been unable to compete within the neoliberal social welfare system and therefore, cannot participate in the market economy may be forced to remain within their traditional dependencies. Their stories are not documented here. Some of those who have been left behind in terms of welfare programs and the capitalist economy have attempted to give meaning to their lives through fatalistic narratives. Karawati lost her husband in an accident before joining the program. Later, MS began recruiting women to establish a group in Sitapur, and Karawati was persuaded to join the program. This is because MS calls for the active participation of widows, as it is not only difficult for women to work in the rural society of eastern UP, but widows are also often discriminated against as being ill-omened. However, she rarely attended meetings and when attending, would listen silently. She was seldom aware that a meeting was being held because her house was some distance from the meeting site, and other members did not inform her or ask her to join the meetings. She described her impoverished situation after her husband’s death and MS members’ lack of a supportive attitude regarding the group’s saving scheme as follows:

[Narratives: Karawati (14 February 2004, Sitapur)]

I've had more responsibilities since my husband died, and I wouldn't have a headache so much if it hadn't happened... If I had a husband alive, I would have been able to confide my hardships to others, but now who wants to talk to me? ... There's no one to give anything. Men can take care of themselves, but who takes care of women? ... I must borrow money from my brothers and sisters; this is the way of the world. You have to follow the rule of the world; you have to follow. ... They (other MS members) know whether the money was saved in the bank or not... Some members are saying that I wouldn't be able to do so. I want my money back. If no one will listen to me, it's useless then.

The situation in Karawati’s case led to feelings of uselessness, despair, and anger concerning MS and its members because “no one listened to her,” as she lamented. In her narratives, as a means to contain emotions that she could not cope with, such as bitter grief over the death of her husband, anxiety over poverty, fatigue due to her heavy burdens and grave responsibilities, and hopelessness because nobody would help her, she expressed fatalistic refrains such as “follow the rule of the world” and “karma.” The docile acceptance of one’s life situation stems from a fatalism inspired and justified by the concepts of karma and rebirth. In fact, many Hindus believe that
one's deeds in previous lives determine one's destiny and social status. One ought to do one's duty with detachment from the consequences, without seeking personal gain; in fact, fulfilling one's karma obliges one to minimize self-centeredness (Shenoy-Packer and Buzzanell 2013). Women in Sitapur described their dire circumstances as their destiny, and expressed their ambivalent feelings of discontent, anguish, receptiveness, and intimacy in their narratives. The fatalistic phrases were also articulated when they spoke about the precariousness of their future, as shown in Munni's narrative below.

Munni, who lives right next to Gayatri, has also participated in MS programs since 2002. She had been suffering due to her husband's drinking and violence and began participating in MS meetings. She was afraid of her husband's violence; therefore, she often left meetings prematurely to do housework and work in the field. In a dialogue with me, she responded to my questions with a sense of resignation about her circumstances in which most of her husband's salary was spent on drinking; there was violence against her, and she had a heavy burden of housework, farming, and caring for livestock.

[Narrative of Munni (14 February 2004, Sitapur)]

Author: What is important to you in your life?
Munni: I think I can't find anything (important) in my life.

Author: Do you think your life is terrible?
Munni: That's right. My life is terrible.

Author: Why do you think so?
Munni: Life is terrible if your husband is a terrible person.

Author: Did you get any help from MS?
Munni: No. You know, my life is already awful. I can't do anything to help make my life better anymore. I may die today, I may die tomorrow, or I may die by ingesting poison someday.

Author: Your attitude may spoil your child's life.
Munni: Please leave it. What can I do?

Author: Are you going to arrange marriage when your children grow up? Or does your husband do that?
Munni: If it's written (in karma), it will be arranged, and if it isn't written, it won't be.

As mentioned above, the women of Sitapur describe their miserable situation as their fate and express ambivalent feelings of dissatisfaction, anguish, acceptance, and intimacy in their narratives. However, it is simplistic to attribute such narratives to a process of internalization in which a woman who has experienced suffering abandons hope of overcoming or improving it, and denies herself by believing that her own karma caused the suffering. Concurrently, when others attribute her misfortune to her karma, it leads to the severing of the ethos of sympathy and compassion that is supposed to be mobilized around the sufferings of the one concerned and places them in a more difficult situation. Furthermore, in the neoliberal atmosphere, suffering is re-localized as something that the individual should overcome; this is also the case in the field of welfare programs. If we refer to Neocleous’ (2012) discussion of resilience mentioned at the beginning of this study, programs such as MS can be a platform to provide training to enable women to overcome the shock of losing their husbands, to overcome the stigma of widowhood, and to become financially independent so that they can accomplish the seemingly almost impossible task of recovering the same daily life as they lived before their husbands’ deaths. The program is meant to be a space where training is provided. For Munni, physical violence from her husband was already...
embedded in her everyday life that needs to be recovered. So, how should we determine the reasons that these women chose to participate in the program? It appeared that their decisions to remain with the program were due to their hope that they might extricate themselves from their desperate lives by gaining “power” for self-development. They were perhaps attempting to keep their connection to the MS programs alive to obtain benefits and opportunities for better lives, while in practice remaining bogged down in overburdening housework and behaving as if they were subservient to the power relations and gender norms in their everyday lives. Even if this hypothesis has some truth, the following questions can be raised concerning the attitudes of these subaltern women. Can what they do be described as their strategies for survival? Are they using their agency to offer resistance against their apparent fate? Would an optimistic description, focusing on the agency of subaltern women who have been deprived of opportunities for well-being that they otherwise could be assumed to be seeking, be a deception, perhaps created by an anthropologist (or even a self-deception created by such women)? These matters are discussed in the next section.

Can the Voices of Subaltern Women Be Heard?

Social welfare programs that aim at a more equal distribution of wealth to marginalized indigent groups, have engendered a contested site among subaltern women who are intended to be equal beneficiaries of these programs but among whom boundaries have been created resulting from such programs. There are some prerequisites to being able to participate. There must be a) physical support for domestic work from family members, b) an ability or capacity to manage both family responsibilities and MS activities, c) family understanding about participation in MS activities, and d) personal ability or strength to confront criticism from those around you. Women who cannot meet these prerequisites rarely join MS programs and thus, become even more vulnerable and in even greater need of such programs compared with those who are able to participate. How are such discrepancies and paradoxes, resulting from the process of seeking to empower marginalized women, to be understood?

Gayatri’s narrative in the previous section seemingly showed that she changed her husband’s perception of women’s roles and desires and acquired a feminist perception of the local patriarchy and men’s inappropriate behavior toward MS women. That is, she achieved what MS envisioned as “empowerment” through the program. However, her resistance raises some questions. Was the “power” she gained and her “resistance” on which it was based actually directed against the patriarchal ideology and inequalities embedded in India’s socio-political structures? As described above, Gayatri and Veena improved their social and economic status partly by acquiring leadership skills and gaining greater access to MS resources compared with other members. If this was the case, it might be interpreted to mean that the “power” gained through the empowerment program was obtained at the expense of more marginalized and vulnerable women.

Sharma (2010:2) argued that in empowerment programs, such as MS, that encourage women’s self-actualization and self-development, any failure to empower women is ascribed to a lack of ability or negligence among participants rather than to any defects in the program’s design, structure, and strategies. Furthermore, according to neoliberal assumptions, it could be considered that participation in a program involves a simple
choice by each individual woman, regardless of the circumstances that influence decisions concerning whether they might wish to or be able to participate, and the voices of these women need not be attended to. Hence, when operating within neoliberal assumptions, it is possible to regard these programs as a type of violence exercised as social welfare (Sharma 2010; Gupta 2012), and scholars could be complicit in inaccurately describing or not describing these potential sites of violence.

In Sitapur, 18 women joined the MS program in 2004, which comprised 5% of the eligible residents (married women above 18 years old). In other words, most women did not join for whatever reason. I inquired why so many had not joined, but most did not wish to discuss it. Finally, two women, Guriya and Sundar, responded to my invitations to an interview. Guriya, a Bind woman in her early 30s, had five children, and had married in Sitapur when she was 16 years old. She allowed me and Sangeeta, an MS staff member who was accompanying me, to enter her house, and asked us in a respectful manner to sit on a cot placed next to the entrance. Her husband was selling milk products and earned 40–50 rupees a day, and she earned money by doing farm work in the field of a landowner. She often quarreled with her husband and her mother-in-law because her husband spent whatever he earned on gambling. The sahejogini encouraged her to join the program so that she could cope better with the issues concerning her husband, but she refused. She commented as follows:

Author: Do you know about MS?
Guriya: No. I don’t know because I’m not participating. I think my knowledge will increase if I participate.
Author: Have you ever heard the name?
Guriya: No.
Sangeeta: Oh, right? Are you sure you haven’t heard the name MS?
Guriya: Yes. I’ve heard the name MS. But I have never participated.
Author: Do you want to know about MS?
Guriya: I want to know, but I have to move around here and there (to do housework).
Author: Why don’t you participate?
Guriya: I have a job at home, and I have to do it.
Author: Everyone works at home, but some have joined the group.
Guriya: I want to join and increase my knowledge for the future, but I can’t.
Author: Wouldn’t you like to participate right now?
Guriya: No. I have a lot of housework and I can’t go (to the meeting). And if you participate, it will take some time. One hour, two hours... if you have time to join the meeting, you can do other work.

I asked Sangeeta whether MS workers had encouraged women like Guriya to join the program, and Sangeeta answered in a way that suggested she partly blamed Guriya for not joining. “Yes, we have encouraged them to join us, but they don’t care what we tell them. If we tell them today, they will forget it tomorrow. It is a waste of time because they forget it.” When I asked Guriya why that is, she said “I don’t know how to tell you why. If I join, I know I will get more knowledge though...”

Sundar, a Bind woman in her early 20s, was even more reticent. She had gone to primary school until the fifth grade and married into a family in Sitapur four years before. She had two children. She made at least two blouses per day and earned 10–20 rupees per blouse. Her husband worked at a sweet shop and earned 1,500 rupees per month. She said her conjugal relationship was satisfactory but was concerned that her husband habitually used hemp (cannabis). The MS workers had also been concerned
about her husband’s habit and occasionally encouraged her to join the program, but she had refused. She commented as follows:

Author: Do you know about MS?
Sundar: No.
Author: Have you heard of MS from anyone?
Sundar: Nobody would take me (to the meeting).
Author: Do you want to participate in the activities of MS?
Sundar: I’m busy working at home and don’t have time.
Author: Would you attend if you had time?
Sundar: Yes.
Author: Do you know what the activities of MS involve?
Sundar: You can gain knowledge and information.
Author: What do you think about that?
Sundar: That’s good.
Author: If you had the opportunity, would you like to participate?
Sundar: Yes.

How can agency be understood in relation to these narratives when the women reveal so little? As Spivak (1988) contended that subaltern subjecthood can be represented only through an elite subjecthood that offers an analysis, the subjecthood of the women in this study only emerges through my subjecthood, which involves a completely different life experience compared with their experiences. Should their subjecthood be seen as being tied to an immense amount of housework and family pressures and living in fear of critical staring from other villagers, which explain their limited participation in MS programs? Alternatively, as they speak in the idiom of karma, it could be described as Hindu women fulfilling their karma by looking proactively at their impoverished lives without any desire for personal gain through MS. It could also be that these women do not join for more mundane reasons such as not liking some of the members or preferring to chat with their family at home. The most complicated part of this matter is that both interpretations seem plausible. Given this, it would seem impossible to determine precisely the subaltern voice. However, if one does not listen to the vanishing voices of these silent women, they will be lumped into the empowerment stories of Gayatri and Veena, recorded as already protected entities by welfare programs, and obliterated. Thus, they will be reduced to what Agamben (1998) calls “bare life” while remaining inside the law and politics. Therefore, it is one of the key roles of anthropologists witnessing their lives in the field to make their presence known, so that their voices and their lives are not diminished. A detailed examination of such persons and their representations, using ethnography, is worthwhile.

Concluding Remarks

One contribution of anthropology to the study of subaltern people is facilitating a focus on the everyday resistance strategies of marginalized lower-class people and rendering their agency visible while processing power relations in the local context through ethnographic descriptions. In fact, here, I have illustrated the agency of women who struggle against patriarchy and attempt to rise out of poverty. Yet, ethnography cannot be completed on its own. As discussed, the penetration of capitalism and the global economy into all areas of rural society has greatly heightened economic disparity, the aspirations of subaltern women to improve well-being through participation in the market economy, and the creation of boundaries among them due to competing
interests in relation to social welfare program opportunities. In addition, decoding the agency of women left behind by boundary formations has become increasingly complex and difficult. Discursive narratives in ethnography can be analyzed, categorized, and theorized, using several key concepts such as “power,” “resistance,” “strategies,” and “agency,” and published as coherent and completed stories. Yet, the ethnography depicted here was not a consistent success story of subaltern women unveiling their agency through the MS program. Instead, I attempted to leave the discursive narratives as they were; one’s power was directed at others within the same group, some used karmic phrases to describe a “hopeless life” and “helpless self,” and could not resist the structural forces behind inequality, and one did not speak much, which made the interpretation more difficult. We can never ignore the fact that the process of empowerment of some women not only produces new boundaries among subaltern women but also makes the impoverished situation of the women left behind invisible by presenting it as a solved problem. In fact, here, the women who were made invisible behind the “successful story” without receiving any benefit from the welfare program appeared to be as sealed and obliviated as if they were unrecorded. It would be reprehensible if ethnography, in describing the agency of subaltern women, were to exclude them to the sphere of “bare life” and expose them to the violence of death by confining women’s suffering and feelings of despair over their living conditions to a black box that is made invisible. The role of anthropology, based on face-to-face fieldwork, can be seen as a valuable means of collecting a series of ethnographies involving intricate, discursive, and fragmentary stories of the everyday world of local subaltern women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. For instance, Ciotti (2010), in her ethnography of the Chamar community of rural North India, describes the efforts of educated middle class Chamar women to differentiate themselves from the less educated women by acquiring the behaviors of upper-caste women (such as pardah and domestication) in order to plot their upward trajectory.

2. Raheja and Gold’s (1994) study which attempted to counter the male-centered discourse on Indian women through their study of women in North India is suggestive. Through an ethnography of the lives of North Indian women, they argued that women are not only modest, chaste, and passive, but also resist existing patriarchal structures and subvert hierarchical relationships by expressing themselves with obscenity, irony, and mockery in improvised ritual songs and in everyday conversation.

3. According to Bracke, global institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank are currently investing in training programs to build and enhance the resilience of individuals and communities, notably those in the Global South, an investment that might be understood as a way to ensure that long-standing and ever-creative strategies of survival are safely molded to the needs of the greedy global economy (Bracke 2016:852).

4. The data is based on research conducted by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development in 2012, led by the Uttar Pradesh state government.

5. According to Rana Singh (2007), the city recorded a growth rate of 23% between 1991 and 2001 and was expected to grow by another 38% between 2001 and 2011.

6. I have changed the names of the villages I focused on.

7. Politically, the Bind are categorized as among the most backward castes (MBCs) within OBCs, which include disaggregated castes and communities situated just above the ritual pollution line and which are largely absent from the political arena (Doron 2014).

8. In 2019, the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh included Bind, Mallah, Nishad, Kewat and 13 other OBCs in the SC list to provide these socially and economically backward classes with the benefits of reservation, so Adityanath’s Bharatiya Janata Party has been whittling away at the vote base of the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party. This was the third time that the State government made attempts on this issue; previously, both, the SP (2004) and BSP (2012) governments had failed due to legal intervention. Since the power to declare any caste as SC rests with the Center, the State government’s decision, taken without the Center’s consent, proved futile (IANS 2019).
Most of the women’s narratives I analyze here are based on 2003–2006 data I collected from local women aged 30–60 years. I have changed the names of my informants.

ABSTRACTS

With the spread of the global economy and capitalism in India, the local economy has been incorporated into national and globalized markets, and disparities have rapidly expanded between those who have access to opportunities to gain economic capital and those who have experienced the loss of economic resources, and therefore become marginalized. This has also produced divisions within marginalized groups between those who have been able to bring about changes in their consumption behavior and lifestyle through welfare and development programs, and those who have been left behind, without access to such opportunities.

In this study, using ethnographical data regarding women of a labor caste in Uttar Pradesh, I explore how subaltern women have been affected by the capitalist economy and how they have formed boundaries between themselves in the process of becoming involved in welfare programs. I will argue that the ‘power’ of women empowered by women’s welfare programs is not directed against the socio-political institutions that oppress them, but against those who are left behind within the welfare program. I will also argue that anthropologists need to understand the subjects of women’s empowerment in welfare programs to ensure that the existence of the left-behind is not overlooked.

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Keywords: subaltern, agency, boundaries, neoliberalism, welfare, resilience

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