

Essay 6

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Shirin M. Rai

Civic Driven Change ~ Opportunities and Costs

'Human security is concerned with safeguarding and expanding people's basic freedoms. It requires both shielding people from acute threats and empowering people to take charge of their own lives. Needed are integrated policies that focus on people's survival, livelihood and dignity, during downturns as well as in prosperity.'

Sadago Ogata and Amartya Sen (Ogata and Sen, *Human Security Now*, 2003)

In this essay I focus on the exercise of civic agency and on an assessment of the costs that are attached to modes of struggles. I argue that when analysing or measuring agency we cannot afford to overlook the risks. When developing programmes that might empower citizens who are seeking social change, we must not overlook the perils of participation. When encouraging civic agents to act in this way we need to assess their vulnerabilities which can make them victims as well as actors in their quest for empowerment. By insisting upon counting costs, we can also insist upon the recognition of structural barriers to empowerment. In so doing, we can re-politicize how we regard agency as well as the empowerment that might accrue as a result of exercising it. This would then allow the focus of civic-driven strategies of social change to include not only individuals but also contexts in which individuals and groups function; not only in recognition of the disadvantages that need to be overcome but also the redistribution of advantages that are needed to shift inequalities in our societies. And finally, we will then see the structures of power (states) and those of agency and agents (citizens) not as binary opposites but as co-constitutive of change.

My concern with this broad issue of opportunities and costs arises from the study of the unfolding and unravelling of the Women's Development Programme in the state

(province) of Rajasthan, India. I have reflected upon this case in order to understand how agency is exercised in different and difficult contexts and with what consequences - for individuals concerned as well as for the movement for change initiated and participated in by these individuals. By studying this we can also understand how, what Ruth Lister has called, *unfolding citizenship*¹ takes shape - through an interaction with the state and non-state actors, among citizens and for individuals. What this case study also shows is that while the theatre of action might be local, threads of power link this local space to the national as well as the global through state programmes and international funding of these. A multi-level analysis of governance is important to understand how civic-driven change might happen, what challenges it might face and supports it might garner.

Given these concerns, this essay argues the following: first, that 'agency needs to be informed by a mapping of power/relations' - class, caste, gender, space among others, as well as adequate support, in order to translate conscientization into change. Second, 'a nuanced reading of power in order to understand, measure or analyse agency as a concept, strategy or outcome is important' because it alerts us to the constraints imposed by social relations as well as the possible spaces for changing these. This study is centrally about embodied agency. By this I mean where agency is not just conceptually constructed but is constituted by and constitutive of actual bodies of men or women, rich or poor, healthy or sick, with or without access to power spaces and relations. This approach allows us to examine the various modes of struggle - within oneself (conscientisation), with others (women's groups, movements and networks) and with society as a whole - for social change. A focus on power relations as well as on agency of citizens to affect change also allows us to be alert to the levels of risk involved in exercising agency on a political landscape where power is manifest as well as hidden, disciplining as well as disruptive. And third, that 'civic agency is framed by multi-level governance insti-

2 tutions' - the state and donor agencies. It plays out in local and global spaces, with ambivalent functions in both assisting the poor institutionally to fight dominant social relations, and at the same time ensuring the consolidation of power and privilege. It also unfolds in the process of 'becoming' a citizen through exercising agency.

The Case: The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan

In the story of the Women's Development Programme (WDP),² we find that overlooking costs of 'empowering' women through development programmes because they are not politically thought through can be catastrophic for the individual agents involved. Moreover, this omission can be fatal for the projects/programmes of change in which they are engaged. There are different agents caught up in this story - individuals, groups and organizations - local and international, state and non-state. There are also different expectations of change - integrative and agenda-setting.³ We will observe different modes of practice - reflexive, conscientizing and networking. And, we encounter different outcomes - withdrawal of support, violent opposition, renewed mobilizations for change, and unexpected and unforeseen changes - for the individuals and the groups concerned. In this context, power mapping would be deeply contested, messy and inconclusive.

The WDP was launched in the Government of Rajasthan, India in April 1984 with the ambition to empower poor women in Rajasthan. The programme was not 'civic-driven' in terms of the key subjects that were finally involved. In fact, it was a response to pressures of the women's movement, both national and international, as well as to pressures on the Indian state from international institutions in the run-up to the UN evaluation of the United Nation Decade for Women, 1976-85. While its funding and therefore, to a great extent, its framework was developed in conversation between institutions - international and national, state and non-state - its implementation remained in the hands of the volunteer worker called *sathin* (woman friend). In terms of CDC, therefore, an important point to note here is that often the causal links between social movements and policy outcomes are not linear. In other words, wider, broader movements can create the environment wherein state and non-state actors develop strategies and policies for change. These then involve individuals and groups not simply as mobilized resources for policy delivery but as actors in their own right, with potential for making change. Chakravarti points out that 'The *sathin* was envisaged as a worker with a difference: a catalyst of women's empowerment at the grassroots. She was to be instrumental in the growth of women's collective strength, to increase women's bargaining capacity, and help them to articulate collective interests. (...) But the effectiveness of the *sathin* was predicated upon a transformation within the *sathin* herself so that she could become, through this process, a woman

leader'.⁴ Training of the *sathin* was thus an important element of the programme - but one that, in the end, failed them.

At the heart of their work was a commitment to 'collective processes, working upwards through first evolving village-level platforms for articulating women's points of view and then moving outwards to other groups of women engaged in similar processes'.⁵ Both practical and strategic interests were identified through this process. These ranged from famine relief measures, to combating gross forms of patriarchal and social oppressions, in particular child marriage, minimum wages, recovery of land from encroachers, issues of widows' claims to land, employment opportunities for women, safe drinking water and healthcare. The articulation of these interests and mobilizations resulting from them inevitably brought the *sathin* into conflict with the village social and political hierarchies. As 'long as the *sathins* received support from the district agencies, from the voluntary organizations, and through them the government authorities, the *sathins* were not alone in their activities (...). The support of the district agencies was a crucial element in women's confrontations with caste and class oppressions within rural society'.⁶ However, this edifice based on cooperation between multi-level agencies and actors revealed tremendous strains as the government moved to prioritize the 'family planning' programme at a time of drought and crop failure in Rajasthan between 1985 and 1988.

On the one hand, government-run famine relief programmes were the major means of survival for the rural poor, and on the other, these programmes were used by local government officials to fulfil their quotas for the sterilization of women as part of the family planning programme. Women were caught between these twin pressures. The *sathins* mobilized opposition to this double oppression with the support of the non-governmental organizations involved in WDP. The District governmental sector, however, refused to discuss the issue. In a parallel move, the *sathins* from various villages and districts met in 1986 and identified land and health as the two areas that most needed to be addressed by WDP. As Chakravarti comments, 'The only aspect of women's health the state was interested in was that they should stop "breeding"'. The women who participated in the health camps held in Ajmer District, on the other hand, were concerned with a whole host of issues around their bodies'.⁷ As this dispute on linking family planning and famine relief showed, the alliance between sectors of governance was fragile when competing interests - evident in the different interpretation of 'women's health' that the government and the *sathins* put forward - clashed. State institutions had a powerful position in this dispute. The final, and arguably the most sensitive issue taken up by the *sathins* was that of opposing child marriage. Rajasthan has a particularly strong tradition of child marriage and the *sathins* wanted to educate parents against this practice.

This clash of interests became even more pronounced when the *sathins* tried to mobilize their resources by organizing themselves into a union, and by demanding the 'regularising' of their status within the state structure as government employees with the right to security of employment and an adequate wage for their work. In 1990 *sathins* went on strike on this issue. The government agencies refused their demands stating that the *sathins* were volunteers, not employees; that they were uneducated and illiterate and therefore could not *be* government employees. The fact that the WDP had envisioned the participation of poor, low caste women as central to the success of the programme, and that these women could not be educated and literate did not enter into official consciousness. The local government officials, such as the Block Development Officer, even sent letters to the husbands of the *sathins* instructing them to 'bring their wives to their senses' or accept the consequences. Chakravarti comments, 'From the movement of the *sathin* around wages and other related issues it is clear that while the *sathins* had been transformed from being "passive recipients" of development policies, the "upper" levels of the WDP had remained class bound and instrumentalist in their approach to the program'.⁸ The political space that was created by the WDP quickly closed down as the conflict over matters of substance escalated.

During 1992 Bhanwari Devi, a *sathin* working in the programme, campaigned against child marriage in her own village. She tried to persuade the Gujjar (dominant caste in the village) parents of a one-year old daughter, who was to be married, but in the mean time the police interfered and stopped the marriage forcibly.⁹ Bhanwari Devi, from a lower potter sub-caste, was blamed for this, threatened and asked to leave the village. When she refused, she suffered a gruesome gang rape on September 22, 1992. The police initially refused to record her statement. The Sessions (lower) Court acquitted the alleged rapists on the grounds that 'an upper caste man would not disregard caste (...) differences to rape a low caste woman'.¹⁰ Dominant cultural, caste and social norms were invoked: 'It isn't possible in Indian culture that a man who has taken a vow to protect his wife, in front of the holy fire, just stands and watches his wife being raped, when only two men almost twice his age are holding him'. The judgment also states that it is highly improbable that an uncle and his nephews would commit rape together. The presence of one Brahmin amongst those accused leads the judge to observe that gangs in rural areas are not usually multi-caste and so the accused could not have acted together'.¹¹ All five were acquitted of rape and convicted of minor charges. In early 1996, Bhanwari Devi, women's organizations, CBI and Rajasthan government filed an appeal in the High Court against the acquittal. The rapists offered her compensation to withdraw the case. Her reply was: 'Tell our village elders you raped me, restore my dignity'.¹² In 2006, ten years later the appeal was still pending. Kavita Srivastava, activist and People's Union for Civil Liberties chief in the state, commented

that 'It's the 10th year of that appeal and not a single hearing has taken place yet. We twice appealed for an early hearing but both were rejected'.¹³

This enraged a women's rights group called Vishakha that filed public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court, invoking CEDAW,¹⁴ passed a landmark judgment on August 13, 1997 in the Vishakha case, laying down guidelines to be followed by establishments in dealing with complaints about sexual harassment. In doing so, the Supreme Court did not merely confine itself to interpreting the law but intruded onto legislative ground. The court stated that these guidelines were to be implemented until legislation is passed to deal with the issue.¹⁵ But the guidelines were followed more in their breach. Very few complaints committees were set up, service rules were not amended and the judgment was widely disregarded both by public and private employers. But one of the fall-outs of the judgment was that many civil society organizations became aware of it and started to publicise it and pushed for its implementation. Around the same time many women who were being sexually harassed started breaking their silence and begun demanding action from the employers. In fact a number of these cases arose from university and college campuses'.¹⁶ The National Commission for Women took the lead in drafting a Bill called Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention and Redressal) Bill, 2004.¹⁷

In the meanwhile, Bhanwari Devi continues to wait for justice in penury. She has received a number of awards but no financial support. She cannot sell pots in her village anymore but refuses to leave the village because she feels she has done no wrong. Srivastava acknowledges 'Bhanwari's case was a pioneering one for the anti-rape movement. It brought about a change even in the system of accountability of the police. Many women have gained from Bhanwari Devi's struggle, but sadly not her'.¹⁸ In the last few years, the *sathin* programme has been bureaucratized, as well as starved of funds. Chakravarti concludes from this that 'The government wants empowerment without breaking into the power of those including themselves, who have power over the disempowered (...) while the *sathins* struggle (...) for the statutory minimum wage of workers and the survival and expansion of the scheme, the government claims credit for the "success" of the *sathin* programme in Beijing, Vienna and Geneva'.¹⁹

The above story of exercising agency as well as the impediments to exercising it by state and non-state actors, groups and individuals allows us to understand the implicated, unpredictable nature of change. The WDP was conceived by the national state and administered by the provincial government, funded by an international organization and advised by an autonomous women's NGO. The initiative indeed created new spaces for political action towards equality of women and men. However, this space was filled with tension and conflict on grounds of class, caste and gender inequalities and struggles over the appropriate strategies and political vocabularies to challenge these. The success of the WDP depended upon

4 the work of the *sathins* - not only as a group but as individual subjects, who wished to change their worlds but, in attempting to do so, also changed themselves. From being mobilized by the state, *sathins* like Bhanwari Devi became agents of change - often through distancing themselves from the state agendas. Through this 'becoming' subjects/actors, *sathins* widened the political space in which they worked, but also revealed the deep fissures that made it unstable and dangerous. Bhanwari Devi's story then has a ring of inevitability on the one hand - as these fissures opened to swallow her in violence - and great courage and agency on the other. Her refusal to back down has given her a status of hero in the Indian women's movement, while at the same time invoking debate about the nature of agency, the role of those who seek to mobilize as well as to exercise it. Finally, her example, also points to the unintended consequences of exercising agency - her own life was marked by violence of rape, caste conflict and state denial, but it inspired other struggles about women and working conditions, again questioning the linearity between agency and change. Thus, a first wave of sponsored civic mobilisation generated a second wave that is spontaneous and more autonomous.

The Lessons

What can we learn from this story about the opportunities and costs of exercising civic agency? About change? About the nature of risk attached to the exercise of agency? About empowerment and disempowerment? Parpart et al. have argued for 'the need to situate individual and group action/agency within the material, political and discursive structures in which it operates. Thus we call for careful, historically situated analyses of women's struggles to gain power in a world rarely of their own choosing'.²⁰ What was the economic and social *context* within which the WPD was conceived, funded and launched?

Developmental states such as India have often invoked the discourse of modernisation to legitimise their policies. However, as historians such as Sarkar and Chatterjee have argued in the context of India, this modernity is fractured on grounds of class, caste and gender.²¹ The huge socioeconomic regional disparities in the country also create ruptures and fostered tensions between the national and local state fractions. The Indian state's claim to modernity has rested as much on social as economic development. India's development profile continues to be very mixed, despite its recent economic growth: the HDI for India in 2005 was 0.619, which gives the country a rank of 128th out of 177 countries. In the context of a local state, Rajasthan is among the poorer states in India, which hosts 76 percent of the poor of India.²² The sex ratio for the state is 922:1000 males, which shows the poor social status of women. Despite the improvements recorded since 1961, Rajasthan continues to have a lower sex ratio than that of India, although the gap between the two has reduced over the years.²³ Thirty-one percent of 6-14 years old girls do not go to school;

9673 women died in childbirth in 1999 and figures continue to be high.²⁴ Rajasthan's literacy levels as well as health indicators, especially for girls, continue to be among the lowest in the country. Life expectation in the state is among the lowest. In 1991-95 it was 59.1 years: 58.3 for men and 59.4 for women.²⁵ As we have seen above, the local state is under pressure to address this evidence of gender inequality through specific programmes, but the focus of these initiatives is not necessarily democratic or gender-sensitive, making them internally flawed.

While state-led modernity focused on the economy and political citizenship - formal equality in law, representative democracy - social relations continue to be regarded as the sphere of the family embedded in 'traditions and culture' which in themselves are presented as important to the stability of the nation. While social reform was considered a priority by all post-colonial elites, it was also emphasized that the 'essential distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must at all times be maintained. There would have to be a marked 'difference' in the degree and manner of westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation'.²⁶ In addition, the above distinction was made but not acknowledged. This non-acknowledgement took different forms but the assumptions about the social placing of men and women were built into the constructions of these concepts, and then naturalized through law and state policy. This disjuncture between modernity and tradition creates internal tensions as those who resist such formulations of modernity can be found both within the state and in society at large. So, when these tensions emerge in the context of demands for change to state policy, their unpredictability creates unexpected allies as well as the usual suspects who are opposed to change. What is also notable is that these tensions emerge in different ways at different levels of governance - local, national and global - which then can affect the ways in which civic-state alliances can be formed. So, in the context of development, we need to keep the state in our analysis of civic-driven change. In the story of the WPD, the provincial state government was one of the actors who initiated the process of challenging social relations in Rajasthan through the work of *sathins*, while other state fractions such as the police and the lower judiciary played their part in shoring up the patriarchal and caste systems in the way they treated Bhanwari Devi's appeal for justice.

Challenging these unequal social relations is not easy as the structures of power at the local levels are deeply entrenched and resistant to change. When we speak of structures of power, what are we examining? When we attempt to 'map power' what are we charting? Realist interpreters of structure (or social forms) focus on 'objective' constraints or enablers of agency and view social structures as displaying characteristics of 'temporal priority, relative autonomy and causal efficacy'.²⁷ Marxist analyses have examined how social relations of ownership of means of production resulted in conflict and its

mediation by the state. Both, however, reject the 'transcendence' of some notion of the objective causality of structures that the postmodernist theorists propose. In the context of our story, the structures that we encounter are those of caste, class and gender - lack of education, concentration of land ownership and caste privilege - which frame the WPD as well as affect its conceptualization and implementation. While change is at the heart of the programme, challenging land ownership patterns was not supported by it. Neither did the programme conceptualize issues of women's health as related to women's autonomy over their bodies - only as 'family planning' in the context of the state's concern over a growing population. The shoring up of gendered hierarchies is evidenced by the letters that the BDO sent to the husbands of *sathins* who organized towards 'regularising' their status as state/civil servants. Caste structures were legitimized in the judgement of the court when circumstantial and victim evidence was set aside in favour of interpretations of caste purity. For *sathins*, such as Bhanwari Devi, these 'structures-in-dominance'²⁸ posed significant barriers to their work in the WPD. Challenging these barriers was dangerous and the support that they had from the state in doing so was minimal. While academics and women's groups were active consultants to the project, they were not involved in the implementation of the WPD and therefore not key players providing key material support to the *sathins*. The agency of the *sathins* was therefore limited by these structures of power.

What is unclear in this story is why the women who became *sathins* volunteered to be on this programme. Madhok outlines the process as that of appointment and not volunteering - of consultation between the village elders and prominent members, with the criteria that had little to do with their qualities of leadership but with their caste, religion, marital and class status. Even so, I wonder what 'internal conversations'²⁹ these women had before accepting this position. How did *they* conceptualize the WPD? The balancing of risk with the ambition to exercise agency in order to bring about change is, of course, not easy. Many different aspirations, motivations and concerns about risk bear on our decisions. Often the journey we start on turns out to be different from what we imagined - the risks greater than envisaged, rewards more complex. We can be surprised by the ferocity of opposition to small acts of resistance, but equally amazed by how individual acts of courage can create ripples of change. 'Knowing' the dangerous terrain upon which we tread can both embolden us and make us fear taking the first step. Further, taking the first step can also change us - make us part of a group of others taking their first steps, plumb the depths of our own courage and resistance, make us more aware of ourselves, our capabilities. Through this knowing we can be transformed from objects of mobilization to subjects and change makers.

In our story, what information were *sathins* given? Who did they consult before making their decision? Did they have a clear idea about the challenges that they would be facing? About the support that they would need

and who would provide it? Do we know what were the reflexive deliberations of these agents before making their decision to join the programme? In short, what sort of power mapping were these women able to do and how far did these maps help them in negotiating their ways through difficult social terrains? For example, once they identified the power of the landed class in their village as predominant, were they able to discuss how this power might be challenged with the support of state officials or women's groups and what costs might have to be met if they were to go it alone? We try and map power in our own contexts but this can only be a partial and interrupted exercise - especially if the information that we start with is minimal, flawed or not shared.

We also do not know about the deliberations of the other agents in this programme. The national and the local state fractions were initiators of this programme as were the women's groups who campaigned for gender equality. At the international level UNICEF provided financial support to the programme. What were their aspirations? Were there contradictions among their approaches and how, if at all, were these resolved? The *sathins* emerged as actors through the work of this alliance. So, one thing to consider when we are thinking of 'civic-driven change' is about the process of deliberation that goes into setting this up - what are the drivers for programmes, who are the key players/agents and what information do they need to consider before they can embark upon a journey that might lead through predictable or perilous political landscapes? What are the ethical issues involved here in terms of the role of the agencies that initiated and funded this programme? What 'political' dynamics were at play between the institutions and groups which allowed them to address some patriarchal hierarchies and not others?

For many, agency means being able to *exercise* freedom to make choices in their lives as opposed to being constrained by natural, physical or social structures.³⁰ What we can assume in our story of the WPD is that the *sathins* were not forced into participating in the WPD; they freely volunteered to join and therefore can be regarded as agents. But freedom itself is difficult to define because of the way in which we approach the interplay between structure and agency. For some it is rational choice which determines the exercise of agency - maximizing advantage and minimizing risk - while for others, rationality is itself framed by dominant social relations and is therefore open to question. What I am interested to explore here is not how structure is mediated by agency, but how to address the tension, in the words of Hannah Arendt, 'between our consciousness and conscience, telling us that we are free and hence responsible, and our everyday experience in the outer world, in which we orient ourselves according to the principle of causality'.³¹ The struggle between the outer and inner worlds defines our conceptualization as well as exercise of agency. Miscalculating the constraints and limits of either can be dangerous. Given the restrictions that poor, lower caste women like Bhanwari Devi lived and worked under, we can assume that their perception of

6 freedom was controlled or at least informed by these constraints. At the same time, given the role that Bhanwari Devi played in WDP as an agent for change, we can also assume that she sought to exercise some degree of freedom in her life/work. When she refused to leave her village and asked for justice, she was exercising her freedom - to refuse to be intimidated as well as to accuse those who violated her personhood. Extending the sphere of freedom for actors is then an important issue for us, and one which cannot be resolved without giving attention to the mediations between structure and agency or to the dominant social relations obtaining in the political space in which we seek to be agents.

Another issue for us is to reflect upon collective and individual agency. When *sathins* as a collective went on strike for their employment rights and insisted that they be paid for their work as government employees, they were acting as a collective. When Bhanwari Devi attempted to influence the decision of the upper-caste family not to marry off their young daughter, she was acting alone but presumably with a sense of support of the collective as represented by the WDP. How can collective agency and individual judgment be brought together to become a force for civic-driven change? While mobilization and organization have been analysed as means to collective action, there has been a recent renewed interest in deliberation as a key to understanding and improving public action.³² What we know about the WDP does not display characteristics of deliberation, though it does have components of training, organization and mobilization. The collective here is itself fractured, with different interests and powers represented in and through the programme. What might be useful to consider is how deliberative processes might be built into the initiation and development of initiatives of change. While deliberative politics has been criticized for not paying enough regard to the complexities of power, it can help us address some of the difficulties faced in collective action. Following Nancy Fraser, I argue that recognition of difference or disparity needs to be combined with a commitment to redistribution of resources for deliberation to be successful 'to empower representatives, to influence policy outcomes as well as change the nature of the debates themselves'.³³

What we find in the story of the WDP is the erosion of deliberative values as tensions within it crystallize. At the start of the programme, *sathins* met in the village squares to deliberate on issues of women's status and empowerment, and in so doing 'performed' deliberative politics.³⁴ The outcome of these deliberative practices created a rupture on how the public spaces in Rajasthan villages were used. When we think of agency, we often think of the local space as one that is most accessible to agents, of which the actors have most knowledge and in which they are most invested as they live in this space. The local space is also one where a community takes shape, is nurtured and sustained: 'The argument there is that the local is not only closer to the lives of people, it also allows for greater sensitivity to local ecology, it is more accountable, and more

participatory'.³⁵ However, local space is not *a priori* uncomplicated. As we have seen in the story of Bhanwari Devi, the levels of culturally validated oppressions, exclusions, violations and surveillance that women experience in villages can be extremely high. The intimacy of proximate spaces makes for intimate violence. So, when we are thinking of 'civic-driven change' we need to be aware of the politics of space. By occupying the village public space through the mechanisms of *jajam* (the blanket on which village people sit to deliberate) and *shivir* (a 'tent' under which meetings are held), *sathins* created a performative rupture that was dangerous to the local dominant social relations - challenging rather than adapting to these.

One of the issues discussed about deliberative politics is whether it is more successful when the agendas pursued are reformist rather than 'revolutionary'. This issue takes our attention to the concept of change itself. When we wish to change our social environment, what is it that we are imagining? Change is often used interchangeably with different concepts. Metamorphosis emphasizes a (biological) process of a conspicuous and relatively abrupt change in form or structure through growth and differentiation. Adaptation focuses on evolutionary or reformist change where individuals, groups and societies adapt to changes in order to maximize their chances of survival. Rupture involves disruption or a break with the past and can be therefore revolutionary. Change has been seen as a random series of events culminating in transformation of existing social relations, lacking determinism or teleology. Change is also described as being cyclical. One expects circumstances to recur. When we scrutinize the story of the WDP we realize that the actors involved might have been thinking of different forms of change, with different expectations and different modus operandi to bring it about. Finally, change can be incremental as well as inadvertent.

These differences, if not fully discussed, could result in the gaps that are revealed in the actions of those involved in the WDP over a period of time, with disastrous outcomes for Bhanwari Devi and disappointments for other *sathins*. It is not clear that Bhanwari Devi wanted to create a rupture in her village; in her interviews she is not challenging the caste system as a system but instead taking seriously the programmatic impulse on the issue of child marriage in her village. She sees herself exercising reformist agency, but for others, hers is a disruptive act. Perception of threat to the structures-in-dominance is enough for her actions to be seen as challenging accepted social relations and therefore as dangerous to the powerful in the village. The way in which these structures-in-dominance are employed needs to be assessed - first, her husband's masculinity is brought into question by suggesting that his wife is out of his control and needs to be better 'contained'. Second, she is told to leave the village for instigating police action to stop a child from being married and finally she is raped for refusing to do so. The village, imbued with caste and gender politics, becomes the arena of Bhanwari Devi's action as well as of the violence committed against her.

What we also find is a limited commitment in state fractions, a limited capacity in the women's movement and too much political distance between the programme and the donors for redistributive politics to be fully supported. The costs of pursuing an agenda for social change is then borne by the *sathins*, who are arguably the weakest of the several actors involved in this programme. However, change does happen in pursuit of emerging concerns by Vishakha and the intervention of the Supreme Court. Sexual harassment at the workplace was not an expected but an important outcome that followed from the unfolding and unravelling of the WPD.

Whether reformist or radical, adaptive or disruptive, change doesn't just happen - agency, as we have been arguing, is important to make change. But to say this is to say little - whose agency? Under what conditions? In which space? At what point in time? Gladwell³⁶ has made the argument that ideas can be 'contagious' in exactly the same way that a virus is. And when they reach what he calls a 'tipping point', they gain the strength of an epidemic - in fashion, in taste, in policies. The tipping point then is the moment when the accumulating evidence and argument results in its acceptance by those who make policy - it is the point when the virus of ideas reaches critical mass. This, of course, is not a new idea. Change happens when the accumulated evidence and pressure for change becomes undeniable; when contradictions within societies become too fraught to be managed through internal reform, we have a 'revolution' - of social relations, in ideas and norms - which fills the power vacuum that is symbolic of the incapacity of the state to resolve conflict.³⁷

But, change doesn't just happen, tipping points are not reached without the exercise of agency. It is through the conflicts of interests, through development of consciousness and through taking advantage of the strains within political systems - external as well as internal - that substantive or systemic change occurs. But this suggests a rather linear understanding of change. What we find in the story of Bhanwari Devi is that change can happen and not happen - some rupture takes place, and some adaptive messages get through, while at the same time a reaction against attempted change also plays out. Where change happened is in the very inception of the WDP - the weight of the Indian and international feminist movements which put pressure on states to address gender inequalities. The ambition of the Indian state is to present itself as a modern, forward-looking and just state in the international arena, which leads it to sign the CEDAW, which is then used by the Supreme Court to initiate change in India's employment law through its guidelines, which in turn pressures the state to pass legislation. So, the change that was accomplished was different from the change that was intended. Change, therefore, happens in haphazard ways, in fits and starts, for the better and for the worse. This more complicated approach to change is important because actors involved in making change are not homogenous.

The story of Bhanwari Devi is evidence of such differences. The study of political agency harnessed to change

raises issues about historiography. Who do we historically think of as agents of change? Together with being state-centric, much of the historical literature also values political elites - great men (sometime, though rarely, exceptional women) who stride across our worlds, changing it, protecting it and in so doing shaping it for us and future generations. The challenge to this approach to historical and political agency has come from many quarters, including that of a group of Indian historians who developed a different approach to the study of change - that which focused on 'the subaltern'.³⁸ By examining the stories of the marginalised, through their struggles that were not accounted for the histories of dominant elites, the subaltern studies school makes an important contribution in 'establishing the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories'.³⁹ However, while such a perspective allows us insights into the subject position of the subaltern in the moment of defiance of the dominant power relations, it also often imbues the subject with qualities that sit ill at ease with his/her marginality. There remains an unanswerable tension in the dialectic of empowered and disempowered subject which subaltern studies tries to answer by privileging agency at the same moment as it reminds us of the structural marginality of the subject. There is some concern that the pain experienced by Bhanwari Devi has been forgotten in the next stage of the struggle. The Vishaka case moved the limelight away from her, even as progress was made in the successful appeal to the Supreme Court that women employees need protection as they are increasingly recruited into the labour force as India's economy takes off. But the individual agent is left behind, to cope with penury, disgrace and continued risk of violence. So, what responsibility have those who mobilized subaltern women like Bhanwari Devi to work in WDP towards these agents of change? When we think of change and those who affect change, we need to be aware of the consequences of this work for individuals as well as for the collective.

While exploring issues of structure and agency above, I have neglected to focus on one key element of the CDC initiative - the concept of the 'civic-driven'. There are two levels of analysis - 'civic' and 'civic-driven'. One where we see a normative participation of citizens and/or a civic space; the other where the initiative and control of the initiative rests with citizens. Whatever level of analysis we focus on, in the emphasis on the 'civic' one is presumably signalling a shift from state-centric processes of change to those conceived, initiated and pursued by citizens of countries. However, the WDP was not entirely a civic-driven programme - the state, international organizations as well as civic groups and individual citizens were involved in this programme. What we might find is that in poor countries, with limited resources, this alliance of actors is an oft observed pattern.

Among women's groups in India, unlike in the West, the state has always occupied an ambivalent political space; on the one hand acting as an institution that medi-

ates to consolidate and stabilize social privilege, on the other as an institution that can be lobbied and even seen as an ally against some forms of dominant social relations. The borders of activism can then be seen to be related to borders of states, even though we challenge the primacy of the state to effect change. However, in the context of globalization, we might also be signalling the global reach of these imaginings of change and their pursuit through global networking or movements. Indeed, the cosmopolitans among us might want to sign a common global ethic, which would frame these endeavours towards change. In the context of India, Chatterjee argues, however, that by focusing on challenging and changing state norms, we also create new modalities of politics for exercising our agency beyond its borders.⁴⁰

Finally, we are also opening up the question of civic action in the context of legality. When acts based on the desire for progressive change challenge legal boundaries policed by the state, do they become illegal (for example, the Gandhian satyagrah or civil disobedience movements), or do such acts open up spaces to address the question of what is legal? Whom does law serve?⁴¹ In the case of the WDP, we notice the borders of activism changing - from the national/international to the local/national and again to the national/international. As the saga of Bhanwari Devi unfolds in the local space of the village, the courts of Rajasthan and then the Supreme Court judgment make her a *cause celebre*, with ripples taking the message of these struggles beyond national borders. The unexpected turns that change-driven struggles can take are important to note, as are their limits.

Thus, through the study of the WDP I have learnt much about individual commitment to change, the importance of alliance building among different actors and the power of ideas to challenge social relations. At the same time, I have also learnt caution. We need to approach programmes for change so that those who step forward to take on the burdens of activism do so with the information, knowledge and support that is appropriate to the task. As a principle, they must be equipped to mediate and negotiate most effectively within the difficult and dangerous political landscape upon which they choose - and are enjoined by others - to tread.

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Notes

¹ Ruth Lister (1997) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

² See Uma Chakravarti (2006) 'Rhetoric and Substance of Empowerment: Women, Development and the State', in Mary E. John, Praveen Kumar Jha and S.S. Jodhka (eds) *Contested Transformations: Changing Economies and Identities in Contemporary India*. Delhi: Tulika Books; Shirin M. Rai (2002) *Gender and the Political Economy of Development*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Sumi Madhok (2003) 'Autonomy, Subordination and the Social Woman: Examining rights narratives of rural Rajasthan Women', University of London.

³ Raunaq Jahan (1995) *The elusive agenda: mainstreaming women in development*. London: Zed Books.

⁴ Chakravarti (2006: 3-4).

⁵ Ibid.: 3

⁶ Molyneux (1998: 5).

⁷ Chakravarti (2006: 8).

⁸ Chakravarti (2006: 11).

⁹ <http://www.hrsolidarity.net/mainfile.php/1994vol01no01/1935/>; accessed 26 March 2008

¹⁰ Chakravarti (2006: 16).

¹¹ <http://www.hrsolidarity.net/mainfile.php/1994vol01no01/1935/>; accessed 26 March 2008

¹² The Hindu, Online edition, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/03/04/stories/13040611.htm>; accessed 26 March 2008

¹³ 'Four women India forgot', *Times of India*, Online edition, 7 May 2006, 0242 hrs IST, Saira Kurup; <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1519056.cms>; accessed 26 March 2008

¹⁴ The Court held that 'if the Indian Government makes such commitments in international fora it shall be binding on the Government even within the nation and it will be treated as part of the national law unless there is a law within the country which is in direct conflict with such a law' (ibid.).

¹⁵ Vibhuti Patel 'A brief history of the battle against sexual harassment at the workplace' <http://www.infochangeindia.org/analysis100.jsp>; accessed 26 March 2008

¹⁶ Mihir Desai (2003) *Combat Law*, special issue on violence against women, September-October.

¹⁷ As defined in the Supreme Court guidelines (Vishakha vs State of Rajasthan, August 1997), sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as:

- Physical contact
- A demand or request for sexual favours
- Sexually coloured remarks
- Showing pornography
- Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature, for example, leering, telling dirty jokes, making sexual remarks about a person's body, etc

¹⁸ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1519056.cms>

¹⁹ Chakravarti (2006: 18).

²⁰ Jane Parpart, Shirin M. Rai and Kathleen Staudt (2003) *Rethinking Empowerment in a Global/Local World*. London: Routledge.

²¹ Shirin M. Rai (2008) *Gender Politics of Development*, Chapter 5. London: Zed Books.

²² International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Development Association and International Finance Corporation *Country strategy For India*, September 15, 2004: 5; http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/09/20/000160016_20040920102445/Rendered/PDF/293740REV.pdf; accessed 29 March 2008.

²³ http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_IND.html; accessed 31 March 2008

²⁴ Ibid. Selected MGD Indicators for India's States, Annex 6

²⁵<http://www.undp.org.in/media/HDRC/shdr/Rajasthan/Rajasthan.pdf> ; accessed 31 March 2008

²⁶ Chatterjee (1989: 243).

²⁷ Uma Chakravarty (2006) 'Rhetoric and Substance of Empowerment: Women, Development and the State', in Mary E. John, Praveen Kumar Jha and S.S. Jodhka (eds) *Contested Transformations: Changing Economies and Identities in Contemporary India*, p. 2. Delhi: Tulika Books.

²⁸ Upendra Baxi (2006) *The Future of Human Rights*, 2nd ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Margaret Archer (2003) *Structure, agency, and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Amartya Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³¹ Hannah Arendt (1968) *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. London: Penguin Books, p. 143.

³² Shirin M. Rai (2007) 'Deliberative Democracy and the Politics of Redistribution: The Case of the Indian *Panchayats*', *Hypatia*, 22(4): 64-80.

³³ Ibid.: 77.

³⁴ Sumi Madhok (2003) *Autonomy, Subordination and the Social Woman: Examining rights narratives of rural Rajasthani Women*. London: University of London.

³⁵ Rai (2002).

³⁶ Malcolm Gladwell (2000) *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Little Brown and Company.

³⁷ Thea Skocpol (1979) *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁸ Ranajit Guha (1997) *A Subaltern studies reader, 1986-1995*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³⁹ Das (1989: 312).

⁴⁰ Partha Chatterjee (1998) Beyond the Nation? Or within? *Social Text*, 56: 57-69.

⁴¹ For an interesting discussion of this issue and the role that the media plays in making certain state violence acceptable (even desirable) to dominant groups of citizens see, James Holston (2007) 'Citizenship in Disjunctive Democracies' in Joseph S. Tulchin and Meg Ruthenberg (eds) *Citizenship in Latin America*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.