The Group Called Women in Himachal Pradesh

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Women's power (shakti) is very great. Let alone the DC (district commissioner), when women get together they can shake even the prime minister.

(mahila mandal member, speaking at annual Himachal Pradesh women's gathering, 1993).

Woman's ultimate duty is to keep her husband happy. Whether by singing or dancing or cooking good food she should make him happy.

(high school principal, speaking at sub-district level gathering for mahila mandal members, 1993).

**Introduction**

These two statements from different gatherings of mahila mandal (village women's organization) members display striking contrast: the first is a celebration of women's power and an embrace of women's collective action; the second is a conservative plea to keep women's attention focused not on social change but on the husband in the home. However, underlying these divergent statements is the shared assertion that it is meaningful to address diverse village women's organization members as generic "women" or "woman." In this article I challenge the rather common assumption (among many development workers, researchers, funding agencies, and local officials alike) that there is some pre-existing and meaningful coherence to the "group called women" in Himachal Pradesh that can be easily harnessed for projects of social and/or environmental transformation. Below I elucidate differences among mahila mandal members that preclude a naturally occurring sense of solidarity, and I also analyze contexts within which diversely positioned Himachali women produce a collective identity across differences and engage in collective action. I discuss several mahila mandal events, from hamlet-level meetings to an annual statewide gathering of mahila mandal members. I explore how the dynamics of social interaction within these different arenas lead to radically divergent outcomes: from the production of contestatory discourses of womanhood to the conservation of dominant discourses, and from the production of a collective identity specifically as women to the reproduction of hierarchical differences among mahila mandal members. This article is both a cautionary and optimistic account of the group called women, for while I argue that the category women dissolves into a sea of differences within everyday hamlet routines, and while I caution against the assumption that the invocation of the category women will necessarily result in progressive outcomes, I also examine dynamic contexts in which members of village women's organizations produced a collective identity and contested restrictive gendered norms and meanings.

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1 I owe this phrase to Cassell (1977).

2 My use of the concepts of space and arena follows contemporary theories of geography in which space is seen as a dynamic context of social interaction. Space is thus not determining structure or static backdrop, rather spaces are the dynamic interactions of persons with embedded histories of practices, discourses, and understandings and imaginings of place. See Moore 1986 (esp. pp. 1-7) and Massey 1993.

3 This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted in 1992-1993. I lived in multiple hamlets in Kangra District, although I focused my field research in the hamlet of Chalah, home of Godan Devi, a dynamic grassroots woman leader. During the course of fieldwork I participated in and observed hamlet and multi-hamlet mahila mandal meetings in the Changan; staff meetings and training programs of a local and state level NGO; district and state government women and development meetings; and the North Indian Women's Liberation Conference in Kanpur, UP. As a U.S. citizen of European descent pursuing Ph.D. research, my primary research relationships cannot be glossed as a woman talking to other women. Hierarchical differences of nationality, class, and education, along with my lack of caste identity and my outsider status to Hinduism shaped my interactions with people throughout my research. My research was also shaped by my personality and by my knowledge of urban Hindi, but not of the local dialect (which I finally learned to understand but never learned to speak fluently). I relied upon the assistance of two women, Sarla Korla and Veena Dogra, for the work of transcribing and translating tapes from mahila mandal meetings and events.
Local Level Mahila Mandal Events

Mahila mandals are found within many of the small hamlets that dot the Shivalik Hills of District Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. These mahila mandals were formed in the early 1990s by motivated rural women with the support and encouragement of a local non-governmental organization named ERA (Society for Environmental and Rural Awakening) and the state-wide organization SUTRA (Social Uplift Through Rural Action). Most hamlets within these hills are quite homogenous; they are entirely Hindu and generally comprised of a single caste, if not a single clan (khandan). The members of these mahila mandals appear to be united by shared gender identity as well as by shared needs and routines of work. The lack of reliable roads to these highly erosive hills and the resulting lack of jobs, services, and all but the smallest markets, creates a context of shared difficulties among those who live in this locally-described “backward” (picchre) region. The vast majority of able-bodied men migrate out to find paid employment, often returning only a few times a year. Numerous households are de facto female headed, with many of the women engaged in subsistence cultivation of corn and wheat on unirrigated plots of land while raising children and managing households. Class divisions are minimal compared to the Kangra valley some forty kilometers to the north. There are a few professional households in the Shivalik hills of Kangra district that forego farming altogether or lease out any land they may own, and there are some poor and generally dalit households in which women and men try to piece together a living as laborers or through their crafts of pottery or basket making. However, for the vast majority of women in this dry hilly region of Kangra known as the Changar, the work of subsistence farming on their own and/or on other’s land, along with the difficulties which arise from male outmigration and distance from substantial health care facilities and markets, provides a context of significant commonality. Yet during my research in 1992-93 and return visits in 1997 and 2000, it was strikingly apparent that within single-hamlet mahila mandal meetings commonality was rarely expressed and displayed. For while membership was based on common gender identity, it was not as “women” united by gender that members interacted to discuss their needs and find ways to meet them. Rather, differences of at least kinship and age, and often clan, caste, and/or education, were reproduced verbally and spatially within these meetings for the group called women.

In hamlet mahila mandal meetings older members sat in privileged spots and dominated conversations. Daughters of the village moved freely in and out of the meeting, talking among themselves and interjecting points when the topic interested them. Those new daughters-in-law who attended mahila mandal meetings (by far the exception) touched the feet of their elders as they entered the meeting and sat quietly on the floor, listening to the talk. Older, well-established daughters-in-law negotiated for positions of authority and competed with elders to take the floor.

The predominance of kin relations within hamlet mahila mandal meetings is not surprising given the ongoing practices of positioning self and other in relation to kinship at the hamlet level. These practices informed such diverse events as routines of work, the development of friendships and alliances, gesture, dress, adornment, and relative freedom of movement. Able-bodied mothers-in-law have significant authority over their unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law residing within the household, as do elder sisters-in-law over their younger sisters-in-law. This authority can be used to delegate work responsibilities on the farm and in the household, set times and duration of visits to a woman’s natal home, and dictate ways to raise children. Age and kinship also serve as the basis for friendships and informal arrangements of shared labor for farm and household work. Through the practices of daily life, kin positions were thus imbued with significant force and salience. The importance of kin positions, which placed mahila mandal members in hierarchical relationship to each other in daily life, did not recede simply because they were meeting in a space defined for women (mahilaen). The subject position woman—as opposed specifically to man—is simply one of numerous and contradictory subject positions that mahila mandal members occupy.

In addition, positions of caste, class, religion, and gen-

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4 The pain of leaving one’s natal home, shared by almost all women in the area, and the pain that may emerge from marriage, also provide an underlying commonality linking diversely positioned women’s lives. Narayan (1998) discusses a local genre of sorrowful women’s folksongs called Pakhara that helps women to cope with suffering. She suggests that groups of women singing these songs of sorrow may generate a temporary feeling of solidarity.

5 I use the term subject position to point to the differential social constitution of subjects as a result of occupying discursively produced and hierarchically related positions in life. This concept highlights the ways that needs, interests, and desires are shaped and/or produced (see especially the work of Smith 1988, Hennessy 1993, and Moore 1994). For example, being positioned as a daughter in a household, rather than a son, not only entails socially constructed bundles of expectations that accord certain rights and statuses and demands certain responsibilities, but also these expectations, rights, statuses, and responsibilities affect complex intra-subjective processes of the production of desires, fears, and interests. The expectation that daughters within the Changar will leave their natal homes and marry into a household of strangers while sons are expected to remain with their parents and inherit from them, will elicit fears, desires, and interests in daughters that their brothers will not share. Because the subject position of daughter is also constituted at the intersection of other
nder at times became central in mahila mandai meetings, often involving the reassertion of hierarchies, but also providing the context for their contestation. One mahila mandai in the area was divided by caste and class, with elite high caste women in the meeting excluding dalit women and dominating the agenda. In another case, two neighboring hamlets—one high-caste Brahmin, the other dalit, Chamar—had been registered by the government women and development officer as one mahila mandai. The Brahmin women proceeded to kick the Chamar women out of the mandai. In this case, the Chamar women vowed to Godan Devi, the SUTRA-trained sathyogini (grassroots mahila mandai coordinator), to fight to register their names as a separate mahila mandai. If the government would not assist them in this enterprise, they insisted that they would convene with the Brahmin women and ensure that they would all sit and “eat food from one pot.” In several hamlet mahila mandai meetings, women echoed BJP anti-Muslim rhetoric, thereby positioning themselves as Hindus and reasserting the dominant relations between Hindus and Muslims. And perhaps most contradictory of all was a meeting in which an elder man from the hamlet imposed himself on the mahila mandai meeting and spoke at length about the work he thought the mahila mandai should undertake. The majority of women in the room were junior to him, and only Godan Devi vied with him for the opportunity to speak about the work of the mahila mandai. However, when he shifted the conversation to the impurity of Chamar women, many women eagerly joined the conversation, even interrupting this senior man in the hamlet to make their points. In this meeting the shift from gender and kin hierarchy to a sense of comrade never and the embrace of caste hierarchy. In all of these cases, the arena of the mahila mandai, designated for the group called women, was transformed into an arena for the reassertion (and in one case the contestation) of class, caste, religious, and/or gender hierarchies.

On other occasions within mahila mandai meetings, differences among members became muted when the talk turned to larger events in which women acted collectively for commonly defined needs (such as discussion of collective action for a school, bridge, or road, or news from the national women’s movement brought in by Godan Devi from SUTRA meetings). As members discussed the politics of the controversial contraceptive Norplant or opposition they faced from men in the community for working together on community development projects, they positioned themselves and other members specifically as women. Yet even in these discussions of women’s collective action, hierarchical differences among mahila mandai members continued to shape who could speak, for how long, and with what force of persuasion.

Diversely positioned mahila mandai members did, however, produce a collective identity specifically as women in some contexts, despite the differences that routinely divided them in daily life practices. Groups of hamlet mahila mandals at times joined together across differences of caste, class, kinship, and residence to collectively protest lack of government goods and services, such as water and schools, or to work together on local projects, such as building paths and bridges. During protests, mahila mandal members positioned themselves specifically as women making demands of the government, and they were represented by government officials, news media, and NGO leaders and workers as women working collectively for a common goal.

When mahila mandai members transgressed gendered boundaries—by marching or working collectively outside of hamlets without their male relatives—they faced confrontation and ridicule by some local men. In one example, members of several mahila mandals from the Changar, with the help of ERA and SUTRA, worked together to raise government and local funds to build a metal foot bridge across the river which separates the Changar from the roads to the rest of the district. The members of these mahila mandals were cross-cut by caste, class, kinship, age, and education. Yet they organized across these hierarchical differences, raised the funds, and arranged for the bridge to be built and delivered. Sixty-five women carried the iron

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6 By gendered boundaries, I mean that convergence of everyday norms related to “women’s” honor and work that limits women’s movement beyond (and in some cases within) hamlet boundaries. In the Changar, as in many areas within northern India, these norms stipulate that women should not work outside of hamlet boundaries except for those caste/class-based work relations within others’ homes or fields (midwives, tenant farmers, farmworkers) or for paid employment in a business, government, or non-governmental organization. Women should not travel alone between hamlets or to towns, not even for work purposes. Women should not travel alone to markets. Women should not visit offices (whether government or private) without the company of men. These boundaries are gendered, for they apply to some degree to all diversely positioned women, but not to men, and they apply differently to differently positioned women—in some cases, despite that movement of new daughters-in-law is most severely restricted, while daughters have more freedom. The consequences for transgressing gendered boundaries can be severe, for a woman’s reputation can be sullied simply by being in contexts, such as walking alone on a path, where “misdeeds” are believed to be possible.
bridge, weighing approximately one ton, three-quarters of a kilometer to the riverbed where it was installed with the help of a carpenter. The transgression of gendered boundaries that this collective action entailed did not remain unnoticed. One mahila mandal member who participated in the event narrated the following interchange at a Changar mahila mandal mela (celebratory gathering of mahila mandals): "When the women were returning home from installing the bridge, they heard some men saying, 'If somebody dies then the women will carry the corpse to the funeral pyre.' To this one woman replied, 'If we can lift such a heavy bridge, four women can easily lift a corpse. Then you men can sit at home, put on bangles and skirts and cry.'"

This interchange about men’s and women’s ritual responsibilities—central to defining and upholding a posited gender difference—invoked a rhetorical inversion of gender roles. Men suggested that women could now do the men’s work of carrying the body to the funeral pyre. And women responded to this taunt with a completion of the inversion by asserting that the men could take over women’s ritual role of wearing the old style skirts, putting on bangles—one of the quintessential symbols of Indian womanhood—and wailing for the deceased.

As men ridiculed mahila mandal members for their work in public spaces, both members and their opponents positioned themselves specifically as women and men, engaging in contestatory discourses which at times inverted gender hierarchies and meanings. It is significant that in these verbal contests mahila mandal members maintained the oppositional man/woman positioning, rather than addressing the men as brothers and thereby avoiding or diffusing confrontation. When positioning themselves as women (in protests and demonstrations and in response to opposition from men of their communities) despite the differences that divided them, mahila mandal members drew upon the feminist discourse communicated and crafted in training programs, meetings, and melas at SUTRA.

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7 In addition to taunts and ridicule, some mahila mandal members faced slander from men of their community and occasionally physical abuse from their male relatives for their participation in collective action. There were some forms of collective action, however, which men of the community supported and encouraged, such as working collectively to repair and clean the hamlet spring. This type of collective action, as it occurred within hamlet boundaries, did not entail the crossing of gendered boundaries. Often men and women of the hamlet worked together on such projects.

8 Women commonly employed the strategy of calling an unrelated man brother (bhai) to protect themselves against harassment, to diffuse potentially violent encounters, and for a variety of other purposes.

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SUTRA: Spaces of Contestation

Social Uplift Through Rural Action (SUTRA), located in Solan District, Himachal Pradesh, and founded and directed by (Mr.) Subhash Mendhapurkar, originally served as a mainstream development organization that sought to distribute various development goods and services. SUTRA began working primarily with women not out of conscious design, but rather in response to rural women’s initiatives. Local women demanded access to development goods and services, and they began raising issues of alcoholism and wife abuse, thereby initiating SUTRA into the field of gendered protests. SUTRA then worked with Indian women activists and feminists, as well as a British feminist who lived and worked at SUTRA for a year, to develop a training program for women leaders informed by a hybrid feminist philosophy.

Grassroots women leaders from around the state attend ten-day training programs and participate in bimonthly meetings and events at the SUTRA campus. SUTRA also hosts an annual mela or festive gathering for mahila mandal members across the state of Himachal Pradesh. Typically, three hundred to five hundred women attend this three-day festival of speeches, songs, dance, role plays, and strategy meetings. During the trainings, meetings, and melas I attended in 1992-1993, mahila mandal members were introduced to and/or helped to craft a hybrid feminist discourse. Differences of caste, class, and ethnicity were ignored in lectures and speeches, and rules of separation were disregarded in the organization of events. Mahila mandal members sat beside each other, ate and danced together, slept side by side, held hands in role plays and celebration without knowing their neighbors’ caste identity.

The feminist discourse which members of SUTRA have created centers around the concept of shakti, or feminine spiritual power. According to this discourse, the source of women’s shakti lies in their reproductive capacity. Menstruation, commonly represented as a shameful bodily function, is reclaimed as the source of women’s power. In the ten-day training program, SUTRA staff members showed slides of pre-Aryan goddesses, resplendent in their naked and fertile bodies. Rural women leaders were trained to think critically about society, to identify restrictions on women’s lives, and to fight for equal rights and equal responsibilities for men and women in the home and society. Women’s honor (izzat), so closely associated with mod-
esty, embarrassment, and shame (sharam) in hamlet contexts, was also radically redeployed. At SUTRA, honor was re-presented as control over one’s body and life. Women were encouraged to fight for their and other women’s honor by fighting all atrocities against women and restrictions upon women. According to SUTRA’s feminist discourse, fighting rather than modesty is the quality necessary for having honor as a woman. The staff and director of SUTRA have blended interpretations of Himachali women’s lives and struggles with Indian and international feminisms to produce a discourse of womanhood based on strength, solidarity, and collective struggle to ameliorate gender oppression.

Through engagement with this feminist discourse and through role plays, dancing, singing, eating and sleeping together, diverse mahila mandal members produced a collective identity as they positioned themselves and others specifically as women, downplaying the differences among them. To elucidate this process, I draw upon Stuart Hall’s definition of collective identity. Hall invokes the creative practice of such identity formation as well as the inherently political nature of such a project. He defines collective identity (in his case the formation of oppositional ethnic identity of Blackness in England) as “an imaginary political re-identification” (Hall 1991: 52-53). By calling attention to the imaginary and political character of this identity, I refer to processes by which members of mahila mandals re-identify as women, rather than as friends, neighbors, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, Rajputs, Chamaras, etc. This re-identification as “women” is imbued with a specific and contestatory meaning as mahila mandal members engage with SUTRA’s feminist discourse of womanhood. Collective identity was thus produced at SUTRA when mahila mandal members represent diverse experiences, issues, and problems specifically as women’s experiences, issues, and problems and act collectively to ameliorate those problems.

At SUTRA events mahila mandal members represented difficulties and issues as common and shared in speeches, and members simultaneously produced and celebrated their unity through dance, song, and ribald improvisational plays. During the 1992 SUTRA mela, over 50 mahila mandal members gave speeches about their difficulties and successes. Many of the speakers expressed empathy for other women’s sorrows and vowed to support them in their struggles. The atmosphere of unity compelled some speakers to transform empathy into identification. In response to a sorrow-filled speech by a woman from a neighboring district, Draupadi Devi, the pradhan (president) of Sarva Shakti Sangham (the seven-member umbrella council of all SUTRA-organized mahila mandals), said, “When there are atrocities on any sister or on any daughter, then we do not understand it as having been committed on anyone else; we understand it as if it has been committed upon ourselves. And we take on the case and fight it and are ready to fight.”

Narratives of women’s strength provided an affective base for collective identity formation and collective action. Themes of women’s strength and power emerged in time and again in speeches and songs composed by mahila mandal members, compelling women to struggle and celebrate together. Jindro Devi, a mahila mandal pradhan (leader), said, “How many women are sitting here? There is so much taakat (strength) from a mela. And the world will see what is women’s taakat and what they can do.” The refrain to one song is jai mahila shakti (hail woman power), and mahila mandal members dance joyfully to such songs of unity and celebration. Some women discarded their gauzy scarves and danced with their hair swinging freely around their shoulders, rules of modesty ignored in the celebration of women’s strength.

When mahila mandal members narrated their stories of contestation at SUTRA events as well as in hamlet contexts, they represented themselves as strong, first for accomplishing physically taxing projects, and second for talking back in the face of taunts, ridicule, and slander. There is a dialectical relationship between representations of women’s strength and power at SUTRA and local instances of collective action: mahila mandal members’ stories of collective action and contestation provided affective force for the representation of women as strong, and the concepts of shakti and taakat provided meaningful basis for organizing collectively as women.

However, the production of a collective identity—so forcefully communicated in the celebratory songs of women’s taakat and shakti at SUTRA melas—is contextual and relational, emerging as a primary identity for constructing meaning and action in certain spaces and reced-

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10 It is important to note that issues of caste oppression implicit in some dalit women’s speeches about their struggles were not explicitly addressed by other speakers. General support for their struggle and empathy for their sorrows were voiced, however explicit discussion of caste oppression and strategies for alleviating this oppression were not discussed.

"Stuart Hall (1991) discusses the moment within the formation of contestatory collective identities in which there is an effort to ground identities in stories of homelands, origins, and the past. Although Hall is discussing ethnicity and new and contestatory ethnic identities, this insight is useful for an understanding of the significance of narratives of strength within the formation of collective identity at SUTRA. At SUTRA, the place of grounding is not an imagined homeland, but a reclaimed body where menstruation is the source of women’s strength and power. Pre-Aryan goddesses are interpreted as symbols of a time and place where women’s bodies (including processes of menstruation) and women’s power to give birth were worshipped. Like stories of imagined homelands, the stories of women’s strength and power enable the formation of affective solidarity across differences that otherwise might be divisive."
ing to a distant background in other spaces. At the SUTRA campus differences among women of caste, class, age, education, and kin position were downplayed, while commonality of gender was highlighted. When mahila mandal members returned to their hamlets, they also returned to arenas in which differences among women structured relations of work and leisure. As these differences among women were foregrounded, a sense of solidarity specifically as women, so vividly produced at SUTRA, receded to the background. Yet within moments of gendered contestation in Changar hamlets, mahila mandal members could draw upon the feminist discourse espoused at SUTRA and the affective force of collectivity from these events to produce a collective identity as women—foregrounding a common position of gender while pushing differences of caste, class, and kin position to the background.

ERA Mela: Spaces of Conservatism

At SUTRA and in some hamlet contexts, diverse mahila mandal members produced a collective identity and contested dominant norms of gendered relations. However, such contestation is not a necessary outcome when women are gathered together. Assembly of the group called women may also be used to conserve dominant relations of gender—as can be seen in some of the events organized by ERA for mahila mandal members.

ERA grew out of a youth club, founded in 1987, by a male Ayurvedic doctor, Arun Chandan, and Ashok Jamwal of Duhok hamlet. Stemming from a desire to bring goods and services to a region of Kangra that has been widely neglected by government development plans, they decided to form a small non-governmental organization to alleviate the region’s problems. ERA’s early work with mahila mandals was deeply influenced and financially supported by SUTRA. Changar grass-roots women leaders were trained at SUTRA, and their monthly stipends were paid through SUTRA’s funds until mid-1993. Although the members of ERA often did encourage and support local instances of collective action, they did not articulate a specifically feminist discourse of womanhood. Many ERA staff members (both male and female) had not attended SUTRA’s training program, were critical of the feminist discourse espoused there, and/or had little experience in thinking critically about gendered relations. As a result, when ERA staff members organized events for mahila mandal members, they did not espouse a discourse that could lend salience to form a small non-governmental organization to alleviate the region’s problems. ERA’s early work with mahila mandals was deeply influenced and financially supported by SUTRA. Changar grass-roots women leaders were trained at SUTRA, and their monthly stipends were paid through SUTRA’s funds until mid-1993. Although the members of ERA often did encourage and support local instances of collective action, they did not articulate a specifically feminist discourse of womanhood. Many ERA staff members (both male and female) had not attended SUTRA’s training program, were critical of the feminist discourse espoused there, and/or had little experience in thinking critically about gendered relations. As a result, when ERA staff members organized events for mahila mandal members, they did not espouse a discourse that could lend salience and force to the positioning of members specifically as women, or which could encourage and support instances of gendered contestation.

In one example in 1993, ERA staff members organized a mela in the village of Bhatu for the fifteen mahila mandals located in the vicinity. These were new mahila mandals, and none of the members had traveled to SUTRA, nor had they engaged in collective action that transgressed gendered boundaries. (By the time the Bhatu mela was held, Dr. Arun Chandan, the director of ERA, had completely distanced his organization from SUTRA and had openly rejected SUTRA’s feminist philosophy.) The mela was held beneath a massive pipal tree in the school yard, and the raised area around the trunk was transformed into the speakers’ platform. ERA staff members placed rows of chairs to one side of the stage for elder male leaders and invited guest speakers, and they spread rugs on the ground for mahila mandal members and children. Approximately 100 village women’s organization members, young and old alike, from fifteen neighboring mahila mandals all sat below on the rugs. Young men huddled around the rented sound system, others spilled out onto the east-side of the platform, and a few sat on the rugs’ edges. The gathering was multi-caste: high caste Brahmin and Rajput women, mid-caste Dhiman women, and low-caste Chamar women were present.

Differences among members of this multi-hamlet gathering were vividly displayed under the shade of the pipal tree. Men were positioned above the women on the ground. Younger women touched the feet of their elder relatives as they entered. Married members draped their scarves (chunni) over their faces or seated themselves so their eyes were averted from their husbands’ male kin seated on the sidelines. Women sat in clusters with their friends and relatives from their hamlet, and although the groups’ boundaries blended together on the rugs, there was little interaction among women of different hamlets. Caste separation, maintained through these distinct groupings, was also subtly expressed during the two collective mid-day meals: although everyone was fed in one seating on the school building’s verandah, informal caste segregation determined who sat next to whom, and the most vital aspect of purity for high caste mahila mandal members, the food and water, was maintained through the presence of Brahmin cooks and servers.

Local development officials and other local elites dominated the hours of speeches during the two-day event. Most of the speeches stressed collective work for the good of the community and the necessity of maintaining peace and happiness in the home. The most explicit of the speakers was the highly regarded local high school principal. He attempted to circumscribe the reach of women’s collective action by saying:

Women of Naari Sammelan [woman’s mela] listen. In this case nobody is going to help you. If something goes wrong between you two [husband and wife], nobody from outside will come to solve your problem…. Woman’s ultimate duty is to keep her husband happy. (Naari kaa param-kartavya apne pati ko khush karne se he). Whether by singing or dancing or cooking good food, she should make him happy. Meaning if the husband is happy
then God (*Parmaatmaa*) is happy. If a woman’s husband is angry, then for her, God is angry. I am not saying anything wrong. This is the reality (*basttavikataa*).”

Older mahila mandai members sitting on the rugs below greeted this pronouncement with laughter, contesting his most learned assertions of a purportedly incontestable reality. Their indirect comment was the only response to this conservative discourse of womanhood.12

A few mahila mandai members were invited to speak from more distant hamlets. One of the speakers, Sapna Devi, related the story of building the bridge and the talk and back talk of the ensuing contestation. However, Sapna Devi’s five minute speech, which emphasized women’s strength and the contestation of gendered boundaries, and which was informed by SUTRA’s feminist discourse, was subsumed within hours of speeches encouraging mahila mandai members to maintain “appropriate” womanly behavior. As most speakers emphasized allegiance to husband and family, rather than to other women, they limited the force of Sapna Devi’s story. In contrast, at SUTRA events such stories of gendered contestation imbued contestatory discourses of womanhood with affective force, and they became symbols of women’s solidarity. At the Bhatu *mela*, however, the story of the bridge merely stood in ironic juxtaposition to the speeches conserving gender hierarchies and roles.

At this *mela* there was no attempt to create an arena in which hierarchies among women and between women and men could be contested and in which a collective identity as women could be produced. Partly this was due to locale. The director and staff of SUTRA have created a campus in which everyday hamlet relations are suspended and a new form of social organization exists centered around commonality as women. In contrast, the Bhatu *mela* was held in the center of a hamlet with its histories of dominant relations of gender, caste and kinship giving form not only to daily life activities but also the *mela* itself. These hierarchical relations were maintained at the *mela* by caste separation, by inviting male elders and providing them with privileged seats above the women on the ground, and by displays of kin position through veiling and greeting. There was no celebratory singing or dancing at the ERA *mela*—rules of modesty were kept intact as boundaries of gender, caste, and kinship were maintained.

While the locale of the Bhatu *mela* significantly shaped the event, locale alone does not determine the possibilities for producing a collective identity. Six months prior to the Bhatu *mela* (when SUTRA was still funding and training ERA’s grassroots women leaders) a similar gathering was held by ERA in the hamlet of Duhok. The Duhok *mela*, like the Bhatu *mela*, was held in a hamlet with kin and caste identities known. In both *melas*, elder respected men of the community sat on the sidelines and observed the event. Yet this gathering of mahila mandai members occurred shortly after a jubilant show of collective action to demand a high school for the region. Many women who were trained at SUTRA and/or attended the SUTRA *mela* were present, leading songs that celebrated women’s unity and strength. Mahila mandai members told stories of slander and opposition to their organizing, often from men within their household. They sang and danced together, and ate side by side.13 Their recent experience of collective action and contestation of gender relations enabled them to produce a collective identity even within a place in which daily modes of interaction are informed by spatially-maintained differences of gender, caste, and kinship.

Conclusion

The formation of a collective identity is never an obvious outcome when diversely positioned women gather together, and neither is the contestation of gender relations. For mahila mandals can be arenas in which hierarchies of caste, kinship, class, age, and even gender are reproduced. Furthermore, there is nothing inherently liberatory about addressing a group of mahila mandai members specifically as women. As was evident at the Bhatu *mela*, speakers may position female members of a hamlet as “women” in order to reassert dominant constructions of gender relations. However, mahila mandal members may produce a collective identity when they engage in a political re-identification specifically as women, informed by a discourse that provides affect and meaning to this act. Even for those mahila mandal members who espouse SUTRA’s feminist discourse and who have engaged in collective action and the talk and backtalk of gendered contestation, the force and salience of this newly politicized position as women shifts according to the dynamic context of social interaction. The subject position woman remains one of numerous and often contradictory subject positions through which mahila mandal members lead their lives. In locales in which differences among women give form and substance to daily

12 Although in this case the principal’s conservative discourse was not accepted uncritically by older members of the *mela*, it is important to note the contexts in which diversely positioned women construct a collective identity as women, informed by conservative discourses of womanhood, for conservative political purposes. See especially the situation of women members of the RSS and BJP for examples of this dynamic within India (e.g., Sarkar and Butalia 1995, Bacchetta 1994).

13 Women’s singing and dancing in new and politicized contexts not surprisingly invoked opposition. After the ERA *mela* at Duhok, some local members of the BJP (the Hindu communalist party) condemned the *mela* on the grounds that women had behaved immodestly by dancing in front of men.
routines, the politicized subject position woman may remain in the background, re-emerging in the foreground during contexts of gendered contestation or celebrations of women's collective action and strength.

Furthermore, because positioning is a dynamic and often contradictory practice, it is possible both to form a collective identity across numerous and often divisive differences and simultaneously, or in other contexts, to reproduce these differences and their hierarchical evaluations. The production of a collective identity as women does not preclude beliefs or actions that oppress some women along axes of caste, religion, class, or kinship. Nor does it result in a ubiquitous salience to this positioning.

A collective identity as women, for the purpose of contesting gendered inequalities, is always and everywhere formed within the context of multiple differences that shape daily routines. It is never an obvious outcome, but neither is it an impossible one. It is rather a project, forged through action and imagination.

References


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