

The Politics of Devotional Labor: Women in the  
Panchayat Raj

by

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## Abbreviations

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BDC	Block Development Committee
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CRRID	Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development
CSWI	Committee on the State of Women in India
CWDS	Centre for Women Development Studies
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MS	Mahila Samakhya
NCW	National Commission for Women
NDC	National Development Council
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PM	Prime Minister
PRI	Panchayat Raj Institution
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SBMA	Shri Bhuvneshwari Mahila Ashram
UN	United Nations
WCD	Ministry of Women and Child Development

## Who's Who

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### Kuningad

Vimla Devi	Ward member of Gram Panchayat Kuningad
Rakesh	Vimla's husband
Divya	Vimla's daughter
Lucky	Raskeh's cousin
Sageeta	Lucky's sister

### Maniket

Sapna Devi	Gram Pradhan of Gram Panchayat Maniket
Prem	Sapna's husband
Depaak	Sapna's son
Kiran	Sapna's daughter
Uma	Sapna's daughter
Sashi	Sapna's daughter

### Gairsain

Deviki Devi	Ward member of Gram Panchayat Gairsain
Paromita Devi	Ward member of Gram Panchayat Gairsain
Manju Devi	Ward member of Gram Panchayat Utteri Jhumakhet
Janki Devi	Pradhan of District Panchayat Chamoli

## Introduction

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A couple of years ago Madaniah was elected sarpanch, village chief, of a small hamlet in Andhra Pradesh, India. Once elected, he told his wife to be sterilized. The couple already had two children and one more would disqualify him as an elected official. Presumably, Madaniah was not being cruel to his wife but was making an effort to abide by the law.

The Two-Child Norm policy was recommended by the National Development Council (NDC) Committee on Population in 1992 and was implemented by a number of state governments (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa) in the early nineties (Cole 2009: 11-12). The policy was promoted in response to the population figures of the 1991 All India Census. The law prohibits persons with more than two children from holding an elected post; the policy has specifically targeted elected officials of Gram Panchayats, or village councils (Cole 2009: 12). The implementation of this policy occurred at almost the same time as the emergence of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment into India's Constitution.<sup>1</sup> The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment enhanced the powers of local councils (Panchayats) and mandated quotas for women and other marginalized sections of society (scheduled castes and tribes).<sup>2</sup> The legal limits placed on the family size of office holders at almost the same moment as the entry of women and marginalized groups into the Panchayat is noteworthy.

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<sup>1</sup> 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment was added to provide constitutional support to democracy at the grassroots level.

<sup>2</sup> Scheduled Castes and Tribes: population groups recognized by the Constitution of India previously referred to as "Depressed Classes."

The Two-Child Norm law was introduced with the assumption that it would encourage couples to adopt contraceptive measures (Buch 2005: 2422). The Haryana Supreme Court explains that by applying the law to elected leaders, the government hopes to provide a local model for small family size within the community without directly impinging on the reproductive rights of individuals (Buch 2005: 2422). However, media sources such as *Times of India*, the *Hindu*, and the *Indian Current*, have highlighted that the policy directly targets women, who had recently (1993) been granted 33% reserved seats within the Panchayat under the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment.<sup>3</sup>

In general, the law restricting the family size of elected officials has been ineffective; population growth is still a major issue. Most state governments have yet to take full responsibility for this and do not provide affordable and accessible contraceptives. Most state officials have yet to acknowledge that women lack control over their childbearing. In a study conducted in Rajasthan by Nirmala Buch (2005: 47), she concluded that no family planning to have more children changed their plans because of the new law. In other words, it appears that the law jeopardizes women's ability to contest for election without increasing their influence in family planning. Consequently, the law threatens to undo the 'justice' provided by women's reservation. By prioritizing population control over women's political inclusion, state governments expose their influence in standards of acceptable conduct. Which rights take precedence is a politically loaded decision that in this case reflects ideas on appropriate citizenship, motherhood, and effective methods of empowerment.

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<sup>3</sup> During this paper the reservation for women will be referred to as women's reservation, but should not be confused with Women's Reservation Bill.

Media sources, such as the *Times of India*, have decried the law as a violation of women's human rights and an invasion of privacy. In defense of the law, a judge in Rajasthan state court argued that under the nation, fundamental rights are not absolute and can be suspended if need be. He illustrated his argument by referring to the suspension of rights in times of war. He makes the claim that human rights are often abused when the nation or national ideology is threatened (Srinivasan 2005). While he never goes so far as to call the 'explosion of the Indian population' an issue of national security, he does mention that he finds it immoral to have children who cannot be provided basic freedoms (such as food, clean water and education).

Following the judge's argument, it appears that fundamental rights, such as personal freedom and autonomy, should be willingly sacrificed for the preservation of the nation (in cases such as war). The nation-state protects the rights of citizens with the understanding that its citizens will defend their protector when the nation-state is threatened. Self-sacrifice in this context is admirable. It is voluntary, informed, and 'authentic' in that it originates within the citizen-self. Despite potential death or deprivation, so long as the agent is *acting* of his own free will, those conditions are acceptable and "free". While people often don't act on their best interests, the origin of individual's aspirations, rather than their content is what matters. Consent, not the illiberal character of one's actions, provides ethical authorization (Christman 1991).

In this project, I critically analyze the ideology of the free individual as authentic subject. To do this I question the assumption of the free self as necessarily autonomous, or free from constraints of tradition and community. I argue that obligation and conformity can be meaningful and productive of self-determination.



The liberal, rights-bearing individual is not the only mode of imagining a politically active subject. In developing my argument I challenge the inclination to see sacrifice and subordination as inherently ‘bad’ acts that suffocate the self. At times and in certain contexts, these qualities lead to creative action and contribute to the social and moral authority of the subjects who perform them. In the context of Gairsain, India, where I conducted fieldwork, these virtues are distinctly feminine and have a long history in national identity. Feminine virtues have symbolic function in a number of nationalist movements, past and present. The extreme Hindu nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), uses representations of Bharat Mata (Mother India) as a rallying call for all Hindu brothers to unite in protection of the Motherland. In this particular employment of gender symbolism, men are the sacrificial subjects while the Indian mother is an imagined collectivity worth dying for (McKean 1998).

### How I Got Here

I started this project knowing very little about too much. I wanted to study decentralized government. As a recently self-proclaimed Gandhian, I thought that decentralization would be the solution to the social injustice and corruption that were all too evident in the municipal bodies I had studied in my last few months in Jaipur. I wanted to study women, specifically, because having read my first book of Vandana Shiva, I was persuaded that women’s leadership is the solution to global problems. Obviously, my idealism was riddled with optimistic assumptions about rural women as an essentially “good” category of people and the Panchayat as an unproblematic system of justice and democracy.

I set off to Gairsain, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand. It was there that I had my heart broken. Rural women are not our salvation; they are simply people. That is not to say that I didn't learn to love and respect the women I encountered and stayed with, particularly Sageeta whose daal palaak always hit the spot. Always. Women in Gairsain, like humans everywhere, lie, cheat, bully, and argue, just as much as they sing, nurture, sooth and charm. None of us are perfect, and thank goodness because perfection does not make for an interesting story.

The story I will tell is a version of the truth that comes from the transformation I experienced as I grew to understand a different form of life. Of course, my understanding is limited and partial. One of the biggest obstacles in my search for the "truth" was that I didn't speak Hindi. I learned a little in Jaipur, and a lot more, very quickly, in Gairsain (including the words for tall girl- lambi- and alone- akeli). However, I never got competent enough to understand what was being talked about.

On my first of two, trips to Gairsain, I was accompanied by a friend of my study aboard program director, Dhan Singh Rawat, who translated for me. His translations were helpful, but as an outsider like me, he often made the interviews we conducted rather formal and uncomfortable. My first stay in Gairsain lasted twenty-one days. During this time I resided in the Ashram of the Nongovernmental Organization (NGO), Shri Bhuvneshwari Mahila Ashram (SBMA), which was located ten minutes uphill from the market place in Gairsain. SBMA is a central location where villagers often stop by, have a cup of tea, talk and catch up. It was

staffed by local people, even a local celebrity who was on television a couple of times for his beautiful rendition of Garhwali songs.

On my first visit to Gairsain, I didn't know how to go about ethnographic research. The pre-set series of questions I originally asked reflected my biases, expectations and fantasies of village life. When I proposed the idea that I turn my research, based on these questions, into a thesis, the Anthropology department, rejected my proposal. The department expressed reservations about the research I had conducted and encouraged me to revise the proposal and to extend my field research. I returned to the village two months later, inspired by the kind and insightful words of Professor Gillian Goslinga, to whose impassioned approach to anthropology this thesis owes a great deal.

When I returned, I changed my situation: I stayed with a family. I also decided to let go of my expectations. I got rid of my questions, and while I do make use of my previous research and interviews in this project, my second experience in Gairsain was guided by inquiries that developed from the observations I made during my time there. I spent the first week only watching and writing, without asking anything. The first family I stayed with was that of Sapna Devi in Maniket, about an hour outside of the marketplace in Gairsain. When I refer to people or women of Gairsain in this project I mean the 'block' of Gairsain, which includes the village Gairsain and surrounding villages Maniket and Kuningad where I actually stayed with families.

Sapna was a little resistant to the idea of having me stay with her because, as any sane person would have noted, "she doesn't speak Hindi." However, after I explained that it didn't matter (I never fully convinced myself with this explanation)

and that I just wanted to watch her work, she warmed up. Although she was never persuaded that something as seemingly trivial as grass cutting could be a credible object of study, she allowed me to watch her work and stay with her family for a week. At the time it seemed longer; looking back, it seems like no time at all. I truly enjoyed my time with Sapna, and she taught me a lot, despite our lack of verbal communication. Her family, three daughters, one son and husband made my time in Maniket memorable. I am forever grateful to their generosity and warmth, which got me through difficult and isolating research.

The next place I stayed was in Kuningad, only a short walk from the marketplace in Gairsain. I stayed with Vimla Devi and her husband for the first few nights; after that, I stayed in the home of Vimla's husband's father's brother, who happened to be the head of the village (Pradhan). Vimla was a young mother, only twenty-five. She was intelligent and had completed her BA in Hindi, Sanskrit and Sociology in a local university. Because I spent so much time with her, she is central to this paper. I also believe that she embodies a striking transformation that is occurring in younger, more educated wives. Often times Vimla endeavored to preserve the lifestyle she had grown up in, to which she remained attached. She vehemently believed that Indian culture should be protected against the forced of Westernization. She specified that Indian clothes, songs, and rituals were unique to India and should not be substituted to assimilate to Western styles. At other times, she resented the ways traditional culture blocked her opportunities (for a better education or a house in the city). I describe her household and village in the first chapter

## The Project

The families I stayed with transformed my research. I had come with every intention of studying the Panchayat, how it works and women's work within it. I left knowing how to cut grass and make a killer cup of tea. While I want to avoid romanticizing the women I observed, I cannot ignore how much energy went into every task these women performed. This energy, spent caring for other people, was translocated to the Panchayat. I wanted to study the political, but the personal and intimate got in the way (as it tends to do). As I write this piece of work, I realize that my experience was conditioned by the lifestyles of the women with whom I stayed. I learned a lot about working for others and I believe these skills prepared me to write about Panchayat work.

I have realized that public service *is* devotional labor. It is commitment to serve others. And while at times it can be ugly, the intent of the work is honorable. I do not want to suggest that women's intentions are disinterested or selfless, but their position within the family disposes them to give of themselves in ways that are often unappreciated. In my own and Ms. Shiva's (1999) opinions women's work is highly undervalued by the global community. When an individual commits herself to the group she nurtures communities and brings people together. And while men's work was carried out with the community or family in mind, the work itself, often factory work or manual labor in exchange for wages, is not associated with care or devotion. This distinction is not absolute. A growing number of women, even in Maniket and Kuningad, wanted to or did leave the village and sought out paid employment. Yet,

the overwhelming number of women who dedicate their labor to caring for others shapes this work.

Sacrifice can be one of the most beautiful acts a human can perform. In one sense these are performances of love and compassion. When a soldier dies for his country, he surrenders himself to the ideology that he seeks to protect. What distinguishes the devotion a woman who gives herself to the preservation of her family from the devotion a soldier gives for the safeguard of his country? Women who serve their families usually attribute the incentive behind their work to religion, particularly their *dharma*. These external forces that subordinate women are defined by liberals as inhibiting women's self-realization and suffocating an "authentic" self, which could emerge in the absence of domination (Mahmood 2005). Human rights activist and renowned economist, Amartya Sen understands women's willingness to serve their husbands and in-laws as a lack of agency, a passivity that is damaging and unjust. I argue otherwise. Women may not express their actions in idioms of choice and freedom, but their work is self-determining. Women are creative in their self-production and under forces of domination they are able to fashion a moral personhood.

### Road Map

My thesis will start where my research began: in the family. In most of India, Garisain included, village exogamy with virilocal residence is the dominant marital pattern. New wives leave their natal homes in their late teens or early twenties to go live in a stranger's home in an unfamiliar village. Households are multigenerational

units and descent and inheritance are patrilineal, traced through the male line. Men are linked together by their seed and land. In-married women, being foreigners, have to establish a space for themselves in the hearts of their in-laws. Most new wives do this by serving and preparing food, collecting fodder, washing clothes and other everyday tasks that are crucial for daily life. Through these reproductive and nurturing activities a woman fashions for herself a position of power and influence. The survival of the family, its growth and continuation would be endangered without a woman's service.

In the second chapter I move to the Panchayat. I argue that women's service in the home predisposes her for service in a more public milieu. The character and history of the Panchayat are crucial here, for the multiple functions of the Panchayat allow it to be a powerful tool for rural development as well as grassroots democracy. The outward orientation and commitment to communal values that are partially enshrined in the Panchayat reflect the nature of women's labor and facilitate a celebration/validation of their role in the domestic economy.

In the third chapter I argue that empowerment is a politically loaded discourse, and attributions of it by outsiders, as present or absent, do not always align with women's self-perceptions. Women's passivity and silence are often times read as indices of a lack of individuality and agency, but I argue that this is not the case. Women talk in certain contexts and remain silent in others; both of these performances can be active methods for self-production. To outsiders, however, the public character of the Panchayat makes women's subordination to its demands appear acceptable, while subordination to the family is deplorable. This distinction

reflects a larger discourse pertaining to national duty as self-affirming and domestic duty as self-denying.

The final chapter will further explore personhood and the production of self. I start with a critique of liberal secularism's concept of an autonomous individual as possessing an essence, which determines his or her course of action. I maintain that power can reside both internally and externally: the internalization of domination informs subjectivity and action. It is through subordination that an individual becomes a recognizable subject. In the modern era, liberalism is another force of subordination that creates new "liberal selves" which validate the ideological existence of free will and choice.

This thesis is a creative collage of ethnographic description, theory, and my own interpretations. The bits and pieces I have chosen are just this: bits and pieces. The tales presented to me were altered because of my outsider identity. Additionally, my own interpretation of these accounts, influenced by my ideas and experiences, are a mutation of the narratives I was told. So please, know that I am not trying to impart any absolute truth. I am humbly attempting to destabilize a truth that has a firm hold in our society. Self-production is not only achieved by resisting domination. Rather, devotion, conformity and obligation can be effective resources for constructing an admirable, moral, even powerful self.



## Chapter 1: The Outsider Wife and Devoted Daughter-in-law

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Just a short ten-minute walk uphill from the market in Gairsain is the village Kuningad, where Vimla Devi lives with her husband and his family. Vimla serves as one of five ward members on the Gram Panchayat (village council). The Gram Pradhan, the head of the village, is her husband's father's older brother (chacha); he and just about everyone I spoke with claimed to be part of Vimla's family. With only 270 residents, the village is small and intimate.

From the top floor of Vimla's house I could look over the village at the small clusters of houses painted in bold colors, deep reds and bright yellows, pepper the landscape of the lush Himalayan mountainside. The village is packed with houses nearly toppling over one another, partially covered by the greenery that flourished in the heavy monsoon. Like the houses they live in, the families are physically close and intertwined. A day doesn't go by without visits from or to other households. During these visits, household members share and exchange everyday necessities such as vegetables or milk, as well as information and gossip.

Vimla's husband, Rakesh, is the oldest of five children. He lives with his parents and grandmother in one house. The household also includes Vimla and her young daughter, Divya. Rakesh's youngest brother is away pursuing his education in Dehradun and one of his sister is married and resides with her husband outside the village. Rakesh's younger brother and sister both live with Vimla and Rakesh. The oldest and only daughter-in-law, Vimla is marked by an "otherness" as she is the only one not born in the village. She is arguably still a stranger. As such, she is responsible

for providing the whole family with meals three times a day. Additionally, her position as “outsider wife” means that she is the last one to eat and the first one to go hungry if there is not enough food.

Throughout this chapter, I will often refer to Vimla’s stories and opinions along with other women’s perspectives. Through their words and my own observations, I hope to paint a vivid, although incomplete, picture of women’s lives in the village and their roles in their conjugal homes. As a stranger, a new wife strives to make a place for herself in the hearts of her in-laws. This is done through devotion, respect and domestic service. Women as “outsider wives” tend to be lower in the family hierarchy in regards to ownership or decision-making, yet women’s work is integral to familial survival. Thus, a woman’s place in the family structure is insecure but simultaneously crucial. A new wife occupies an ambiguous position; she is both the symbolic center of the home, as the mistress who labors over the family hearth, as well as a marginalized outsider. Women invoke feminine virtues such as self-sacrifice to demonstrate supreme feelings of love. Through their labor, women produce the affective bonds that inform their self worth. A similar dedication in labor lends itself to women’s work in the Panchayat Raj.

### Family Business

The structure of Vimla’s household reflects many of the familial norms of the area. Like most households, Vimla’s is a multigenerational joint family, with four generations living under one roof. Vimla’s natal kin are not part of the household, nor are Rakesh’s married sisters. Women generally leave their natal families at marriage

and reside in their husband's household. Like most households in the region, that of Vimla's husband is patrilineal, with authority vested in the oldest living male and inheritance passed through the male line (Earnes 1967:1). Communal ownership has a long history in India; "the property-holding aspect of the joint family has been the subject of Hindu Law throughout Indian history" (Shah 1998: 24). When a number of generations reside in one house, ownership of the property is considered shared by all the adult males. In the case of Vimla's home, the property was said to belong to both Rakesh and his father, since Rakesh is the eldest son.

Many people, in Gairsain, told me that the joint family is a central aspect of Indian culture and crucial for social survival. The family unit has many functions; most cited was economic interdependence. While the relationship between economic stability and household composition is fundamental, the joint family is not a purely economic unit. Rather, the family has multiple functions, "such as production, reproduction, socialization, care of the elderly, and domestic worship" (Shah 1998: 81). All its members live under one roof, eating food cooked at one hearth, holding property in common, pooling incomes in a common fund, incurring expenses from the same fund, and participating in common family worship (Shah 1998: 23). The combination of its economic, cultural, and emotional dimensions produces enduring interdependencies that make the joint family fundamental to social life.

While the term "joint family" (*sanayukt parivar*) often refers to a single material domicile and the group that occupies it, the concept of 'kin' is a flexible social category that allows for multiple levels of inclusion (from individual households to clans). One striking characteristic of Vimla's village is that a large

percentage of the families in the village claimed common ancestry. The boundaries of family extend out to include the entire village, thus women's political labor is still in service to the family. It was not unusual for women to work outside the home, even in a neighbor's house. Kiran, for example, spends every night at her Dadi's (grandmother's) home, a couple of houses down from her father's house. She takes care of all the morning chores for her grandmother and returns to her own home when she is finished, around mid-morning. Since women are symbolic protectors of household, the fluidity of a woman's movement from one house to the next composes the hamlet as a single family. Other scholars have noted this pattern in North India. For example, Shah (1998: 30) refers to "ten or twelve houses, each sheltering a joint family, all together acknowledging common descent and capable of showing relationship through one line" (see also Paraiwala 1994). When I encountered people outside the village, for example shopping in the market place, many would ask me questions like "are you going back to our home?" They would use the term *ghar* (home) to refer to the village rather than the physical house in which I was staying. By applying kinship terms to all villagers, the hamlet is recast as one familial unit. The unity of the hamlet is a salient aspect of village life that has larger implications for the 'domestic' nature of women's labor within the Panchayat Raj.

Discourses of relatedness reinforce the sense of communalism that prevails within this small village. Notably, Vimla explained that while the household is patrilineal in organization, village unity is a primary concern of women, particularly the in-married wife (who is not part of the patrilineal line). Her familial position,

which I expand upon later, is a combination of symbolic centrality with social marginality.

The necessity for new wives to devote themselves to the creation of family cohesion impinges on personal aspirations that lay beyond their roles as daughters and wives. For Vimla, the joint family has meant personal sacrifice. She has had to let go of her individual ambitions in order to please her parents-in-law. However, Vimla's misgivings about familial obligation are less important than her dedication to the merits of family life. Through the family, individuals are able to divide labor and rely on one another for physical, emotional, and material support.

The work performed in the region is predominately agricultural. Individuals are dependent on their family belonging to keep up with strenuous seasonal work of farming. While times are changing and many families, joint and nuclear, are moving to the cities, the familial division of labor is still considered a vital part of life in a Himalayan village. There are other benefits to the joint family beyond the domestic economy. In particular, many villagers praised the joint family for the emotional support it provides. In the film *Dadi's Family* (1981), the grandmother (Dadi) explained that when someone you love dies, it is too difficult to handle the grief by yourself. If you are part of a large family, Dadi argued, then your grief is spread out and becomes more bearable. The emotional dependence adds to the strength of enduring family ties.

Villagers describe being part of a family as “making them feel needed and welcome.” The sense of being part of a larger whole is ingrained in a moral code. Contrary to what tends to be the “Western commonsense,” people do not feel social

pressure to live independently. As Kondo (1990) argues with reference to Japanese notion of personhood, familial belonging is so crucial to social existence because self-image is determined through recognition from others within the family. When strangers, upon first meeting me, wanted to get a better sense of who I was, they refrained from questions about occupation or even name and instead asked the number in my family or my marital status. These relations are considered more useful indicators of who I am as a person. The work you do does not make you who you are; instead, your 'self' is produced through your connections with others. Work is merely a way to earn money and contribute to the family unit.

#### Maternal Ties/ Sacred Bonds

As I have emphasized, feeling a sense of belonging is a positive outcome of being part of a family. I refer to Janet Carsten's (2000) definition of 'relatedness' as an alternative way to think about kinship in Gairsain. According to Carsten, cultures appropriate specifics of biology to sustain ideologies of belonging. While biological relationships are socially constructed through 'reflective' cultural practices, kinship ties are consequentially fluid and profound. Social representations of kin allows for flexibility in who can belong. Carsten puts the social and biological domains in conversation with each other, maintaining that they can be mutually informative. In other words, customs reveal certain biological connections that are recognizable through physical display. The social productions of kinship make room for individuals to create new ways to relate and experience feelings of deep connection, which may or may not be grounded in biological idioms.

On the surface, families are structured by and perpetuated through the patrilineal line of descent. Kinship in Gairsain appears to be a “bounded sphere which is closely structured by certain well-known characteristics: patrilineality and patrilocality” (Lambert 2000: 73). Sons are thought of as carriers of the substance that continues the family. Sons are “crucial, because sons are proprietor of the two substances in which the selfhood of a village and a man are most invested- his land and his seed” (Trawick 1990: 158). As already discussed, property and family assets are passed down through the male line of descent. Additionally, genetic material, referred to metaphorically as one’s seed, is passed down from father to son. Men do not pass this ‘seed’ to their daughters; the latter are said to receive no physical substance from their father’s line. Ideologies of procreation emphasize men’s biological contribution to new life while diminishing women’s. A women’s contribution is a space (the womb) in which a male’s heir grows. Patrilineal ideology is strengthened, in this idiom of differential contributions, while the female line is ignored. The metaphor “projects man as the provider of the seed and the women as a passive recipient who nurtures the seed within her for its owner. The man is the owner of both the field and the seed, hence he is the master of the child and of the woman who bears his child” (Dube 1986: 22-53).

Vimla’s connection to her daughter Divya was not imagined as a substance that holds information or links Divya to Vimla’s parents. In fact, Vimla’s natal kin are strangers to Divya. At three years old, Divya has met her maternal grandparents only a handful of times. Vimla told me that when she gave birth, the only person with her in the delivery room was her mother in-law. I was surprised that her own mother had

not been present, but she said that her parents hardly have anything to do with her life now.

The first time I noticed how detached Divya was from her maternal grandparents was when we were flipping through the photo album from Vimla's wedding. It was my first day staying with Vimla's family and time for me to admire the elaborate wedding ceremony. Vimla brought me into her room and Divya followed behind us. Divya and I sat on the floor as Vimla searched for the key to unlock the cabinet that held her precious album. The album was covered in red felt. It contained page after page of close ups of Vimla and Rakesh, as well as photos of the various rituals they took part in. As we went through the pages, whenever we came to photos of Vimla, Rakesh, or Rakesh's parents, Divya would smile and exclaim, "*Mata, pita, dada*" or "*dadi.*" It was Vimla who pointed out her own parents; Divya showed no recognition of them. Divya's detachment from her maternal grandparents reflects and affirms the privileging of the patrilineal line of descent. Children are aware of their kinship and link to their father's line, but have no sense of *belonging* to their mother's natal kin.

Women create links between themselves and their children using different idioms of relation. A woman occupies an outsider identity through performances of relatedness that connect her to her natal family. Maternal ties, such as those that come from shared wombs, are more 'sacred' than relations based on sex or friendship (Lambert 2000: 76). In particular, the relationship between a brother and sister is sacred because they came from the same womb, ate from the same hearth and drink the same milk. "The affective vision of the brother-sister relationship in the north is



the enduring love between two human beings born out of the same source and the same soil” (Trawick 1990: 177). The commonality of nutrients and spaces (the womb/ the home) is the material link that a mother uses to connect with her offspring. Maternal ties mitigate the rigidity of patrilineal connection, since when a new wife moves into her conjugal house, a woman still symbolizes permanent distance and engages in practices that reaffirm a connection to her mother and the kin who shared a womb or hearth with her.

One such practice is veiling, a symbolic representation of intimacy, respect or isolation. Women will veil in front of their in laws and they will also veil in front of unknown or elderly men (Gold and Raheja 1994). Women will not veil when they are in their natal village or around their natal kin because they can express a different level of intimacy towards their natal relatives. The absence of the veil signifies familiarity and reproduces the significance of bonds founded in shared nutrients, shared wombs, and shared spaces. Gold and Raheja (1994: 28) reflect upon the contrasting expectations placed on a woman in her husband’s home and her father’s home by describing women’s unique insider-outsider identity.

In her natal home a woman does not veil her face and remain silent in the presence of men, she need not show particular deference to senior kin, and she is not obliged to perform arduous domestic labor. This comparative freedom ends when she is married and moves to her husband’s home. Though she is expected to transfer her loyalties from natal home to conjugal home upon her marriage, she is nonetheless often viewed as an outsider there.

By sustaining this distinction, the unique potency of male-ordered ties is reinforced.

The radical distinction between a woman's identity as daughter/sister in her natal village and as wife/mother in her conjugal village is clearly marked. A woman's actions, even her very personality, will change depending on with whom she is interacting. A woman's sense of self is grounded in this contrast. Often a woman will ally herself with individuals from her natal village, who now reside in her husband's village. Unlike men, women use these 'other' relationships that exist outside the home to fashion a relational existence that is not solely dependent on her husband's kin.

It is the opinion of most husbands and in-laws that a woman should fully merge with her new family by submitting herself to her domestic duties. The preservation of her natal ties challenges the authority of her husband, because the woman maintains alternative means of support and protection (both things she receives from her husband). Natal ties counteract the rigidity of the exogamy system. As Gold and Raheja (1994: 76) explain, "in the Uttarakhand region of northern India, men are apt to reject the idea of a woman's continuing relationship with natal kin because to acknowledge it would be to weaken their own power over their wives." A woman cannot be reduced to men's property nor is she solely an extension of her husband. Her outsider position disrupts women's absolute conformity to her husband's kin, allowing her to creatively affirm her devotion to her conjugal family.

Women are instructed by their new families to disassociate from their natal homes. Young girls are taught that when they go to their husbands' homes they should be like water, which having no shape of its own, can take the shape of the vessel into which it is poured, or that they should be like soft and malleable clay,

which has no form until it is worked into shape by the potter (Gold, Raheja 1994: 77). This metaphor teaches a woman to be adaptable and attenuate her former allegiances or preoccupations, constructing her as a docile body that is malleable and easily manipulated. A woman's place in her husband's house is paradoxical, because in one sense her virtue comes from docility and passivity, yet her creativity and individuality are crucial for the production of closeness and intimacy.

### Crafting Love Through Service

When a woman marries into her conjugal family she ideally becomes one with her husband, adopting his customs, lifestyle, sub-caste, and kin as her own.

According to Gold and Rajeha (1994: 75), the wedding is the moment when a woman undergoes a transformation, "she becomes the 'half body' of her husband, of one substance with him." The following is a common departure song, sung to a new bride as she leaves her natal village:

Dear girl, today you've left your father's house, today you've become 'other'  
The streets in which you spent your childhood have today become 'other'

My grandfather cries, my grandmother cries, the whole family cries  
My younger brother cries, your sister born from the same mother has left and gone away. (Gold, Raheja 1994: 99)

Hindu doctrine (Manu Samriti) states that a wife rightfully belongs to her husband's home.<sup>4</sup> As Kiran pointed out, a woman is with her husband for seven lives and her

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Man Samriti, it is a woman's duty after marriage to follow her husband and serve his family for she is not one with him. For more information see <<http://hinduism.iskcon.com/index.htm>>

mother for only one. Thus the husband and wife relationship is the single most important relationship in a woman's life.

For Vimla, the first few weeks with her conjugal family were difficult. The marriage had been arranged between her mother's natal kin. Someone from her mother's natal village knew of a family whose son was looking for a bride. Before the wedding, Vimla already knew some of the people from her new village, mostly girls she had met in school or had interacted with in the market place. Like many women in North India, Vimla hadn't met her husband or her husband's parents before the wedding. Their first meeting was during the wedding ceremony. On her special day, she nervously approached three total strangers and performed the marital ritual (*Saptapadi*) with her husband. The marital ritual is completed when the bride first steps into the house of her husband. At the close of the wedding rite, Vimla was both separated from her old home and incorporated into her new one. As a new wife, Vimla first bent down and touched the feet of her in-laws, to display the respect she had for them and intended to show to them throughout their lives. As she rose from their feet they blessed her for the *gift* that she is.

Vimla told me that her biggest fear before she left her natal home was that her in-laws would not like her. All the women who spoke about the subject said that a woman must work hard to please her in-laws and "make them love her as though she was their own daughter." She wanted above all else to be a good wife and a good daughter-in-law. She was deeply concerned with 'how to make a place for her in her in-laws' hearts.' Ideologies of love are dynamic in North India. The creation of love is eloquently presented in Margaret Trawick's ethnography, Notes on Love in a Tamil

Family. Trawick explains that the role of domestic servant is useful for a new wife to create feelings of love among her new kin. A daughter-in-law is supposed to show humility and servitude to her in-laws. Through these submissions, she ironically takes on a position of power and elicits appreciation and respect from her in-laws; “through love opposites are overturned” (Trawick 1990: 106). Trawick explains that in Tamil *adimai* loosely translated means servitude (Trawick 1990: 111). The term is both an expression of love and is deeply associated with humility. By serving another, one is essentially being controlled by another or being bounded. The situation is comparable in Gairsain, where women go without to establish the superiority of their love. In this position, women can pursue their own interests while strengthening affective relationships.

As symbols of centrality, women labor over the hearth where the whole family gathers for its meal. Activities such as eating, drinking tea, and practicing religious rituals are communalizing practices dependent on the in-married women. “As a form and vehicle of nurturance, milk and food in this way, provide a connection between two modes of relatedness: that of women, coming from outside to sustain the future, and that of the ancestors, as agnatic forebears” (Lambert 2000: 82). This nurturing activity binds women to their husbands’ families since the continued material and emotional well being of the family is largely in the women’s hands.

To better understand this unique position in the family, it is helpful to reflect on food and milk as idioms that constitute women as mistresses of the hearth, the heart of the household. By cooking for the family and serving the family, daughters-

in-law both physically bring the family together for communal meals and show their love and respect for the family by filling everyone's *daal* bowl and catering to everyone's needs before feeding themselves. Similarly, milk is a nurturing substance that has symbolic meaning for women in North Indian. "Mother's milk was a special substance because it was mixed with the feelings of the mother and transmitted them to the child" (Trawick 1990: 94). Milk is significant in Hindu tradition because it symbolizes purity and strength; it is 'life-giving' and invokes the reproductive divine power of Lord Shiva (Lambert 2000: 81). It is considered a particularly nurturing substance, which, as Lambert maintains, "seems to have special symbolic resonance in relation to a household's and lineage's kinship identity through time" (Lambert 2000: 81).

Another role of a wife is to preserve the spiritual standing of the family. It is often not until marriage that women will take on a more active role in household rituals. These rituals contribute to a wife's moral authority within the home. In Kuningad it would not be usual for a daughter to eat meat, while a wife adopts more ascetic eating habits. Vimla, for example, would fast every Monday in honor of her god, Shiva.<sup>5</sup> Vimla explained that by fasting she contributes to the morality of the family. Given that women are the keepers of tradition, Vimla asserts that a good woman will understand and respect religious traditions in order to protect both her own faith and the faith of those around her.

Women are exceptionally creative within their conjugal families. As outsiders who retain their 'otherness' through natal relationships, women use reproductive and

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<sup>5</sup> The region is considered the land of Shiva; particularly the Garhwal region where many Hindus come for pilgrimages.

nurturing labor to display their devotion to their new families. Feminine virtues of self-sacrifice are not embodied in passivity but in a wife's ability to work selflessly for familial preservation and continuation.

### Interdependence in the Domestic Economy

The domestic economy shapes and is shaped by gender relations. Gender difference is correlated with a complementary division between masculine activities of acquisition and provision and feminine activities of nurturance. The distinction between these types of work is mirrored through contrasting spatial orientations, linking men with the outside and women with the inside. Consequently, different expectations are given based on one's sex, for example "who would offer/ be asked for what differed depending on one's gender... a married daughter or daughter-in-law may give the time and a son the money involved in caring for a sick parent" (Palriwala 1994: 111). Both manhood and womanhood are relational subjectivities; neither one is fully complete without the accompaniment of its opposite. In other words, a man must be ritually linked to a woman to be truly a man, and vice versa.

Trawick explains that in India it is not until one is married that one enters fully into this central part of the Tamil language (Trawick 1990: 145). Because of this strong association between marriage and maturity, women must conjure the courage needed to leave their natal village. Women conceptualize their separation and transition as a rite of passage into womanhood. A wife's loving devotion to her husband cannot be discerned from the power relation between them; the relationship defines wifeness and consequentially wifeness defines husbandhood (Kondo 1990).

When I asked Kiran, who was only nineteen at the time, if she were scared to go to her husband's village she replied: 'No, of course not!' I had heard of women crying for weeks and assumed that young girls would be scared to leave their natal village. I asked Kiran again if she were not afraid, emphasizing that she would be leaving her family, and she replied that she would be with her new family and would serve her husband's parents. She explained that was her duty and she had to go. Her explanation resonated with the Hindu concept of *dharma*: that one life's purpose is to fulfill one's duty. It is also a Hindu belief that the husband is a wife's life partner for the next seven lives, while the natal relatives are only with the woman for a short time (Gold, Raheja 1994: 73). From these beliefs, women are able to "break away from the world of the mother, the primal world of shared bodies" (Trawick 1990: 149-150) and go to a strange village.

Certain gendered responsibilities are described as non-negotiable in Vimla's community. These responsibilities are defined as one's *dharma*, one's personal duty to uphold natural law. By performing their social duty as mother and caregiver, women seek to preserve the natural order, please the deities, and produce good karma. In Garhwal the phrase "work is worship" is commonly used to refer to the strenuous labor of women who reside in the Himalayas. It is even the title and chorus of a popular local song. Women say that they strive to perform their difficult work graciously because they see it as their duty as mothers and women. The ritual of food service expresses hierarchy within the family. The men and guests are always served first. After the men and boys have eaten, younger daughters will eat, and the mother will refill the food items. The wife eats last from the leftovers. She doesn't arrange



the food on a plate for herself, as she had done with her family members, but eats the daal and rice out of the serving bowl.

This ritual is not taken lightly. Most women insist on eating last and serving their husband and children first. My first host mother, Sapna Devi, would wait hours to eat if one of her children or her husband was late for lunch. I specifically remember one afternoon when her elder son, Deepak, did not return from the jungle on time. Sashi, the youngest daughter, had returned from school at 1 pm. Once she got home I knew it was time to eat. I was served first, being the guest, followed by Prem, Sapna's husband, and then Sashi, Kiran and Uma, the middle daughter. I took my seat on the floor of the kitchen next to Uma and Sashi and across from Sapna who was closely watching everyone's bowls to see where she could add more daal and sabzi. Once I had had more than my fill, I asked Sapna whether she was going to have lunch at all. She normally waits until everyone is finished before eating the leftovers from the daal bowl, but her daughters were wrapping up and she still hadn't touch a lentil. She told me she couldn't eat because Deepak hadn't returned from the jungle yet, and she couldn't take a bite until he had had his lunch.

It only took about thirty minutes for Deepak to return. Sapna reheated the daal that had gotten cold on the small flame in the corner of the kitchen and prepared Deepak's plate with a little pickle and a chili. She then watched him happily, holding a small bowl in her hand, eager to serve him with more of her spicy daal. At last Sapna was able to eat. She collected all the plates and Uma and Sashi brought them outside to be washed. Sapna then scrapped the leftovers into the serving bowl and ate until she had had enough.

In this ritual of eating only what is left over women demonstrate the feminine selflessness that is celebrated in Hindu doctrine (Manu Samriti). My translator, Dhan Singh, explained that the wife always eats last to ensure that no one goes without. If there is not enough food, she will be the one to go hungry. While this may be an act of servitude, it is an honorable service, which the wife performs willingly. This performance demonstrates women's endurance, strength and spiritual maturity, qualities that are transferred to various areas of performativity including, as we shall see, the Panchayat Raj.

Traditional gender roles and their manifestation within the domestic economy create expectations that provide male children with both a better chance at survival and a better education than their female counterparts. In South India, Trawick maintains that boys are more likely to make it to adulthood than girls because both fathers and mothers value a son more than a daughter. "A woman will rarely allow herself to be sterilized unless she has had at least one son. And if a woman must choose which child to feed, she will feed her son and let her daughter go hungry" (Trawick 1990: 169). Consequentially, expectations are different for a son: they are centered around ideas of men as providers, pushing men into specific provisionary roles in both the joint family and society writ large (Palriwala 1994: 124).

Men, much like women, feel the pressure to privilege familial obligation over personal aspirations. Men's relational existence creates a self, which is esteemed through commitment and material provision for the family. The pressure to provide is expressed in the narratives of two young men I met during my first round of research in April. I was staying in the NGO's ashram, where these two men around my age

were also staying. One, Rajeev, was from Delhi. He was 26 years old and was helping SBMA with various projects. He was particularly interested in making films for the NGO to promote the good works SBMA was doing. His story was a little different from most young men his age. After high school he had gone the IT route and had spent years of his life studying computer science in one of Delhi's most prestigious schools. He told me that after schooling he started looking for a job. He lucked out and got a job with a widely respected organization; after only a couple months at the job, he suddenly quit. He renounced the lifestyle that he had grown up with and went to work at an alternative primary school buried in the Himalayas. This school promoted Buddhist ideology and incorporated activities such as meditation and yoga into the daily curriculum. Rajeev spent five months working for this school and it left him a changed man. He revealed that he doesn't approve of the systematic way that Indian males follow the same competitive track and never think about what makes them happy or what they're passionate about. He characterized most men his age as mindless, "mere robots that only exist to serve a larger system." He pointed out that this track makes things like the arts in India depreciated. Since math and computer science ensure a secure future for a son, they are forced upon many young kids. He criticized families for being so focused on economic survival as to crush personal creativity and individuality.

Initially, I agreed with Rajeev; I too had noticed the emphasis placed on scientific knowledge and how crippling this was for potential creativity. In my first homestay I had one younger brother and a younger sister. The brother received high marks in computer science and was constantly commended by his parents, while his

sister excelled in fashion design. She was forced by her parents to remain in the house and study math, while her brother experienced considerably more freedom. The depreciation of artistic talent saddened me, and in secret I encouraged my host sister to continue drawing. I couldn't see any value in suffocating one's true self for the benefit of one's parents. It was not until I spoke with Purohit, another young man I met at SBMA, that I recognized that many sons and daughters privilege their relationship with their parents and feel morally obligated to express gratitude and devotion by meeting parental expectations with regard to occupations.

When I first spoke with Purohit he told me why he was visiting SBMA. He said that he was in his final year of his bachelor degree in economics and was looking at the success of government funded school programs in comparison to internationally funded school programs. His area of study was stereotypical of Indian men so I couldn't resist relaying to him the critique I had just heard from Rajeev, about how young men follow a similar path only to obtain financial security rather than following their dreams. Instead of getting embarrassed, as I expected he might, Purohit laughed. He looked at me in disbelief and exclaimed: "Yeah Rajeev would say that, because he's selfish." It wasn't exactly the reaction I was expecting, so I asked Purohit to explain himself. He asked me what I thought of Indian men. That they all only care about material and possessions? He said this is India, and while financial security is important, Indians are not greedy and consumer culture doesn't dominate society like it does in the States. "No," he said, "I would be very happy renouncing material success and going off to some Buddhist retreat to find myself and explore my passions, but how inconsiderate is that? While I may find *my* inner

peace, what does that do for my family? I am my parents' only son and they are relying on me. Meditation is not going to provide them with rice and daal to eat. I need to support my family and take care of my parents in their old age, so I'm going to do that the simplest way I know how. My parents raised me well and they paid a lot of money for me to get the best education I could, how insulting it is that someone can just throw that all away, all their parents hard work, to do something that only serves them?"

Unlike daughters, a son is supposed to represent the future of the family line; the family is continually dependent on the son's adoption of the family's trajectory. A son's self-creation inevitably changes a family identity. As Bourdieu (1990:57) argues, self-creation comes from the combined adoption of and divergence from norms or social patterns, which shape an individual. While inclinations and appropriate behavior are often informed by kinship and then performed by the individual, Rajeev demonstrates that practice is not determined and individuals have leeway to evade traditional norms and produce new realities. Traditional narratives are flexible, allowing for social changes to be adapted and adopted into the traditional structure of the joint family.

Boys can generally expect to receive heavy material and emotion investments from their parents, who sacrifice a lot for their careers, knowing that most sons will reciprocate positively in later phases of life. Kinship is produced through the activity of giving and receiving. Sons provide materially for the family, so they get showered with gifts during their early years; by contrast, women's reproductive labor is often recognized through love. Gendered restrictions on labor at times seemed rigid to me; I

couldn't help but wonder why men would talk or drink tea when there was obvious work to be done around the house.

On my first day in Vimla's house, I was seated outside on a plastic chair with Rakesh. I listened to him converse with his male relatives. They spoke a lot about a foreign company coming to Gairsain that was offering employment to young men in town. They mentioned how the company was offering two-year contracts and paying very well. They also spoke of other men who belonged to the village but were away at school and which degree they were working towards.

As the men spoke, Vimla tended to Divya. During the time I had been with Vimla, she hadn't sat still for five minutes. Anytime she was seated she would pull out her knitting and start fervently knitting away. She handed Divya over to her sister-in-law and began chopping firewood. To do this she raised a huge hatchet into the air and swung at large blocks of wood. It was odd to see this tiny, young mother do such heavy work, while her husband and male relatives complained about the lack of work available. At one point I asked Rakesh why he didn't do some of the work Vimla does. He explained to me that he couldn't do Vimla's work for a number of reasons. He said he would be out of place. More importantly, he asserted "Vimla needs to do this work to be considered both a good wife and a good daughter-in-law, which is important for her to produce good karma," so it would be unfair of him to not let her fulfill her duty.

## Gendered Spaces: The Home and the Panchayat

When I first met Rakesh, I asked him what he did for work. He got uncomfortable and didn't know how to answer the question. Eventually he said, "I don't do anything," but was quick to justify his idleness. He explained that there was no work available in the village. He had gotten his education but there were no job opportunities, so he spent most of his days around the house.

While women do most of the work in the field and around the house, it is men's exclusive duty to plow the field at the beginning of every harvest. Besides this there is little work to be found in the village that is specifically "men's work." Men's dharma in the family is provider. A son is supposed to care for his parents in their old age. Thus, men in general are expected to work 'outside' of the domestic sphere either in the town or a near by city, where they work for money that they can send back to their families. The work of agriculture has in recent years become more and more feminine, as alternative incomes have become necessary. The concept of man's role as provider has driven most of the men out of the hills to "to find jobs in the plains, leaving behind women to work the fields and bring up families alone" (SBMA 2009). Men left behind feel uncomfortable and emasculated by their inability to escape an increasingly feminized and *feminizing* space.

The son of the Gram Pradhan, Lucky, whom I grew very close with during my stay, expressed his discomfort to me on more than one occasion. He is an English teacher, therefore formally employed. However, as the locality of school keeps him in the village, this work is not in a location that affirms his manhood. He frequently complained about his lack of opportunity to move to a city, to continue his education

and to improve his English. All three of these things were links to masculinity for Lucky whose presence in the village made him feel incompetent as a man and unready for marriage, despite his ripe age of 29.

New commodities such as graphic shirts, watches, even laptops are signs of education and status; they have strong ties to the city and are very desirable in the village (Trawick 1990: 215). Vimla was one, among many, who complained about how economic migration is making some people wealthier; the increased polarity of wealth is disrupting village harmony. “People are starting to care about who has what and how to get more.” Monetization, generalized commodity exchange, differentiation of resources, and individualized work and earnings have all meant an increasing emphasis on the individual and the possibilities of “individual success.” These factors have also increased the difficulty in fulfilling kin obligations, and a son’s need of support (Palriwala 1994, Shah 1998). More than ever, economic capital rather than social relationships define a person and a son’s personal success in the economic sphere informs the appreciation he received from his family (SBMA 2009).

The growing interest in new forms of material wealth is stratifying the village by gender and economic class. As the agricultural subsistence economy is embedded in a market economy, men must sell their labor outside the village, in order to acquire an expanding range of goods and services that are becoming social necessities. With the absence of men, women adopt new obligations that stem from government directed village development. As women fill vacant spots on the Panchayat, the character of their labor secures unity as the village evolves and changes. Their political activity strikes a balance between national duty and kinship obligation.



The joint family is multifaceted and relies heavily on the male line of descent. While the man's seed is passed down from generation to generation, a woman contributes to 'relatedness' through her labor and other idioms of shared spaces. To produce affection in her conjugal home, a daughter-in-law performs devotion to the family and concerns her self with the family's wellbeing. Given this position, women -who, as of late, outnumber men in the village- are placed in the 'public' and gendered space of the Gram Panchayat. Nowadays, women fill the void for leadership in village Panchayats placing them under new demands, as they become state actors. The nature of a woman's labor in the home has prepared her to approach development with care and devotion.

## Chapter 2: The Re-Politicized Panchayat Raj

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### Introduction

Under the “Micro-planning” section of the SBMA website you can find the following complaint:

The needs of the rural people are fitted according to the Government schemes as and when they are sanctioned. The true realization of the decentralization process would be achieved when schemes and programs are planned in response to peoples need.

The critique suggests that the full potential of the Panchayat Raj has not been realized; it has yet to become a tool for real grassroots democracy. Despite the remodeling of the Panchayat over the last two decades, priorities of marginalized individuals still go unheard. SBMA claims the original intent of the PRI is local democracy that serves the interest of rural communities, yet in Gairsain the objective of the Panchayat has not been met (SBMA 2009).

Today, I see the PRI as encapsulating the duality of India’s national character. By first contextualizing the function of the PRI as described by the central government and the international community, as well as Gandhi’s intentions for the system, I hope to demonstrate that women’s participation acts as a check on state authority and ensures an element of locally founded *swaraj* or self rule. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a large percentage of men have migrated out of the village, leaving women in charge of the Panchayat. In this chapter I hope to show that women, who are both the leaders of their communities as well as the unifying force within the home, participate in the Panchayat in a manner that is characterized by

their inclination to serve their kin/village.<sup>6</sup> Through elections, women are turned into agents of the state challenging their accountability, for they become responsible to two diverging authorities: the state and the community. From Vimla's account, it seems that her ultimate duty still lies with her kin, thus her familial obligation impels national identity and political participation. As a result, Vimla's communal belonging is constant in her identity, while her position as state actor is worn as a mask when it benefits her.

Additionally, in this chapter I aim to demonstrate that women's work within the Panchayat fashions new roles in women's lives and adds value to already meaningful relationships. While in specific spaces a woman's duty to her loved ones is classified as a passive performance, the consequence of a suffocated/under-developed individual, in the public and political arena of the PRI, a women's labor is placed in new light. The Panchayat recasts women's "sacrificial" personhood as a productive and authoritative position, illuminating the possibilities inherent in subordination.

### History

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment was implemented by India's central government to increase 'bottom up' or grass-root rural development. The Act was drafted under Rajiv Gandhi's administration in 1991. It was passed in 1992 and came into full force on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1993. Its addition reflected the inability of the ruling structure to effectively influence India's thousands of villages and address the poverty

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<sup>6</sup> To reiterate, these terms are often used interchangeably by villagers in Kuningad who refer to their neighbors in kinship terms.

that characterizes rural life.<sup>7</sup> Rural communities' contributions to India's "Below Poverty Line" (BPL) count were seen as undermining India's international image as a developed nation state.<sup>8</sup> Political leaders of the time hoped that in "solving" the problem of rural poverty, the Panchayat Raj might help India create a favorable international image (*The Economist* 1997). The Act came at a significant turning point in India's history. The early 1990's were a time of turmoil, instability and transformation. In 1989, India's economy was on the brink of a financial crisis; foreign reserves were depleted and the value of the rupee was slipping rapidly. Under financial pressure, India's central government initiated a number of drastic changes that have shaped its trajectory and state function.

By the end of 1991 Manmohan Singh, who was appointed Financial Minister under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, had initiated India's Economic Reforms. The economic transformation involved a shift away from the socialist model that had been set up under Nehru's regime to the adoption of neo-liberal reformist policies. The policies were revolutionary because they moved India out of its isolationist past into a future that encouraged international trade and investment, thus further embedded India in the global capitalist system. The overall direction of liberalization has remained constant and is credited with India's achievement of high economic

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<sup>7</sup> I must emphasize that this is an subjective characterization (represented through statistics such as BDP). Both national and international discourse speak of the devastating condition of rural people.

<sup>8</sup> "Below Poverty Line" is an economic benchmark and poverty threshold used by the government of India to indicate the economically disadvantaged who need government assistance. The standard is based off an international benchmark that defined the income of less than one dollar a day as extreme poverty. This measurement is critiqued as being Euro-centric for it was determined by the World Bank and is based on income. (Ravallion, Chen and Sangraula 2009: 163-184)

growth and industrialization. India's economic liberalization has also been celebrated for its ability to alleviate poverty in this "developing" country and uplift the destitute sectors of the population.

The following decade (1990s) was a time of rapid modernization. As the walls that had protected India's domestic market were torn down by neo-liberal reforms, which privatized much of the economy and opened up India to international trade, other internal changes were initiated to advance financial progress (Panagariya 2008: 259). Among the national government's top concerns were: reducing poverty, generating employment, strengthening infrastructure, developing human resources and improving the Panchayat Raj Institution.<sup>9</sup> The national government recognized that the potential of the PRI to restructure government and revolutionize the top-down model of government that had been in place over the last few decades. Empowering local communities could bridge the city-village divide and tap into the 'idle' resources of rural communities, making for a more even/equal development process (Kaushik 2005: 83). Only two years before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment was passed, the same Amendment had been rejected by Parliament (1989). When brought up a second time in 1991, the PRI was refashioned as a tool for spreading social and economic development to rural communities; the government favored the structure for its distributive potential and 'awakening' powers.

Over the years, many leaders have celebrated the potential of the Panchayat to educate and enable rural people so that the population can serve their country properly with labor. In 2007, in a conference held by the Organization for Economic

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<sup>9</sup> This list comes from India's national five year plan at the time (1992-1997)

Co-operation and Development (OECD), the general director of India's Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (ICRRID) asserted that "the Indian nation-state is committed to ensuring success by building human capital, therefore our institution has been engaged in imparting education and training to the elected representatives of grass-root democracy (the PRI)." Such rhetoric as "human capital" is a new object of state concern that is invoked to support the economic necessity of rural development. By borrowing from the neoliberal framework, development projects are recast as savvy investments in human capital.<sup>10</sup> Under neoliberalism, the state no longer feels pressured to provide welfare or redistribute resources to impoverished citizens. Rather through a new anti-poverty campaign grounded in empowerment, the state claims to enable the poor to become more productive and capable of helping themselves. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1989) made the following statement to India's Parliament concerning the Panchayat and the undeveloped "human capital" of rural areas:

There is a vast cultivated field of talent lying fallow in rural areas; it is that fallow field which India is now seeding through various programs initiated in rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Neoliberalism in this context is defined as a set of political economic practices that argue human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free market and free trade (Harvey 2003: 2).

<sup>11</sup> The quote was presented by Rashpal Malhotra, the General Director for the Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID) in a conference for the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development. The location of Rajiv Gandhi's speech was not provided.

The Panchayat is refashioned in neoliberal idioms as an efficient method for creating ‘productive’ citizens. The Panchayat delivers social assistance while also providing a space for local democracy.

The development of human capital was not the only motivation behind Parliament’s passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment. Momentarily setting aside the gendered dimension of the Act, I should emphasize that decentralization and grass-root democracy is and has been central to India’s national identity. The PRI antecedes the contemporary ascendancy of neoliberalism in India by many decades. While the institution has been reformed to coincide with the neoliberal reforms, the original intent of the PRI was to establish a system for local self-government and was championed by national leader, Mahatma Gandhi.

### Swaraj

The Panchayat Raj was particularly close to Gandhi’s heart because the system institutionalized Gandhi’s theory of swaraj (self rule).<sup>12</sup> Gandhi believed that by establishing Gram Panchayats in every village, each community would be a self-sufficient republic. “True democracy would be realized as the humblest and lowest Indian would equally be the ruler of India as the tallest in the land” (1948: 517). Other leaders, including the writer of the constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, were reluctant to include the PRI in the final document. Ambedkar regarded the village as the

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<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee (1986: 89) notes that by self-rule Gandhi meant to exclude government and was concerned with ensuring the happiness and welfare of all through a governing of the self by the self. In other words, the type of government that matched Gandhi’s ideal was an ‘enlightened anarchy’ where rule was unnecessary because individuals lived according to the moral principles of their community.

archetype of regressive India and thought by authorizing local people, the center would be entrusting an ignorant population (Singla 2007: 87).

For Gandhi, however, the village was not a backward field of ignorance but the locus of truth and freedom. In his weekly journal, “Harijan”, Gandhi published the following remarks pertaining to the Panchayat:

I have not pictured a poverty-stricken India containing ignorant millions. I have pictured to myself an India continually progressing along the lines best suited to her genius. I do not, however, picture it as a third-class or even a first-class copy of the dying civilization of the West. My dream is fulfilled when every one of the seven lakhs of villages becomes a well-living republic in which there are no illiterates, in which no one is idle for want of work, in which everyone is usefully occupied and has nourishing food (Gandhi 1938:200).

For Gandhi, modest living was the strongest challenge to Western civilization and represented freedom from “enlightened” reason. He rejected the British parliamentary system because he believed it isolated the people from their government. Gandhi emphasized the potential of the Panchayat as an alternative to provide a model for true decentralized democracy, a democracy concerned with morality rather than economic accumulation.

Swaraj was central to Gandhian nationalism. Concepts such as morally driven self-rule as well as the glorification of simple/modest living are key to Gandhi’s vision for the nation. He distinguished the Indian nation from its colonial leadership through a discussion of spirituality. He held human dignity and tolerance to be moral priorities, the protection of these social ethics was intended to determine the role of the Panchayat.



## The Spread of Universal Humanity

The PRI, the same system, that Gandhi used to oppose Western ideals, is embraced by the global community as a method for economic progress and the spread of human rights.<sup>13</sup> In 2003, *Economic and Political Weekly* published an article titled “The Panchayat Raj Institution and Human Rights in India.” Written by George Mathew, journalist and editor of the *Morning Star*, the article outlines how international bodies like the United Nations defined human rights as inalienable rights that belong to all individuals (2003: 155).<sup>14</sup> Mathew proceeds to condemn India for violating the rights of rural people in the past (2003: 160). He then applauds the Panchayat for its ability to incorporate local individuals in government. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment allegedly spreads ideas of justice, equality and liberty to the local level. The Panchayat is described as a tool for the Indian government to move forward away from traditional society towards a vibrant *real* democracy that champions “human development” (Mathew 2003:160-161). While the article invokes many of Gandhi’s ideas on morality, for Mathew morality is dispensed from above onto traditional communities. For Gandhi, power should remain vested in the masses and come from the ground-up.

In other words, Gandhi presented the Panchayat as a method through which India could ‘return’ to a society that was untouched by the poison of modern institutions. The *Economic and Political Weekly* article sees the Panchayat as a way

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<sup>13</sup> Transnational institutions, such as the United Nations, have contributed financial support and development projects that aid the improvement of the PRI. See the following article in the Times of India:

[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-12-16/varanasi/28101208\\_1\\_workshop-project-sant-ravidas-nagar](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-12-16/varanasi/28101208_1_workshop-project-sant-ravidas-nagar)

<sup>14</sup> UK newspaper, described by the BBC news as “left wing”.

to spread Western ideology to marginalized locations. These two visions for local government come from opposing ‘camps,’ but their portrayals of the Panchayat are noticeably similar. Both emphasize the role of local democracy to preserve (and create) the moral fabric of society, as well as emphasize the ability of the institution to influence the communities it is intended to represent.

### Decentralized Government: the Center’s Perspective

Two years ago, Prime Minister Singh celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the Panchayat Raj. Exhorting state governments to strengthen the legal provisions and reform the Panchayat Raj, Dr Singh (2009) reasoned that the Panchayat Raj must be empowered as “local self government and strengthened so that it can evolve schemes for social justice and economic development.” The PM also rechristened the government’s flagship program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). He argued that Gandhi, as the father of the nation, “gave more emphasis on Gram Swaraj (village autonomy). To name NREGA after him is a humble tribute” (ThaindianNews 2009).

In this speech Dr. Singh encapsulates much of what the Panchayat Raj has come to mean to India. He appropriates certain qualities of Gandhi’s vision into the modified function of the PRI. National identity encompasses rural and modest living as the majority of Indian reside in India’s villages, while it is also characterized by economic strength and universal ethics (human rights). The Panchayat is endorsed from a number of different sectors for its potential to 1) implement efficient economic

development, poverty alleviation, and labor generation; 2) spread liberal ideologies of human rights, liberty, and justice; and 3) generate a system that is distinctly Indian, domestic, spiritually enlightened and locally derived.

### The Development of Panchayat

To a large extent, the Panchayat is still trying on the various outfits that the central government and the world have stitched. More than just an institution for rural development, it is also a developing institution. Currently, it serves the central government as a means for encouraging village development while promoting and preserving village unity. Furthermore, the PRI lightens the pressure of economic migration by addressing social issues that the absence of men leaves in its wake. The state 'assists' communities through these bodies of democracy; Panchayat engages village participation to meet the larger political objective of capital accumulation while minimizing social spending.

Given the impoverished condition of the majority of people in India, the state cannot seem to shed its developmental "welfarist" nature.<sup>15</sup> However, welfare projects must be justified in ways that align these programs with the neoliberal paradigm (Chatterjee 1997). The state is still appraised as an instrument of development, while profitable development authorizes state function (Bose 1997). In the contemporary neoliberal milieu, the center still plans for socio-economic

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<sup>15</sup> This is referring to media representations that call attention to India's economy 'miracle' by highlighting the radically and increasingly unequal distribution of economic gains. The enrichment of the few has been accompanied by the further immiseration of the masses, leave most Indian citizens in 'unbearable' conditions (see in particular the Economist: Lessons from India China and Brazil)

development, however, this planning is acceptable as it focuses on helping the poor help themselves. The self-help rhetoric of many government schemes is, by neoliberal standards, morally admirable and economically efficient; thus development is still an acceptable expenditure of the state.

Despite the general approval of government programs and distributed resources by villagers, SBMA condemns the center's exploitation of the institution. Staff members invoke Gandhian ideas on self-rule and argue that the people should decide the direction of village growth for themselves. Elected officials have to implement state-sanctioned schemes while remaining accountable to villagers' demands. The local body acts as a planning official by recording details of the communities. This knowledge is then used to distribute resources appropriately, work-promoting schemes are carried out, and then records of its success are sent to higher authorities. The vertical, hierarchical structure of the Panchayat makes the character of the state one of "masculine domination" (Brown 1995) rather than one stemming from the community as Gandhi had intended. Bureaucratic processes are key to the developmental success of the Panchayat and engender the institution as a "planning authority." This authority "can promote the universal goal of development by harnessing within a single interconnected whole the discrete subjects of power in society. It does this by turning those subjects of power into the objects of a single body of knowledge" (Chatterjee 1997: 282).

## State Presence in Gairsain

The Panchayat as it operates at local levels supplies both a more complete and complex picture of the state's presence within Gairsain as well as provides an example of the functional image of the Panchayat. The Panchayat system is divided into three tiers, the Gram Panchayat (village level), the Panchayat Samitis (block level), and the Zilia Parishad (district level). My research focuses on the Gram Panchayats of Kuningad and Maniket, both of which belong to the Panchayat Samitis of Gairsain and the Zilia Parishad of the Chamoli district.

Vimla is a ward member of the Gram Panchayat in Kuningad. This board is made up of nine members, seven of which are women.<sup>16</sup> Unlike in other states the first elections for the Gram Panchayat in Kuningad were not held till 2003, ten years after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment had passed.<sup>17</sup> Vimla ran for Gram Panchayat in 2009 during the area's second round of elections. The Gram Panchayat in Kuningad holds "closed" meetings every month, meetings only elected Panchayat officials can attend, and "open" meetings twice a year, which are open to the whole village. Gram Panchayat members are also expected to attend block meetings, usual held twice a year in Gairsain's marketplace. The meetinghouse of the block and village Panchayats are relatively new spaces where locally elected officials gather to make decisions about village growth.

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<sup>16</sup> According to the Uttaranchal Panchayat Act (2002) a hamlet with the population of 300 will have nine members serve the Gram Panchayat. With a larger population the number of representatives will increase.

<sup>17</sup> This was mostly because Uttarakhand remained part of Uttar Pradesh until late 2000.

During my stay in Gairsain, the block meetinghouse was under construction. In comparison to the small, shack-like chai stalls and run down shops surrounding it, the outside of the meetinghouse looked modern, clean, and impressive. It had been freshly painted a shade of light beige, with a red trim; the doors were deep green. It is three stories high and has a number of rooms. The building sits at the bottom of the dirt road that leads to heart of Gairsain's market place. On one particularly hot Tuesday, my translator and I, in search of people to interview after our mid-morning chai, decided to pay it a visit.

When we stepped inside the meetinghouse I was instantly taken aback. Once I had passed through those emerald doors, the cleanliness and order of the outside was turned on its head. Bits of wall, wood, nails, trash, and newspaper littered the floor. The inside was unfinished, yet members of the Panchayat moved about the room, huddling over paperwork on dusty tables. A couple of people had brought in plastic chairs, but most of them stood. This building, much like the neoliberal character of the Panchayat, was new and in its "developing" stages. As the first edifice built to house the Panchayat, so far it offered no place to store the organization's official documents, so there they lay, papers from the state branch that authorized the Panchayat as a governing institution alongside a wrapper of coco creams and last weeks' newspaper.

The building was funded by the state of Uttarakhand as part of the development initiative to improve the Panchayat and the outside the Panchayat of Gairsain is sufficiently "improved"; it is both pristine and orderly. Step through its door, however, and the place is mess. It is an arena of hot, contested, difficult

democracy. The façade of the Panchayat, as a tool for state sanctioned rural development, discredits its other purpose within the village- to enable marginalized, rural people to participate in governing themselves.

The Gram Panchayat in Kuningad, on which Vimla is a member, is one of the many Gram Panchayats under the Gairsain block and has multiple roles in the community. It works closely with local/government-funded schools, monitoring the school's development. It also commissions other projects such as providing an irrigation system or public toilets for the village. Workers are employed for these projects through MGNREGA (2005), which guarantees one hundred days of work (at minimum wage) for every rural household. MGNREGA is one of the largest initiatives that the government has undertaken. The Panchayat's role in implementing the scheme is to make decisions about which changes in the village should be prioritized. Once the project is approved, the Panchayat receives funding from the Development Block Committee (DBC), which is then used to hire local people. Through programs such as these, the Panchayat acts as an arm of the central government to initiate schemes, like MGNREGA, which increase the purchasing power of Indian's rural population (Dev 2009).

The function of the PRI in Gairsain reveals the “contradictory, perennially quarrelsome and yet ironically well-matched couple- that comprise the identity of the developmental state in India today” (Chatterjee 1997: 297). The institution is both accountable to and concerned with the people, while also occupied by the need to increase capital and consumption. Thus at times, the Panchayat's purpose seems fraught. The Panchayat as a state driven bureaucratic institution is dangerous because

its top-down character tends to regulate and control targets of development. At the same time, commitment to traditional morality combats the regulatory nature of development projects.

Unlike the premodern state, described by James Scott (1998: 2) as ‘partially blind,’ the modern state is pervasive and ‘seeing.’ It is not a unified entity, but distributes its rule through various ‘regulatory’ bodies, actors, and manifestations, making its surveillance more extensive. Barbara Harriss-White described the modern state as a ‘shadow state’, as the ‘official’ part of the state is ‘hallowed out’ (2003: 88-89). The shadow state can ‘follow’ apolitical actors who serve state interests and regulate society in specific ways. While I have already mentioned that the local NGO disapproves of the top down character of the PRI, this top-down character simultaneously furthers state agendas by affirming the model of progress and liberty promoted by the central government. Although SBMA does not present itself as a government organization, it is government funded and supplements government schemes with appropriate trainings and workshops.<sup>18</sup> The existence of the “shadow state” in SBMA is potentially dangerous as it delinks politics from the practices of government.

Governmental practices are depoliticized through SBMA’s assistance to the state agenda, and Panchayat itself for its primary function today is development, a seemingly politically neutral mission. It justifies its assumptions that inform agendas and schemes by depicting development as serving the best interest of every

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<sup>18</sup> According to Aradhana Sharma (2008: xx) the NGOs that receive state funding, or projects that are implemented by the state, are dangerous because they are ‘intrinsically political inventions’ that confront the dangers of state regulation, repression and recuperation.



individual, constituting development work as neutral or extrinsic to power. Stuart Corbridge (2005: 16) portrays the “high modern state” as “evincing a muscle-bound faith in the virtues of reason, progress and industry; it is also defined by its hubristic ability to see a better future for all of ‘the people.’”

In general, the presence of the state in Gairsain is difficult to detect, for actors and institutions of the state are continually being redefined/reclassified by local forces. Institutions like the Panchayat have state authority but are often governed by communal laws. Other organizations, like SBMA, are government funded and assist the government in schemes, yet serve as a critique on state and national trajectories. Lastly, elected officials will sometimes own a state identity and at other times will disassociate themselves from the state. In sum, the multiple sources of state power within Gairsain are in fact hybrids of top-down government and locally derived management, making for a complex/dynamic picture of the Indian state in rural communities.

### Negotiating State Subjectivity

As an agent of development, the Panchayat holds the danger of defining norms and identities for the targets of development discourse (see Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992). However as already suggested, development is never a totalizing force and subalterns enter the discourse as already constituted actors. These “‘objects of knowledge’ can turn the ‘planning authority’ [of the state] into an object of their [the subaltern’s] power” (Chatterjee 1997: 276). While development seems to solidify state authority, moves such as the empowerment of local governing bodies end up

creating a politically charged space where locally elected officials and non-state actors engage in a “politics of citizenship” (Sharma 2008: xxii).<sup>19</sup> The dispersive character of the state that secures the national government’s governing capacity also incorporates local subjects who diverge and challenge the aims of the government and the direction of governing.

Chatterjee asserts that through development planning the post-colonial state claims authority as the embodiment of a single will and consciousness: that of the nation (1997: 279). In other words, the nation-state takes the liberty of assuming what is best and desirable for the people. The people have little say in the programs or agenda of the central government, yet it is through these programs that the central government governs its citizens into becoming productive and useful members of society. While this is a political project that advances specific goals, it is de-politicized through an ethics of human development. State governments do not feel it necessary to hear local opinions on what villagers need (SBMA). As I intent to show, it is the very subaltern women, common targets in development schemes, who *re-politicize* the PRI by demanding that the state take responsibility and justify the seemingly apolitical projects that are implemented.

### Women as State Actors

Women representatives of the Panchayat are generally proud to be state officials. The position generates a new role for women within their husband’s community. The Panchayat is another space for women to perform their devotion to

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<sup>19</sup> This is a critical practice directed at state agencies that calls to question the proper role of the state and obligations of citizenship.

their conjugal kin. These performances disrupt the top-down authority and apolitical façade of state implemented development.

The block meetinghouse in Gairsain highly esteemed among female members in the surrounding villages. However, formalities that have transformed the PRI into an effective tool for development are an inconvenience to some officials who live far from town and have to walk for hours to reach the building. To some, the bureaucracy of the Panchayat is a nuisance. One woman, Manju Devi, told me that she had always talked about village development, but now that she has to do so in a specific location, with specific people, who record everything, “it has become exhausting.” She was not alone in this complaint. However, members comply with the new bureaucratic character of the institution. In a way, the remodeling of the Panchayat has reorganized the lives of some ward members. They regulate themselves into state authorized spaces, despite traditional methods for discussing village issues. This regulatory outcome of state bureaucracy carries the danger, as Wendy Brown explains (1992: 201), of rendered elected officials “dependent and submissive by forcing them into strategies of impression managing”.<sup>20</sup>

However, as I experienced it, elected official do not become passive slaves of the state, who adopt the goal-oriented consciousness of planning authorities. They walk long distances because of their dedication to the villagers they were elected to represent. Women described themselves as being accountable to their community. Women’s work in the Panchayat is seen as an important way of weaving women into

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<sup>20</sup> Impression managing is a process where people attempt to influence the perception of others by regulating the information and controlling resources in a given social interaction.

the fabric of their society. As 'outsider wives' women ingeniously use their labor to embed themselves deeper in the community of their husband's village.

Villagers' approval is a fundamental impetus for elected officials. Without the acknowledgement or appreciation of fellow villagers, most women find no reason to serve their post. Manju said that she was willing to walk the many hours to the building because the community needs her. "I care a lot about this community, that is why I work so hard, and I am so weak." The sense of responsibility that these women demonstrate challenges the ability for higher authorities to determine the trajectory of development. Elected officials (such as Manju) prioritize their service to the community over their governmental identity and (top-down) prescribed goals of development.

Women's commitment to their kin weakens the vertical nature of the Panchayat but solidifies women's placement and contribution to her kin/village. Manju, for example, claimed her greatest accomplishment was building a bridge that connects houses on one side of a river with the school on the other side so that her children and the children of others can safely cross. She told me that she wanted to make it safe for her children and the children of her husband's brother's wife to cross the river. It was this concern for her family prompted her to run for election. Ground-up motivation is central to women's participation, troubling the 'flow' of authority.

In general the Panchayat offers women a means for strengthening relationships as well as creating new ones, rooting her place in her husband's village. While I was staying with Sapna Devi she got many visitors who came to talk to her about Panchayat work. At times it would be a teacher who needed the official stamp

of the Panchayat to obtain government funding for the local school. Other times it would be an SBMA member who would discuss various plans or training SBMA may be offering that the Panchayat should promote. Prem was often present at these discussions, but he tended to nod along while Sapna did most of the talking. A meeting was never complete without a cup of Sapna's delicious tea that always included cinnamon and a squeeze of lemon. To most, the staff of SBMA has clout when it comes to political matters, yet SBMA members would frequently consult Sapna about programs. Sapna's position as chief of the Gram Panchayat created new relationships which she highly valued.

As a public servant, Sapna maintains that her first concern and priority is the community. Her neighbors and family were referenced in her decisions. In many analyses on women's involvement in the PRI, it is suggested that families hold women back from political participation (Singla 2007, Banerjee 1994). However, I found the opposite to be more accurate. Elected officials received much of their value as political officials from their kin who fuel their involvement.

For many women, involvement in the Panchayat is characterized by commitment to the community's demands. Female representatives often affirmed dissociation between the community and the nation by commonly distinguished and prioritized villagers' ideas of development over rural development as prescribed by the state and national government. The Panchayat is not a top down dispenser that provides for 'dormant' villagers, but a place of contestation and messy democracy where elected officials and villagers come to define the terms of citizenship and state function for themselves. As such, the Panchayat and women participants unify the

village and constitute the community as a single entity that can make demands on the state (as a group) and work together on its own (singular) path of growth.

### Disputed Authority

When I was staying with Vimla and her family, I was lucky enough to attend a Panchayat meeting. The meeting I attended was slightly out of the ordinary, for it was only open to ward members and women. According to Lucky, the schoolteacher I stayed with, men and women hold different meetings so that women will speak more openly (it did not seem to be an issue here). The purpose of this particular meeting was to distribute payment for a local project to clean the street, funded by the state government through the MGNREGA scheme. The Panchayat of Kuningad had proposed to the BDC that it funds for the streets and pathways that connect the village to be cleaned and made safe. The program was approved and the Gram Panchayat made the necessary hires for the work to ensue. The issue that arose from this particular meeting was that women who had not been officially hired by the government still demanded payment for their assistance in the street cleaning project. While the rules had been made clear, villagers were displeased with the authority of the BDC to decide who should be paid.

The meeting was held in a small meetinghouse right under the home of the Gram Pradhan.<sup>21</sup> It consisted of just one small concrete room. The walls were bare, except for a couple of posters that depicted things like how and when to wash your

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<sup>21</sup> This is not the same meetinghouse that is described earlier in the chapter. That meetinghouse is Gairsain block headquarters while the meetinghouse described in this scene is for the Gram Panchayat of Kuningad.

hands, what a loan can buy your family, and representations of Hindu gods and goddesses. The floor was also bare, with a few burlap sacks for villagers to sit on. There was one table, at which sat the only four men present. One was an SBMA staff member. I had met him a couple of times. He was an incredibly kind and friendly man, with a wide mustache and potbelly. He asked me to sit next to him at the table, but the contrast between women on the floor and men at the table was so stark that sitting next to him would have made me both uncomfortable and an object of excessive attention. I declined respectfully and stayed sitting cross-legged next to Vimla. Despite her authority as an elected official, Vimla and the other women members sat amongst the female villagers.

The meeting formally began as soon as the Pradhan entered the room. A short, stout man, with a bulbous nose and toothy smile, he was dressed in modern attire, an oxford shirt and khaki slacks. He entered the room with his head down. He put a couple of documents on the table and left again. When he returned, he addressed the group of noisy women. He had a hard time talking over them and had to raise his voice a number of times. He was trying to explain to the group how payment for the latest project would be distributed. When he said that only those whose names that were on the list for the road and path clearing would be paid, women were up in arms. One stood up abruptly and started yelling at the Pradhan. Another woman soon joined her in her verbal assault. The unruly debate went on for about thirty minutes, and at no point was the Pradhan able to establish order.

Eventually the Pradhan caved and gave every woman, regardless of whether her name was on the list, 100 Rupees for her work cleaning the streets. The Panchayat

chose the women who were supposed to be 'employed' by the project, however many of the women who were not employed had decided to help anyway and went about cleaning the streets, despite the fact that they were not officially registered to do so.

When it was time for payment, the non-registered participants felt a sense of entitlement. They maintained that if a woman had helped, it was only fair that she be compensated. The idea that the state has the authority to distribute payment as it sees fit was not acceptable to many. Rather, some invoked a locally derived notion of distributive justice, grounded in the idea that all members of the community should have equal access to resources, including compensated labor, not regulated from above by authorities.

In the end, the women who were not on the registered list of participants were still paid their dues. The authority of the village head was dismantled by the women's demands. This scene reflects the flexibility of the Panchayat meetinghouse to be a place for both state officials and local women to negotiate state role and national belonging.

Through top-down development, the national government often patronizes its citizens by denying them a real voice in their own growth. It relies on the use of universal ethics to justify progressive agendas. This imposition and determinacy of what local people need (without hearing from the people themselves) evokes colonial ideology where the rulers believe that they know what is best for their subjects. Just as enlightenment was a necessary precondition of self-rule, now empowerment (often in the form of training) is a prerequisite of effective leadership. In the current age of progress towards 'universal' goals, the central government first seeks to instill in



ignorant villagers education, skill training, and purchasing power in order to form proper citizens.<sup>22</sup> The Panchayat is not yet a system of communication between the “higher ups,” as Vimla referred to them, and the villagers. While the Panchayat is conceived as decentralized democracy, trainings and programs, like the empowerment workshops that women representative are pressured to attend, indicate that leadership and development must be informed in a way that meet the standards of the NGO, state and national government, no the needs of local people.

### Politics of Belonging

Current development projects create ties between the state and individuals. To meet assumedly “common” goals there needs to be commitment from both sides: the state and the people. Government has the responsibility to deliver resources and information, while villagers have the responsibility to participate and develop themselves. The dual identity of ward members allows female participants in government to tread the line between the state and society. Women occupy a dual role as both authorized agents of the state and locally elected representatives of the community. Often times, women will own their state-given authority yet quickly discard this authority when it benefits them to do so. In my research, women openly identified with the state when discussing the benefits they (as state actors) had provided their village. When plans failed, they disassociated themselves. In both instances, it seems to me, women were seeking to embed themselves within their

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<sup>22</sup> The justification of schemes such as the M comes from the government’s desire to provide the rural masses with purchasing power. See the official website of MGNREGA for more details. < <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>>

community. In some instances women bind together with the village as a community distinct from the state; in other moments, women labor for the village within governing bodies to bring facilities to the village.

Duty and accountability characterize women's political involvement. A sense of accountability came from below because women were elected by and had to answer to the villagers. When projects went awry, elected officials would discursively distance the state from the village and then from their subordinated position they would chastise the state's ineffectiveness. Whenever Vimla complained about the lack of facilities, she never mentioned her role in the process. However, when Vimla boasted about what the village did have, it was her doing. Through this dialogue the state becomes an entity that is fluid and locally defined. Additionally, citizenship and the trajectory of development are both things that are "culturally coded and collectively informed" (Sharma 2008: 143). While human rights campaigns have promoted a universal citizenship based on liberal ideas of humanity, villagers invoke national belonging that is locally specific. Their ideas of citizenship commonly include commentary about the proper role of the state as provider, which is reminiscent of premodern systems of rule.

#### Devotional Labor Relocated

Vimla's participation is driven by locally founded ideas of morality and duty. While independent interests were motivating factors behind her decision to contest, her involvement in the PRI affirms her commitment to her husband's village. Manju expressed resentment towards her work in the PRI, thus her labor was presented by

Manju as a personal sacrifice. It was not for her satisfaction but for the value of contributing to the growth and progress of her community, especially her kin. The range of experiences and reactions that female participants articulated reveals that political conduct was not *liberating of an autonomous self*, but *affirming of a communal being*. The celebration of the Panchayat as an emancipatory force exposes the trajectory of development and the miscommunication that occurs between the state and central government and local bodies. Additionally, the new role women find themselves in sheds lights on the performance of service as a beneficial, powerful, and authoritative enactment. Ward members use development to re-envision a just society that prioritizes the relationships that contribute to their sense of self-worth.

According to the World Bank, “people are the means and the ends of development” (World Bank 1997: 110). Justified through universal ethics, strategies of empowerment and grassroots participation threaten to de-politicize development. In many instances, participatory approaches legitimize representations of “external interests as local need, and dominant interests as community concerns” (Cooke 2001: 22). However, in Gairsain, the Panchayat functions as a space for the *re-politicization* of locally established values and aspirations. The election of local women, who affirm their ties to their community, is one way that top-down development is contested at the local level. When villagers enter into the political realm they come with valuable/concrete ideas of justice, duty and love, derived from ‘traditional’ fields of social power. When the state authorizes the Panchayat it empowers these traditions. This new space of the Panchayat constitutes a meeting ground where competing ideas

on proper development and the role of the state sometimes collide. These collisions are moments of productivity for redefined roles and attitudes.

People like Vimla, Sapna and Manju prioritize their community. Despite their authority, they sit bunched up on a concrete floor with other female villagers. They let the people influence their decisions and blend so beautifully with the other village women that as outsider, I could not tell who was an official and who wasn't. One ward told me that she "agonizes with the women, their pain is my pain, we all suffer from the same hardships and so we take our jobs very seriously." These accounts suggest that perhaps, these female officials' subordination to their village and their kin is also the source of their power.

### Chapter Three: Participation as Empowerment

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Despite its chaotic interior, Vimla approves of the new meetinghouse of the Panchayat. “It is important to have a place where the community can gather. Development,” Vimla maintains, “can mean countless things to a number of people, but everyone should be working to better their environment. People should be willing to make some personal sacrifices for the community to prosper. That is key. If everyone works together then the community will survive and be uplifted.”

Vimla first ran for ward member of her hamlet three years earlier, in 2008. She was inexperienced and had never attended a Panchayat meeting before. She says that she was elected because she is well educated and has good ideas for the village. Her parents, while never serving on the board themselves, were very concerned with the village’s progress and taught her about village issues. “I learnt a lot from my parents, and brought many good ideas with me when I moved from my natal home.” Vimla has used the Panchayat as a platform to voice her ideas and has seen some of these, such as the local water tank, become a reality.

In a paper called “Grassroots Empowerment” written for the Centre for Women Development Studies (CWDS), Narayan Banerjee (1994) asked the following question: “Are rural women in India beginning to break their silence, to question, to gain confidence, to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources, altering self-image after entering the newly re-elected Panchayats?”<sup>23</sup> While many

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<sup>23</sup> This paper was written for the Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS), a group that emerged from the Committee on the Status of Women in India that wrote the first government report on women’s condition in society, *Towards Equality* (1974). Banerjee’s

scholars (Banerjee 1994, Sarkar 2010, Singla 2007) argue that it has been too short a time to see significant structural transformations or the deconstruction of patriarchy, India can still see changes “in [women’s] awareness and knowledge, confidence and aspiration levels, their perceptions of self, status, recognition. We believe that in the case of this long marginalized group these small beginnings are giant steps and have a big potential in future” (Sarkar 2010: 220).

The future for women representatives looks bright, but how does personal metamorphosis emerge from political inclusion? By 1985, the concept of participation as empowerment became an internationally accepted notion (Bannerjee 1994: 4). It replaced the modernization paradigm that had received criticism for exacerbating existing inequalities (Spencer 2010). Through participation it is maintained that power can be transferred to disempowered individuals (World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development 1979). A marginalized woman, such as Vimla, gains a voice, confidence and awareness as a member of the Panchayat. Her personhood can be realized through achieving and exercising political power.

Nobel Peace Prize winner for his contribution to welfare economics, Amartya Sen states that when women are oppressed they do not recognize the extent of their deprivation. In Development As Freedom (1999), Sen maintains that the shift from welfare to empowerment has produced women as active agents of change. Sen emphasizes the value of women as individuals, agents who achieve economic independence and become productive citizens when their capacities are enhanced.

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paper will be referred to throughout the chapter as it comes from an autonomous research institute that makes assists the government and other organizations improve women’s status.

That these capacities are innate and can be developed to cultivate a new source of human capital makes women's empowerment an economically beneficial endeavor. Additionally, Sen claims that women's autonomy has a direct, positive effect on children's lives and environmental preservation. Sen promotes women's "social emancipation" so that women may have a far-reaching impact on her family and society (1999: 192). This hypothesis both advocates for women's liberation from a restrictive familial role and relies on their continued commitment to their role within the family to implement proper development. Sen's ideas have directly impacted the United Nations Human Development Program, which has shaped India's development trajectory.

Proper empowerment means realizing one's capability, potential and confidence to take action in one's life (Hapke 1992: 4). Yet, when Vimla described her involvement in the Panchayat she stressed that she ran for election because of her commitment to the improvement of her hamlet. She portrayed her activity as in response to her village's specific needs. She maintained that she gave up some personal liberties for public service. She stressed that this is a necessary thing for everyone to do and if we all act for the community rather than for ourselves, communities will prosper.

The role of preservation and reproduction, the dedication of self to those around you, and the motif of sacrifice are threads that are present in both domestic and public service. In this chapter my focus is liberation ideology, which offers an alternative narrative (to Vimla's) of women's political participation. I argue that despite the similar characteristics of women's work in the family and in the PRI, the movement

from the home to the Panchayat is assumed by outsiders to represent individual growth and the increased independence of elected women. In a public arena women are allegedly 'empowered' by their labor, whereas within their own homes they are oppressed by it. This distinction between the legitimized, empowering world of public politics and the oppressive, isolating world of the household becomes problematic from the internal perspective of the elected woman who verbalizes her Panchayat work in the same idioms that she uses to speak of her work in the home.

### The Silent Woman

“Bollo!” (*Speak!*)

No response. Heena kept her head down, eyes fixed on the floor.

“Bollo!”

Her adolescent son and nephew stood on either side of her. She kept her hands in her lap and her light pink sari draped over her face.

“Bollo! Bollo!”

There was silence. Thick silence. Tensions rose as we waited for the response, but Heena would not break. Eventually, my translator let out a sigh of frustration. He turned to me with a nervous smile. “This is what happens,” he said in English, a language Heena could not understand. “Women will not talk, they are afraid to talk, they don’t know what to say. It’s hard to believe she is the Gram Pradhan.”

We had been sitting in Heena’s house for barely fifteen minutes when this speechless moment occurred. We had gotten her name, caste and education level, but with much resistance. Heena answered the simple questions in a small, high-pitched



voice that was barely audible. She never directed the answers to my translator or me, but kept her eyes cast downward towards our feet, embodying the comportment of a modest woman. The two boys, on the other hand, kept their eyes on us. They fixed their gaze on us from the moment we entered the door and stayed with us until we left. A member of the NGO, Samar, was also present during this painfully uncomfortable interview. He was friendly with Heena and had arranged the meeting. He was a kind man and had greeted Heena warmly, explaining the reason for our visit. She had responded with a quick nod of her head and a gesture for us to enter her home.

Heena's house was large for Gairsain. Her husband's family owned a shop in the marketplace and land in the village, making them one of the more affluent families around. The house was two stories high, which was unusual for the area. The first room, where we conducted the interview, was small and nicely decorated. There was a pink couch, a worn red rug and pictures of deities adorning the walls. There were two little chairs and a simple wooden table in the center. Upon our entry, Heena had insisted on getting us tea to drink, but Samar refused vehemently. I hoped that she would not take his refusal as a rejection of her hospitality. Samar disregarded this possibility, mostly because it was lunchtime and he wanted this to be a quick and easy interview. He knew tea would take time, time he didn't want to waste. Unfortunately for him, the tea was not the biggest obstacle between him and his lunch: Heena would not talk. As soon as I began asking longer questions, she stopped responding. My translator, Dhan Singh was lost as to how to continue. We were sitting there in sullen

silence when Heena's husband suddenly entered the house and the whole scene was instantly transformed.

Immediately, Heena got up and started making tea, ignoring Samar's refusal. Her husband sat down in the seat Heena had vacated. He was a tall, handsome man, with a large frame and angular features. He was wearing a striped polo shirt and jeans. Samar quickly explained to him what was going on, and his furrowed brow eased abruptly. He grinned as Samar explained to Dhan Singh and me that he had recently stepped down as Pradhan himself, and was very involved in the Panchayat work.

He looked towards me, seeming to expect a rapid fire of questions about his work. I obliged with genuine interest. Heena's husband, Guatam, was an educated and aware man. His father had also been Pradhan, and Guatam had been exposed to Panchayat work ever since he was a little boy. His interest in village development was evident and he spoke passionately about bringing ecotourism to Gairsain and building the economy. I asked him if his wife had the same goals for the village. He looked a little surprised and replied, "Of course, she is my wife!" I asked him if he and his wife ever disagreed. He told me that they didn't: they discussed many village issues but had the same ideas. He explained to me that this was good: his ideas are good ideas and she can continue the good work he had done as Gram Pradhan. He added that her election was important because women need to get out of the house and be involved in politics.

Guatam's explanation suggests that he, like many men in the area, sees his wife as an extension of himself and his family. He maintained that his devoted wife

would carry out his agenda and that women's inclusion in politics is a necessity for social justice. Guatam's last comment about the significance of women's political participation is grounded in the ideology of empowered women: that women's empowerment symbolizes community development in areas beyond gender equality, although this is oft-cited reason behind women's empowerment. This scene did not appear to me as reflecting equality. Heena, like her husband, had served as village head, yet while I had intended to interview her, she was in the kitchen brewing tea, while Guatam discussed village matters with me.

Guatam told me that his wife was uneducated, having only attended school until second grade. Her knowledge about government and the PRI came from Guatam and his father. He asserted with chief-like authority that her lack of education should not stop her from entering politics. "It is important for women to go 'outside' [the house], women's participation is a must." I tried to push Guatam to tell me why and how it would help India, but he relied on buzzwords such as modernization without describing any tangible changes that women's inclusion would prompt. Guatam did not see any fundamental difference between women's and men's approaches to development. In fact, he seemed to assume that women naturally defer to men with respect to such issues. However, Guatam was fervent about the importance of women's inclusion; their participation was vital, but presumably only for its symbolic value.

When Heena left the room, Samar and Dhan Singh acted as though she had let me down. Heena's self-dismissal was a loaded move. In her avoidance of speech, Heena fell short of the image of an empowered female state actor that the state and

NGO seek to cultivate. Dhan Singh's response was particularly striking. He was not from Gairsain and was a stranger to most, knowing only a handful of people.

Originally from the capital of Uttarakhand (Dehradun), he had been educated in Delhi and abroad. He spoke English perfectly, whereas he was only proficient in the local language (Garhwali).

Dhan Singh had become increasingly uncomfortable and visibly embarrassed during Heena's silence. His instinct was to apologize to me for her behavior. He appeared ashamed of Heena, embarrassed that she was not the empowered (or verbal) woman that elected officials should be. While Gairsain is not his village and Heena is not a woman he was familiar with, he still claimed some responsibility for the situation. Dhan Singh was conscious of the behavior I was expecting and assumed that I was disappointed with the interaction. At the end of the interview he turned to me and said, "You must understand many of these women do not have an education." Embarrassment over women's 'condition' was something I've often encountered, particularly in educated males. Interestingly, individuals such as Dhan Singh who are most removed from the realities of these women's lives tend to be most anxious about women's 'oppressed' status, because this status impairs India's identity as a progressive nation.

Language is considered a tool for recognizing and conveying subjectivity (Butler 1997). As a perceptible variable, it is understood as a marker of formal education. Women's lack of speech, or their lack of competence with certain modes of speech, is often cited as indicative of their subordinated subjecthood. The argument that women are denied an education and thus do not become individuals who think

“for themselves” is used both to reason for and against their political inclusion.<sup>24</sup>

For many politicians, “passivity and silence [of women] is a major obstacle for the development of gender equality work in politics” (van der Ros 1999: 230). During the 1992 Parliamentary debates on the inclusion of women’s reservation in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, one Member of Parliament, Syed Shahbuddin, contended:

Our historical experience is that reservation for women has been used by the vested interests in order to augment their power within the elected bodies because of the disparity in the level of education and consciousness among women belonging to different strata of society... there is a possibility that the very elements who are today dominating the village life shall find their way back riding on the strength of the women members who will be elected largely from their group (cited in Banerjee 1994: 5).

Shahbuddin reasons that elected officials should represent the people, but women, who in his opinion lack consciousness, are easily influenced and would be susceptible to exploitation. Following this logic, Shahbuddin argues that reserving seats for women impedes democracy rather than enhances it.

In a similar vein, even local officials criticize women’s reserved seats for putting inept village women in positions of power. One female ex-Pradhan explained to me that while she saw women’s reservation as a good thing in principle, it was worthless without the proper training. “So many of those women are uneducated,” she said, “and do not speak for themselves. Women should be trained on how to be good leaders.” Women’s inexperience with public speaking as well as political leadership presumably reflects a fundamental lack in their personality and inability to

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<sup>24</sup> Statistic on women’s education in India

(autonomously) manage village development.

### Empowered Women= Developed Nation

The under-developed condition of women is targeted by the central government's schemes for human development. The national government hopes to solve the women question for reasons that extend beyond gender justice. With documents such as the UN's Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) guiding India's Development Policy, it appears that women's status is an international barometer of progress (Banerjee 1994: 1). In Aradhana Sharma's ethnography of a government funded NGO she illustrates one scenario where local people penetrate the detached interests behind "official" state representatives, destabilizing the *reality* that women are being 'liberated.' One of Sharma's informants, Prabha Kishor, a member of the NGO Mahila Samakhya (MS), complained about state intervention in grassroots development. She specifically criticized the state representative who had employed the NGO to depict women as active political subjects.

'They need women who can vote sensibly and who can talk- so that the government can say to the world, 'see our women are so empowered.'" The danger is that state agents treat MS in an instrumentalist and tokenizing manner and appropriate the program as needed, to project a gender-sensitive feminist and participatory face (Sharma 2008: 194).

Prabha worried that the state is not giving enough recognition to women's importance and strength or to their way of doing things. This tokenism reflects the use of official

representations of women's development by the central government to imply that "modernity" and "liberty" prevail in India.

In a discussion of the success of the Panchayat, Manmohan Singh celebrated the high participation rates of women. He asserted that women's participation is an indicator of India's social development. However, his speech had little to do with women's lived realities or the motivations for or consequences of their participation. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently stated (New Delhi, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2010):

Our great success in this field has been the number of women representatives that outnumber the sum total elected women representatives all over the world. Political and social empowerment of Indian women is the greatest success of Panchayat Raj. It is unique in world history and in the modern era.

In this example, PM Singh uses an international comparison to assert India's superiority in the realm of gender equality and true democracy.

In a similar article in one of India's most popular newspapers, the *Hindu*, a panel of lawmakers that was examining the bill for raising women's quota to 50 percent pointed out that "the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment has ensured election of over 1,048,148 elected women representatives out of total 2,851,739 representatives in the country's three-tier rural Panchayats." The panel praised the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment for having brought about a "silent revolution" in "the process of decentralization of parliamentary democracy" in the country. The use of the term "silent revolution" stands out in this article: "revolution" implies profound change or the uprooting of an old system, whereas the adjective "silent" implies that change has taken place without drama. It seems ironic for the media to use silence and passivity positively when discussing

empowerment: an activation of passive selves. In this representation, the nation is proud of the number of women politicians because the growing number has larger implications for where India sits relative to other developed nations on that clear line of progress.

While one ought not belittle the fact that women are entering politics or deny that this change has indeed facilitated more equitable representation, I question the narrative of progress implied in the celebration of women's political participation. The narrative presented by PM Singh implies that women are overcoming the impediments of backwards, traditional societies. As empowerment is being increasingly determined by international organizations (set by universal standards) the national government's ideas on what empowerment should look like are not locally specific (Sharma 2008: 29). As a result, models of traditional womanhood (read modest/silent/passive women) are being demonized, portrayed as a restricted existence from which women must be emancipated.

#### Isolated and Deprived: Tales of Rural Women

In both the provided example of the national government's representation as well as SBMA's depiction, subaltern women are portrayed as lacking a developed self, as it has been imprisoned by traditional culture. A woman's free will and 'innate' capacities are stunted by her domesticity. Familial obligation and dharma make women into pawns that passively follow customs, which are imagined as fixed and timeless. To liberate themselves, women are told to confront their own illiteracy, inexperience, ignorance, seclusion, and the strong feudal and patriarchal structures



restricting their mobility (Banerjee 1994: 9). The following is one description of women's demeaned condition:

Women's well-defined social roles [within the home] and norms of interaction leave little room for education and critical thinking.

Women [g]o about their chores in isolation, they are unable to share their experiences of oppression with other women, and are therefore unable to tap their collective strength (Government of India 1991, 1-2, quoted in Sharma 2008: 9).

In the description above, the government places an emphasis on reason and critical thinking, as though women's confinement to the domestic sphere is stunting their rational development. Due to their inadequate education, women fail to understand the source of their depravity. By noting women's inability to recognize oppression, the government subverts the argument that women sometimes choose their oppression. The government suggests that if women knew of their shared experience and were put in contact with other women, they would organize and resist subjugation. If women weren't so isolated maybe the "silent revolution" would not have been silent but have been loudly demanded by mistreated women years earlier.

A similar (if not identical) story of women's oppression is told by SBMA. SBMA was founded in the late seventies as an organization that "gave voice to women's frustration against bad government and superstition" (SBMA 2009). Despite its origins as an Ashram for political resistance, it is now funded by both the state and national governments.<sup>25</sup> In addition, many of its programs are sponsored by and partnered with international organizations, including the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank.

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<sup>25</sup> See previous chapter for a brief explanation of government funded NGOs

The NGO runs a number of projects in the areas, ranging from “Women in Governance” to a “Youth Radio Program for Teaching English Skills.”<sup>26</sup> Launched in June 2004, “Women in Governance” targets newly elected women Panchayat members. The program is supported by the United Nations Development Program and acts as a supplement to women’s new presence in local government. Through the program, SBMA undertakes the task of training new representatives so they can articulate and verbalize their own opinions and make reasoned decisions. The mission statement for the program is as follows:

It is an interactive program that seeks to build the functional capacity of women Panchayat leaders by not merely imparting training but by using the ‘do it yourself’ approach. The program uses a participatory leaning and personality development process that can help bring out the best in women Panchayat leaders in order that they might gain in confidence and be able to lead the community from the front. The program is driven by a faith in the innate ability of the women and the belief that they only need to be organized and empowered to articulate their own aspirations, needs, and problems, so that they may participate fully in and benefit from the opportunities afforded by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment.<sup>27</sup>

Again we see women, before the correct training, as limited, bound subjects who lack necessary “functional capacities.” From this statement we can understand which capacities are considered best and can assume which capacities are considered worst.

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<sup>26</sup> This project focuses on imparting basic foundational English to children in government funded schools. The purpose of the program is to ‘level the playing field’ for children who are handicapped when it comes to further education and employment because they can’t speak English. The politics and implications of language within schools is a fascinating topic in India- but requires another thesis for true insight.

<sup>27</sup> For more information see [www.sbmahimalya.org](http://www.sbmahimalya.org)

It suggests that good qualities include confidence, assertiveness, and articulation; women who have developed such attributes are most suitable for effective leadership.

Under a list of Key Functions of the program, the website names 1) empowering women as persons 2) developing women's specific agenda and 3) activating dormant women. These functions rely on specific assumptions that fall short of reality. In declaring these goals, the workshops held by SBMA first construct women as non-persons and dormant subjects, distinct from men in their priorities, then go about empowering a subject whose existence must first be realized by the women themselves (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, Cohen 1989: 11). It appears that woman's role within the home has limited her personality, autonomy, independence and reason.

It is important to note that SBMA's depiction expects women's priorities to center around the home. Men in Gairsain would remark, "Women issues are everyone's issues." Guatam's claim that women and men have the same intension for village development, and SBMA's expectation of women's outward orientation are not mutually exclusive, but congruent assumptions about women's concerns.

#### Caught in the Web of Culture: Liberate Me!

SBMA's depiction of women's condition and the formula for empowerment creates a narrative of helpless subjects who require liberation. In SBMA's mission statement, individual development and autonomy are emphasized as necessary preconditions to the liberation of an individual who can then realize her humanity. How a woman gets to this deprived state is not of her own doing. The blame falls on her duty as mother and daughter-in-law. The idea of "a true, authentic, coherent,

static, inviolable self stands in opposition to society” (Wekker 1997: 333). Women’s outward orientation and commitment to tradition constitutes them as self-less individuals who subordinate themselves to others. Depictions of women’s “personalities” and “subjectivities” as under-developed suggest that women caught up in a web of conventions, lack the ability to assert their own agency.

Furthermore, SBMA’s portrayal represents women as politically immature subjects who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of freedom and free will. Development programs aim to spread (nationally defined) liberation, equality, truth and justice to anachronous communities that are caught up in outdated conventions. These values, presented as indisputable goods, are imparted from above. It is hard to accept the universality of human rights if they cannot be locally realized.

Transformations in women’s public conduct and verbal competence demonstrate victory over traditional forces of power. Such tangible transformations are favorable to the central government because the regime depends on overthrowing conventional ideologies. The central government has high hopes that:

The process of empowerment of women in Panchayats would enable them to re-examine their lives, recognize the sources and structures of power and of their own subordination and initiate action to challenge the existing ideologies. They would move, it is hoped, from positions of silence to gaining voice. We may see their transformation from uneducated, unquestioning persons to questioning individuals, who may value their own knowledge and learn to question gender divisions of labor (Banerjee 1994: 8).

Interestingly, this vision depicts women as acting unprovoked. Once “awakened” by modes of self-empowerment, women follow a predetermined transformation into rational, articulate and autonomous individuals. The innateness of such an evolution

is questionable since women's 'self-directed' change, authored by NGO members, trains women in specific (politically driven) ways. While it is true that the roles for women are redefined and their arena of movement expanded, it is too large of a leap to classify these changes as liberating their internal beings. I question whether true liberation of the self is possible, or if perhaps what is actually being implicitly aimed at by developers is instead a re-subjectification to the liberal paradigm.

One of the more remarkable realizations I came to from my research was that women spoke - or in Heena's case didn't speak but enacted - their political activity in ways that affirmed patriarchal institutions like Hinduism and the joint family. Political inclusion is a credible method for women's empowerment, but for women in Gairsain, PRI membership does not dismantle the patriarchal structure of the community. Women continue to prioritize familial duty. At the same time, the existing fields of power are in transition and relationships are in flux as women apply their skills for serving others. As women personify traditional femininity in new public spaces they both expand their role to include public (thus more political) performances and redefine proper political accountability in the PRI.

The shifts in fields of power that have resulted from reserved seats for women, have altered women's role in society. Yet I maintain that the story is not as black and white as many empowerment narratives make it out to be. Ideas of personhood are being redefined and while female leaders are being encouraged to embrace a new type of subjectivity, the concept of liberating the true inner self is contested. Empowerment suggests the strength of the individual to overcome external power; acts of empowerment also politicize and celebrate "traditional" ideas of femininity

and sacrifice that are embedded in women's gendered role. Women's new relationship with the nation-state as governmental actors is a productive one, but it does not match the neat, clean and direct 'empowerment' that both NGOs and the state aspire to impart.

The representation of women living in isolation is a stereotype that comes from the urban middle-class and is projected on rural women. Women in Gairsain lead physically demanding lives where isolation and alienation from other women is neither the practice nor a realistic possibility. Vimla's labor and interdependence on other villagers kept her in contact with a number of people throughout the day. I don't recall ever meeting a woman who had no contact with outsiders. Rather, I was surprised by the number of visitors a woman would have on any given day. Vimla seemed to be in constant company. If she wasn't interacting with her parents-in-law, her husband or her daughter, then she would be in the fields with other women cutting grass, singing and gossiping. Additionally, during my few weeks living in her house, there was a constant flow of visitors wandering in and out. Her house was welcoming; the doors were difficult to close and normally kept open. Often Rakesh would have visitors who stopped by on their way home after work. Vimla would prepare tea for them and would join in their discussions. To me she never seemed to lack individuality. The stereotype of a passive woman as reticent and submissive is contradicted by Vimla's dynamic, forceful, at times argumentative personality.

Additionally, it is unfair (and, in Gairsain, untrue) to assume that women lack the ability to organize themselves politically. The area of Uttarakhand is nationally renowned for the famous Chipko movement. The movement was started in 1974, in

the Chamoli district by a group of women who, noticing the rapid deforestation of the area, used passive resistance (tree hugging) to stop the cutting of trees and reclaim communal forest rights against the state forest department. Janki Devi, the head of the block of Gairsain (the second level in the three tier Panchayat system), also mentioned that she originally got involved in politics during the Uttarakhand state independence movement (1994). She had been an activist in the movement, and told me that many of her friends also joined. Political organization is not out of the realm of possibility for rural women, even if family life is demanding.

### Deciphering the Self

Much like the physical description of women's isolated environment and limited relationships, homogenous/submissive representations of women distort reality. When the self is envisioned as a unitary entity or essence, the relationships that performances activate become insignificant. It is through relationships that selves are constituted (Mauss 1985, Kondo 1990, Butler 1997, Mahmood 2005). A woman's obligation to her husband or service to her in-laws creates dependencies that are instigators of women's actions. The pain and suffering that Vimla experiences for her family do not disempower Vimla. Rather, by voicing pain at moments of tension, she is able to "establish the superiority of her love" (Trawick 1990: 110). The interpretation of Vimla's suffering for her family at the expense of herself is only *one* reading of the situation. Another may be that Vimla's experience of suffering signifies a dedication to others that creates relations of obligation or loyalty to Vimla, thus Vimla suffers in pursuit of her own desire to be embedded in the family. By

politicizing the liberal reading of the situation, society prevents women position in the family from being accepted as a personal source of value, power and happiness.

To detach women from the family is to disavow the constructive nature of these connections. Selves are derived from relationships and obligations to others (Kondo 1990). The problem of deciphering between legitimate actions of agency and actions of passivity or subjugation arises out of liberalism's dependency on a coherent distinguishable self. As Anne Phillips points out, freedom used to be associated with the ability to do as you please with your property: "When freedom is given more general application it becomes more thoroughly individuated" (Phillips 2002: 265). Individualization is problematic when "selves and society do not separate easily; rather, the boundaries are blurred" (Kondo 1990: 22). Being a liberated self implies disposing of oneself as one chooses, or living a life that is one's own, separate from societal constraints; this ideal can be both isolating and undesirable.

As I have mentioned, daily chores for new wives often include cooking the food, gathering the fuel, and cutting the fodder. I would like to point out that these activities are the traditional works of women and give them authority over domestic life. In Margaret Trawick's ethnography on her experience living with a Tamil family, she explains that in the home a woman has "absolute control as servant, epitomized [in her] role as food dispenser" (Trawick 1990: 112). These same tasks are frequently depreciated as obstacles that "drain women's energy which could have been better channeled towards self and social development" (Sharma 2008: 55). To discredit these nurturing activities as unproductive is to diminish their social value in self-production.



The role of reproducer and preserver is acknowledged for its difficulty by both men and women.<sup>28</sup> It is misleading to portray women as ignorant of their oppression. In my experience, most women were highly aware of the physical and emotional hardships they endured and used them to elicit sympathy and respect in their social relationships. Husbands, in particular, are sensitive to women's daily struggles. I was surprised at the number of times that men would turn to me and say, "Women's work is never done. They have hard lives here in the hills." This proclamation reflects the admiration that most husbands feel for their wives.

Women's position of "subordination" is much more complicated than the government's or SBMA's depiction would have outsiders believe for all members of the household depend on their labor. One explanation of women's roles found in Anjali Capila's book on women in Garhwali folk songs captures it best: "Here in the hills, a man without a woman will die of starvation or becomes a yogi. Why? Because women do all the work." In this quotation, we understand that women's work, while is both difficult and indispensable.

### Sacrificial Selves

Sacrifice and servitude are not only key for familial preservation, but these dispositions are invoked by many of the same institutions, namely the state, that scorn these "passive" characteristics. The symbolic value of feminine virtue has been

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<sup>28</sup> This description of women's role was mentioned by both men and women and is strikingly close to most descriptions of god Shiva- who is the primary god of the region. Furthermore, throughout North India there would often be reference to feminine power (Shakti). This 'creative force' is concerned the power of the Divine Mother manifested through female embodiment and fertility.

central to nationalist movements of the past and continues to feature prominently in current national debates on Indian identity and the aims of human development.

Women, as symbols of unity and morality and Indian authenticity, have been adopted by a number of nationalist projects. Women were strategically employed by Gandhi to further India's image as spiritual, modest and feminine. Gandhi's image of India's national identity undermined the hypermasculine identity that was pushed on Indian men by the British. "Gandhi saw the participation of women in the national movement as a life preserving, humanizing force, given women's essential nature of noble suffering" (Chhachhi 1991: 227). Similarly, the Bengali elite, seeking to distinguish India from its imperialist rulers, constructed an authentically Indian identity that depended on symbolic femininity. The movement specifically endorsed spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, and devotion (Chatterjee 1993: 131).

In present day India, nationalism still engages with the image of Indian mothers to characterize Indian society as spiritual and devoted to the community. Hindustva, a current Hindu nationalism support by the RSS, promotes the symbol of Mother India as a rallying icon to bring together Hindu warriors.<sup>29</sup> While women's empowerment and gender equality may be a 'barometer of progress', traditional feminine virtues are still employed in an effort to unite India as a national community.

The icon of the sacrificial mother also runs through current discussions on India's human development. The development goals of the national government rely on the capacity of women to spread knowledge and resources to the rest of the family. It is reasoned that if you educate the mothers of the community, you educate children

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<sup>29</sup> The image of mother India and an explanation of her symbolic power is explained on the RSS website. < <http://rssonnet.org/>>

as well.<sup>30</sup> The National Commission for Women (NCW) and the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) are government organizations whose primary target group is women and children. A woman is prioritized over men in development both because she is the subordinated sex in society and because her empowerment produces benefits for the entire community (SBMA 2009). However, most development discourse fails to recognize the paradox of women's role in development. Diminishing the value of sacrifice and service challenges the position that makes women crucial tools for social change.

Additionally, in documents that advocate for women's empowerment, it is commonly suggested that women should serve the nation outside of their roles as mothers.<sup>31</sup> Under the "We Believe" section of *Towards Equality* (1974), the Committee on the State of Women in India (CSWI) proclaims that marriage and motherhood should not disable women from fulfilling their proper role in the task of national development. It's noteworthy that both roles encompass unpaid labor, signifying specific ideas on women's place in society. Serving the nation by taking up responsibility in the field of economic and social progress is commendable, while exclusively serving the family is dangerous (because in the family women lose sight of their own personal welfare).<sup>32</sup> The nation-state as a modern institution contrasts

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<sup>30</sup> SBMA argue that there is a direct connection between women and child development. If a mother is educated and empowered child are more likely to both survive and get an education.

<sup>31</sup> The national government's opinion on population control is pertinent to the idea of national duty, for women are often (as exemplified in the introduction) pressured to not reproduce in service of the nation.

<sup>32</sup> Amartya Sen writes: "In some contexts family identity may exert such a strong influence on our perception that we may not find it easy to formulate any clear notion

with the joint family, which is a traditional and consequentially backwards, convention. Since the nation state is progressive and affirms the individual, subordination to its power is recommendable for autonomy, unlike familial ideology that hinders further development of the self for it privileges group survival. The principles that the nation-state is to protect (freedom, equality, choice) are enshrined as universally desirable and relevant to individualism. What is obscured in this liberal ideology is that human beings cannot exist independently; when they are born they are already inscribed as particular members of society (Chatterjee 1993: 232).

In the context of North India, labor is assigned by gender and acquires its meaning through social interaction. Kinship interdependence relies on sacrifice of the individual in the name of the collective.<sup>33</sup> This is true of both men and women; both genders tend to make choices with the wellbeing of their families in mind. Since women's performance occurs in the home, perceived as a de-politicized space, her exclusive commitment to family is rendered oppressive and her 'self' is in need of liberation. Liberation is difficult to enact when women's personhood is embedded in the "forces of domination" that inform her deprived state.

In my experience this deprivation is subjective, entrenched in fields of power that see some ways of being in the world as more legitimate, more rewarding, and more recognizable than others (Kondo 1990). Hunched over her bed, alone in a dark, small room, Deviki Devi could have easily been the oppressed woman referred to by

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of our own individual welfare." His example is "a typical rural Indian woman" (Sen 1990 126-127).

<sup>33</sup> I believe it is important to note the influence of Hinduism which asserts that

the national government and SBMA. Once she started speaking, however, I had to throw that stereotype out the window.

As she spoke about the Panchayat, Deviki lit up. “Oh the women in the Panchayat, they don’t shut up! It’s partly because many men have moved but also because women just have more to say!” She spoke passionately and waved her arms around for emphasis. Our conversation had begun with my telling her about the meeting I had just observed. I asked her if it was normal for women to be arguing with the village chief like they had. She laughed and nodded as though she could picture my experience perfectly. “Men don’t care like women care. Women hear about other’s problems all day long. Mama we need this, sister why can’t we do that, daughter-in-law get me that! So they worry about others’ problems all day long. When you put them in a place where they can make demands and speak about problems they have a lot to say!” She laughed and referred to Indira Gandhi to make her point clear. She said, “Women know how to run things because it’s what they do in the home. Look at her, that’s how powerful Indian women are. While many women don’t spend much time outside of their home we all know a lot about how things should be run, and we can make it happen.”

True to her depiction, Deviki herself had a lot to say. “This is my first term as ward member. Some were reluctant to elect me because I don’t have an education. But I am a great leader, I have done a lot for this village already and I have a lot of good ideas.” She smiled and pointed out the small clay window that was providing our only light. “See those oak trees out there? I planted them with my own two hands!

I have always known that this village should preserve the environment and I work hard to do that.”

Deviki displays pride in her political work. She is outspoken and lively; she stands as a contrast to Heena whose interview opened the chapter. Deviki and Heena both display devotion, yet Deviki uses words to express her devotion while Heena uses silence. Deviki would presumably be an acceptable leader to SBMA, although she lacks a formal education, she speaks *her* mind and can verbally reason *her* decisions.

As already noted, *productive* performances are always contextually specific. In places like the home, silence is instrumental; it enacts morality and as all performances it is a “strategic assertion” (Kondo 1990: 22). Many Hindus regard the ability to remain silent as a marker of endurance and strength; silence has moral authority that adds to the construction of a specific form of self. When Heena was in the presence of foreign strangers, who were seated in her house and had denied her offer to be served tea- she was effectively blocked from performing her feminine domestic role, thus silence may have been constructive for producing a moral and feminine self in the context. I strongly doubt that Heena was without individuality. SBMA workshops claim to develop women’s personality, however the definition of personality seems to be conflated with assertiveness. Women’s ability to articulate their desires are hailed as a signifier of a modern citizen, though verbal demands conflict images of spiritual femininity, a virtue that is celebrated by a number of institutions as being authentically Indian.

Heena's actions can be understood as a form of docile resistance to liberating agendas that seek to constitute its own type of verbal and allegedly "free" subjects. The act of liberation is a politically charged move that legitimizes specific subjectivities while discrediting others. What is noteworthy is that although language can be instrumental for making demands on the government, silence is a more destructive resistance of a development system that seeks to know and understand rural women; silence is the specter of an incomprehensible self (Kondo 1990). Sacrificial or silent selves is a powerful feminine subjectivity that has been central to nationalist movements in the past and as I have shown sacrificial womanhood plays a key role in India's current development trajectory. India's national government thus contests and simultaneously celebrates women's selfless existence; in certain ways, the nation state seeks to 'liberate' women from subjugation and simultaneously re-subjugate them to their national duty.

## Chapter Four: Subjecting the Self

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*“Hinduism endorses the need for commensurate rights and responsibilities. However, it stresses responsibilities. If a person performs his or her duties, then another’s rights are automatically fulfilled. However, the current trend towards demanding out rights is creating a culture of blame, compensation and irresponsibility. Placing the emphasis on dharma tends to promote responsibility. It is not wrong to demand legitimate rights, but without a culture of responsibility it creates problems. And it begins from the top with the leaders. That is why many Hindu stories explain how leadership is based on character not merely position”*

Bimal Krishna (Indian  
philosopher)

In the quote above, Bimal Krishna’s subject is the value of *dharma* in communal living. He argues that by placing responsibility above rights, the natural order is stabilized. He emphasizes that duty, authority and respect are derived from devotional acts rather than self-serving ones. Recall Deviki, the old, small, hunched-over grandmother who told me about women’s “business.” I asked her “Why are you participating in the Panchayat?”

“To serve my village.”

My next question, “Why does it matter if you serve your village?”

“Because it is the duty of a good woman to serve her community.” She attributes her actions to her embrace of *dharma*, which she described as one’s personal calling or obligation.



There is an obligation to the state to conduct oneself as a proper citizen. The obligation to her village Deviki expressed is a precondition for her political conduct, yet various institutions (the state, NGO, news media) label submission to the family as oppressive, a denial of *real* agency.<sup>34</sup> In the realm of progressive politics and liberal political theory it is too easily assumed that agency must inhere in a subject, an individual's will should be distinct from others and produced by her consciousness (Mahmood 2005: 11). Agency is the principle of efficacy, political philosopher, Charles Taylor (1989) critiques liberal ideologies, for the link made between the individual agent and her actions rather than the fields of power that provide the space for her actions.

Herein lies the dilemma of the women's participation: women's political presence is portrayed by international organizations and the central government as key in the fight for gender equality, yet women frame their motivation for participation as originating from their devotion to Hindu tradition (which promotes gender difference). Hinduism defines four forms of worship that instill a pious disposition within an individual. These forms are ritual (Puja), love and devotion (Bhajan), service (Seva), and sacrifice (Yajna).<sup>35</sup> By partaking in these practices women seek to cultivate a close relationship with their God(s). The determinant power of Hinduism is in tension with liberal ethics, which mistrust situations in which people are not shaping their own lives. Progressive agendas campaign to promote an

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<sup>34</sup> This is according to the SBMA website. Women's domestic existence is portrayed as oppressive. (Will find direct quote from website)

<sup>35</sup> For more on Hinduism and worship see <[hinduism.iskcon.com](http://hinduism.iskcon.com)>

individual's ability to act against tradition and culture, assuming that these forces suppress *real* choice (Asad 2003: 202).

In this chapter I show that individual desires and socially prescribed performances are not easily distinguishable. By showing the value of women's labor in the home and the Panchayat, I present women's devotional personhood as a subjectivity of authority. The application of traditional labor to a public milieu suggests that tradition has multiple narratives that are not always at odds with modernity. Rather self-creation on the basis of traditional values is flexible and adaptive. In the case of women, what may be called their devotional *habitus* allows them to change their lifestyle (and participate politically) while still invoking feminine spiritual virtues.

My argument is not intended to deny the value of women's participation in expanding women's political voice. I, too, am of the opinion that women's increased political activity is a positive change and opportunity for women in Gairsain. This exploration should not be considered a critique of quotas for women; rather it hopes to dislodge the assumption that political participation liberates an authentic self from the restrictive force of traditional culture. I argue that it is more challenging than it initially appears to distinguish between liberating and restricting activities. Determining such classifications depends on the individual's social backdrop.

Anthropologist, Talal Asad offers an in-depth explanation of the emergence of the liberal secular discourse that is shaping political agendas in the developing world. Secularism as a political platform originated in Euro-America, yet its advocates maintain that secularism has global relevance for governing any democratic nation-

state (Asad 2003:8). Similarly, Taylor questions ideas of a singular, universal humanity and stresses that people are always shaped by the culture and values of their communities. While human rights are principles that the modern democratic state cannot do without (Hurd 2004), Taylor maintains that secular politics tend to ignore the ways in which individuals arise within socially and historically particular contexts.

### Vimla's Choice

Vimla once voiced that she has always wanted to be employed. She was unsure of the exact line of work that she wanted to go into, but she maintained that a government job would be nice because it pays well (and has great benefits such as a pension). I was a little confused by her answer. I asked her if she did not consider the Panchayat work the same as being employed by the government?

“No,” she said, “the Panchayat is unpaid work.<sup>36</sup> I do that for my community. I do a little training at SBMA and that is paid.” Vimla told me that could not go off and get a real job because her parents-in-law would be angry with her. “They would not let me go. They do not understand that if I went, I could contribute to the family in other ways.”

Vimla also told me that when she was younger she had chosen marriage over pursuing her education. “When I was only 20 years old my mother had heard of a

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<sup>36</sup> The unpaid status of Panchayat work is one source of its continuity with domestic labor. Vimla's statement is contested by other sources that describe elected officials as receiving at least minimum wage for their work. Payment within the Panchayat varies from district to district and is often blocked by corruption within the three tier system.

suitable boy that was looking for a wife. He was the son of a friend of my mother's natal family. He came from a good family and he agreed to marry me without even a meeting." She spoke slowly, stressing how good an opportunity this was. "I was working on my bachelor's degree at the time. I wanted to go on and get my masters. I thought about it a lot. I care about my education and I still will go on and get my masters but I got married and had a child first."

I couldn't resist asking why.

Vimla replied, "I have to be married. It is the life of a good woman to be married and have children. I thought that if I went on with my studies I would miss my chance and would become a burden on my brother and the talk of my neighbors."

It has taken me a little time to come to terms with Vimla's explanation. At first I could only see how the determinism of *dharma* and social propriety restricted Vimla from pursuing her dreams. While I don't mean to discredit Vimla's aspiration for economic independence, I also couldn't let go of the fact that she didn't really know what work she wanted to do. Vimla wanted to contribute to the family in a different capacity, by earning economic resources rather than providing domestic labor. She figured herself as belonging to a family. She imagined her work as contributing to a family to create a place of value and respect. Formal employment, money, commodities, and city living are, as I have noted, gaining importance and authority within the village. I believe this may be the source of Vimla's dilemma. Positions of influence in the village are shifting from moral status (gained by virtues such as sacrifice, devotion, and service) to economic status (produced by material wealth).

As I see it, Vimla had two options. She could have interrupted her education to get married and become a good wife, or she could have continued her education and still eventually have married. In either trajectory Vimla's central identity is dependent on her marriage to a husband and subordination to the family system. Her choice to forego her education for marriage and motherhood privileges the significance of motherhood and wifeness as formative of personhood. While Vimla recognizes that she has interests that are in tension with social expectations, she follows tradition. In this instance her personal ambition is subordinated to her desire to remain an acceptable member of her community. While one choice is more independent than the other, they both hold value. Moreover, the independent choice is imagined as an alternative means of serving the family, rather than as offering Vimla personal fulfillment.

Social settings are necessary (and pre-existing) backdrops that inform courses of action. The ability of individuals to fashion themselves, to change their lives, is given ideological priority over the social relations within which they themselves are actually formed, situated and sustained (Asad 2003: 202). Furthermore, projects that aim to liberate individuals from "oppressive custom" create a world where there are two mutually exclusive options: either an individual is an agent (representing and asserting herself) or a victim (the passive object of chance or cruelty) (Asad 2003: 79). In Vimla's choice she does not fit neatly into either category. She did not act on her personal aspiration to become financial independent nor was she upset or forced into her position as wife/mother/daughter-in-law. She committed herself to a subordination that informs her subjectivity. This read of

Vimla's decision makes it difficult to view Vimla's choice as surrendering to the domination of culture or acting on her own oppositional desire.

### Creating a Subject

Saba Mahmood critiques liberal ideas of 'free will' and 'agency' in her ethnography, The Politics of Piety. This insightful account concerns Muslim women in Cairo, Egypt who are involved in the Islamic revival movement that reinforces a dogma that prescribes female subordination. Mahmood seeks to undo the demonizing and the "othering" of Islam that has intensified over the last decade. Mahmood shows that the mosque women are not victims of false consciousness or deprived of reason; like all of us, the women of the movement are pursuing a life mission of self-determination. In this case, the desired self is a pious, humble, docile self. Mahmood challenges the ethical standing of progressive politics by presenting the reader with the following theoretical dilemma: How is it that freedom is an innate desire, when given the opportunity for freedom, women will elect a particular domination?

Two of the central questions that Mahmood poses feature prominently in my own inquiry:

Are we (Euro-American subjects) willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of remaking sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women may be taught to value the principle of 'freedom'? Furthermore, does a commitment to the ideal of equality in our own lives endow us with the capacity to know that this idea captures what is or should be fulfilling for everyone else? (2005: 18)

In my exploration of women's political practice and interpretation of women's understanding of their participation, I bring up these same questions. By engaging with the moral predicament Mahmood poses, I question the universal value of freedom and its absolute desirability.

Michel Foucault (1997) maintains that power needs to be understood as a set of relations that do not simply dominate the subject but also form the conditions of its possibility. Power does not act upon the subject but is in conversation with the subject and enables the subject to act (Foucault 1980, 1983). From the various restrictions that emerge, power produces the sense of self within a subject. Consequently, agency is not the residue of an un-dominated self that exists prior to the operation of power but agency is the product of power's operation (Mahmood 2005: 120). Feminist theorist Judith Butler calls this the paradox of subjectivation, inasmuch as the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious agent (1997: 14).

In the case of Gairsain, women's subordination to Hindu doctrine provides justifications for their work, specifically their political activity. Liberal secularism is another form of domination that produces individuals who justify their action by claiming ownership of those actions and developing a concept of an individual self. The state's (and international organizations') attempt to eradicate the domination of 'patriarchal tradition' such as Hinduism in the lives of rural women through women's empowerment and increased political participation is indicative of the trajectory of India's nation-state towards secular liberalism. Never a neutral/apolitical process, women's empowerment relies on the assumption that women's current condition is

disempowering and if educated correctly, women would seek freedom from truly dominating forces. Liberalism as an ideological force of domination is not acknowledged.

For the women's participation to confirm liberal assumptions that connect tradition and oppression women must acknowledge male domination and how it (an external force) perpetuates their situation. They then must actively seek to change their circumstances. This desire for rights, equality and choice must be learnt. By accepting these liberal secular 'truths' a woman establishes a relationship between herself and those who protect, justify and hold the truth, in this case the state (Rose 1998). In sum, by adhering to the ideology of liberal secularism, a woman legitimizes the authority of the modern nation state; it is therefore advantageous for the central government to create specific citizens that privilege the state's authority over that of other forces of domination.

By promoting a politically acceptable ethic, based on human rights rather than religious dogma, a secular state such as India claims religious tolerance, but puts into play different structures of regulation and violence (Asad 2003: 8). The morality of secular politics is an attempt to transcend other authorities that shape reality; "by making citizenship the primary principle of identity (the ultimate truth) the state is able to transcend differentiating practice of the self that are articulated by class, gender, and religion" (Asad 2003: 8). The state replaces conflicting perspectives by a unifying experience of individuality and freedom.



## Domestic Duty

While times are changing, the discourse of “rights”, “equality” and “individuality” does not carry the same value that of “duty”, “righteousness” and “morality” for most women who are active in the local Raj of Gairsain. Never once during my interviews did women use the terms “oppressed”, “disempowered”, or even “unfairly treated.” Women would often complain that they were overworked; the term “working harder than a packed horses” was commonly used. At meals or teatime the family hierarchy was evident, yet never contested.<sup>37</sup> The liberal commitment to gender equality conceals the reasons why most women (Vimla, Sapna, and Manju being prime examples) become involved in politics.

I remember I posed the concept of gender equality to one woman, Promita. She is a younger woman who works as a secondary teacher. I asked her if she thinks that men and women should have similar opportunities and the same occupations, if there should be a general understanding that men and women are the same and are capable of developing the same capacities. She didn't fully understand, so when I reframed the question I tried to emphasize her role in the home. I asked, “Do you think a man could do your job? Could a man raise the kids, prepare the food, and cut the grass?” She replied, “Of course not!” She explained that the role of a woman in the home was very special. She told me there is something called *Mamta*, which in Hindi is the term for the special love between a mother and her children. According to Promita, “Matma is essential to the well being of the household, and so it is necessary

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<sup>37</sup> I also suggest that the lack of resistance against hierarchy is because injustice is not inherent in the family order. It is arguably woman as sacrificial selves (a virtue/powerful quality) that have the upper hand.

for a woman to stay at home and cultivate this love. I work outside,” she said, “but I make sure that I spend most of my time here in the home.”

Even the Pradhan of the district prioritized the home and domestic work. When I interviewed Janki Devi she was washing her family’s clothes outside in the mid-day heat. She wouldn’t let me stand there with her so she told me to go into her bedroom and that she would bring me some tea. Janki Devi has worked for SBMA in the past and still helps with training from time to time. She had recently been elected the district head, which is a huge accomplishment. Many spoke about her going on to be involved with state politics. She is incredibly busy and a powerful woman.

She is taller and larger than most other women in the area. She wore a bright purple kurta salwar and her wrists were adorned with a number of golden bangles. Her hair fell down her back in a long and messy braid. Around her forehead was a tie-dye bandana, which was absorbing the sweat that accumulated around her hairline. Dhan Singh and I were sitting watching television with her husband when Janki Devi burst into the room. She put down three cups of tea, took off her bandana, wiped her face and neck and then retied it so that it covered her hair. She sat down on a plastic chair across from me and turned to Dhan Singh, she look slightly annoyed and she quickly mumbled something. Dhan Singh nodded and said in English, “Just pick a couple of questions, she is very busy women.” Apparently she had to go cut the grass before it got dark out. I asked her how she had time for it all.

“Women make time. My work is my worship. I must finish my duties. This is the same for many women, which is why it is so difficult to get everyone at meetings.” I had noticed that often, when I expected to find a woman in the

meetinghouse she would be at home doing domestic chores.<sup>38</sup> Still I was surprised that the head of the district expressed the same priorities. Yet Janki voiced the often-repeated phrase that I think sums up a lot, “work is my worship.” *Seva* (selfless work or service) is the way many women gain personal fulfillment. Women perform daily tasks because they claim it is something that they simply must do. Without their work their families would suffer and they themselves would not grow spiritually.

### Semblances of Self

The work in the Panchayat was often spoken about in the same language of dharma that women use to speak about their work in the home. Sapna expressed the feeling of importance that she received from her development work, which to her was an extension of her domestic role. She told me that she felt that she *must* attend meetings; she *had* to work hard, and felt *obliged* to develop her village. She asserted that villagers depended on her. Without her leadership, she said, “my family would suffer, the PR would not develop, women would not progress, self development would stop and I would lose respect.” The consequences of her absence show that Sapna attributes a lot of her personal worth to her political activity.

While Sapna argued that her presence was vital for development, she reserved the “official” functions of her role as Pradhan for her husband. Rarely did I see Sapna sign a document or keep a record, but Perm truly enjoyed such work. Every chance he

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<sup>38</sup> Many criticize women’s families for not helping out at home when women are elected. Women members of the Panchayat have the double burden that hinders social empowerment of women in the States. I think it is important to note that women will often compromise their work in the Panchayat for their family. While women in the States make similar choices, it is still worth noting that the domestic sphere retains a lot of its value and it still central to the production of a good Hindu wife

had, Prem took out all the official documents of the Panchayat. He would point out the Panchayat stamp and the names of the villagers. For Sapna, she concentrated on networking, serving as the symbolic centrality for the entire hamlet. As described before, she frequently paid visits and brought people together (often with a sweet cup of tea). Her election as village head reflects her pre-existing relational orientation. While the formalities of the Panchayat seemed to bore her, she honed her skills as caretaker to make the Panchayat a productive source of village unity, and a way of creating self-value for women participants.

Sapna's election created new roles for those around her, including her husband Prem. Sapna once told me that when she first became a member she had attended a training workshop at SBMA in Gairsain. The Ashram was a few hours walk from Maniket, so Sapna had to stay the night. She said that it was exciting to go there. She met other women members from a number of neighboring hamlets and exchanged ideas for village development. The only problem was leaving the house for two days. She said she was lucky that she had Kiran, Uma and Sashi to pick up the slack while she was away. Prem, not versed in the subtleties of chapatti making (I personally never mastered it despite my hours of practice), did help out more than usual (although I should note that I often saw Prem sweep the floors and pruning weeds- two duties I had associated with women). He was challenged to expand his role as a man within the house, as Sapna expanded her practice into the public sphere.

As women become more involved in community development, participation has become wrapped up in domestic duty. I recall Vimla telling me that when she first moved into her conjugal home she was requested by her mother-in-law to take her

place in the women's group. The women's group was a new development in the village. It was started by SBMA and discussed matters like deforestation or alcohol prohibition. Vimla explained that her work there is really focused around the community. The group has opened up a bank account under the name of the whole community so if any household is in need, that family can borrow from the account and return the money later. Community development and harmony are focal points of the group, making the already intimate atmosphere even more intertwined despite economic forces that ruptures village unity.

### Individual Incisions

Both men and women agreed that women are more active and outspoken at meetings, which suggest that Heena's silence mentioned in the previous chapter was contextually motivated. As I have suggested the same qualities (devotion/sacrifice/servitude), that encourage misrepresentations of women as passive, are enabling characteristics that fuel women's passionate political conduct. In this way, the subordination that a woman enacts towards her husband's family is productive of the very power she expresses within the Raj.

Women's ability to incorporate their new performance within the PRI into their dharma is emblematic of the flexibility of this traditional concept to include new obligations. As Clifford Geertz (1993: 131) noted, religion serves individuals as a way to model lifestyles because it is a model of life, but that does not make it restrictive of possibility. It is hard to accept the assumption that subordination reflects and reinforces one over-arching "false consciousness" characterized by the absence

of a realization of one's true will. Given my own observations, I find it more persuasive that religion, in this context, initiates actions rather than restricting them.

By categorizing women who sacrifice themselves to others as victims "of false consciousness," institutions such as the central government portray women as timeless/essential beings who are incapable, without external help, of personal expression or independent action. The "false consciousness" trope denies the possibility for women to realize what they (as individuals) really want, without someone determining their desires for them. However, during my time in Gairsain I found that desire and personal concerns often played a large role in women's political activity. Vimla, for example, decided to run for PRI because of a personal interest: specifically, there were no water tanks in the village. Vimla told me that she had never been to a PRI meeting before but she decided to run. She said that in her natal village she had had a water tank very close to her. "It made everything easier!" she explained, "I didn't have to walk far every morning." Having had this luxury in her own village made her determined to get a water tank installed in Kuningad. While her motivation was framed by tradition and self-sacrifice, this specific example shows how women's own preferences can determine their actions despite the fact that their motivation is often assigned to the family.

Women expressed a variety of sentiments towards their Panchayat work. While references to dharma were frequent, not all women felt that it was their duty to participate improved their quality of life. Many spoke of their activity as burdensome, similar to other domestic duties. Manju Devi, for example, offers a contrast to Vimla, Deviki and Sapna who expressed to me the good feelings that come from their

involvement. Manju complained, “I’m running around everywhere to get everything done, it’s exhausting! Look at me!” She sat there in a little plastic chair outside a local primary school. “I am so skinny and weak because I work so hard.” She was right: she was skinny, her bright blue kurta salwar hung loose around her tiny frame. “Men leave the village and we are left to develop it and deal with all its problems...it’s a lot of work but it must get done.” I smiled and asked if she got any satisfaction from her work. “Well of course. I care deeply about this community, especially the schools. I have two boys and I want them to get a good education so they may be happy and have good jobs.”

Manju’s account shows that while some women find PRI work to be just as arduous as other domestic chores, they still assert purpose in their activity. It is important to realize that these feelings are contextually specific, and in different circumstances with different listeners, Sapna might complain about her obligation to the Panchayat, while Manju might extol the sense of accomplishment it provides her. The justification for action does not always correlate with some interior self. Rather, these women negotiate a diverse range of sentiments, the expression of which is always depends on the relationship between the individual and the person with whom one is interacting.

### A Different Kind of Empowerment

While the use of Hindu rhetoric has remained a constant for explaining women’s activities, the improved strength of PRI and women’s inclusion are redefining the contours of village life. While many women maintained that village

development had always been talked about amongst women, the new context of the PRI produces new possibilities for self-expression. The Panchayat provides a platform for productivity, giving women who have been classified as “oppressed” the chance to exert their agency in new spaces and to fabricate new relationships. It also gives them an opportunity to effect changes in a way that was not possible before. By verbalizing their ideas in a new, public space, through an institution that engages both local people and state officials, women create a new role for themselves within the village, one that redefines what womanhood in Gairsain may entail.

As the central government had hoped, and Deviki Devi confirms, women tend to speak louder and make a bigger fuss about village development than men.

Women’s familial orientation, essentially their lack of a self, makes them perfect for rural development, because as Deviki said “everyone’s problems become women’s problems.” The reality of the situation is not black or white, with one aim taking precedence over the other. Rather, women are simultaneously affirming their relational existence as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, while they are also gaining their own unique voices and becoming more present in spaces outside of the home.

With the changes that came from economic migration and women’s reservation, performances of femininity in Gairsain are being reconfigured. While political involvement challenges women’s domesticity, PRI work is unpaid and is oriented towards the village and around welfare, so that involvement is accepted as an



extension of familial service.<sup>39</sup> The transformation in gender roles is not indicative of modernization so much as it highlights the adaptability of performance and the fluidity of culture. Tradition is never abandoned because it is always being recreated in relation to modernity. In other words, there are multiple ways of being “modern” and they should not be uniformly conceptualized as antithetical to “tradition.” While Vimla never claimed to be a modern woman she did mention a desire to follow a modern path of higher education. Additionally her election to the Panchayat and work with SBMA are both modern activities that Vimla is proud to be involved in. From an outsider’s perspective, Vimla is first and foremost a mother/wife/daughter-in-law, whose primary role is to serve her family thus she could be classified as a traditional woman. However, modernity and tradition are not exclusive identities, but as embodied in Vimla these categories can converse and interaction through the actions and preferences of an individual.

The Panchayat, as a modern institution, validates the traditional labor of domestic service. Public service calls for the ability to bring a hamlet together, as well as dedication to the wellbeing and survival of the community. These activities are used by women in the Panchayat to spread development and in the family to create affective bonds. The new site for this type of creativity is a way to affirm the value of feminine labor within a modern society, which tends to prioritize men’s work (with the distribution of wages). Women’s labor tends to be more relational and derives its value from the relationships it forms and develops. Throughout the stages of a

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<sup>39</sup> As already mentioned in a previous footnote, the unpaid status of Gram Panchayat positions is a description provided by Vimla and is contested in other documents about the Panchayat, although I was unable to find an official account about the amount or method of payment for elected posts.

woman's life the relationships she constantly tends to provides her labor with recognition. Today, the Panchayat is alternative source that valid women's relational existence and devotional practice.

### To "Awake" or To Create

To help conceptualize the changes that are taking place as a result of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, it is useful to apply Asad's definition of power. "Power does not inhere in particular subjects or institution. It flows between them, constituting, enabling, and constraining actions as it does so" (2003: 194). This definition clarifies that the Panchayat is not an institution of a particular power but a space and means through which other forms of power converse. In my research the conversation is between modernity and tradition and how both are created and constricted through performances enacted in response to the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment.

Classifying traditional practices as oppressive and modern practices as liberating is problematic when we can see that modern practices, such as political participation, can be explained and aligned with traditional rhetoric. The work of service does not fit neatly into a category of the oppressive. As we find in our own society, a public servant is a position of immense power: thus servicing others can be and often is an authorizing activity. It is pointless to categorize political service as liberating and domestic service as oppressive, especially in a context where the realm of public and private are so thoroughly blurred.

Oppression in some measure is dependent on how it is expressed and its expression is dependent on social relationships (Asad 2003: 88). Therefore, an

acknowledgment of women's oppression does not necessarily indicate the "awakening" of women's consciousness. It can refer to a shift in the power dynamics and relationship between women and their understanding of their sense of self. To be liberated from external control, the self must be subjected to the control of a liberating self (a self that must be free, aware, and in control of its own desires) (Asad 2003: 71). It appears to me that the significant change that empowerment brings about is a transformation in how women speak about their circumstances and understand their actions.

Projects that attempt to impose free will on individuals embark on a difficult struggle to create autonomous identities in contexts where people craft themselves through their dependencies. This is particularly relevant in the context of India, where communality is a cultural value that is inseparable from the deepest aspect of women's personhood (Kondo 1990). Women's participation in the Panchayat is indeed an act of empowerment (if this meaning is redefined as a translocation or embedding of power); as actions are carried out in the service of another (or multiple others) relationships are deepened, unity is preserved and the self-worth/authority and position of the server is affirmed.

Work in the Panchayat, much like work in the home, is described in a number of ways, but one thing remains consistent: women get a sense of value from their service. How much value and where this value comes from vary from case to case. For some women, service secures their position within the family: they are appreciated for the work they do and are constituted as important members of their husbands' households. Others feel their dedication to their work is a religious

experience; their work is their worship (whether in feeding the buffalo or debating with the village chief). Still some feel the work is burdensome and tiring, yet they assert its value comes from their ability to provide for their loved ones and submit themselves to their hamlet. Regardless of the locale, service strengthens relationships that matter to women's sense of self and in this way political inclusion is an empowering activity not to women's individuality but to devotional labor because local politics relies on thus validates the work of serving others.

## Conclusion

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On Sunday February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, during a Panchayat Raj meeting in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, told women representatives to overcome “social hurdles” in order “to perform their duty” (*Thaindian News*). The words of encouragement from the Congress leader underline the contradictions of women’s political practice as a method of empowerment. Ms. Gandhi places women’s duty and social hurdles in opposition, as though these are mutually exclusive forces that direct women’s actions, the former force liberating the self and the latter restricting it. Presumably, the duty she refers to is a woman’s responsibility as an Indian citizen and elected official; the phrase “social hurdles” suggests a woman’s obligation to her husband and kin and the pressure to subordinate herself to others. Implicit in this opposition is the existence of an inner self, called on by the nation to resist the domination of tradition. Seemingly, for Ms. Gandhi, national obligation and public service lie outside of the struggle between self and society, since unlike coerced submission, sacrifice to the country is voluntary and completely consensual.

To accept Ms. Gandhi’s command one must first permit many assumptions. Primarily, we must believe that women are disempowered members of society. To be disempowered is to be without power or influence, which as I have demonstrated is not the clear-cut reality of any woman, no matter how oppressed she may appear to be. According to the paradigm Gandhi sets forth, we must agree that that 1) an inner/true/authentic self exists and 2) that forces external to that self alienate that

body from its truth/authenticity and real wants or needs. Furthermore, we need to believe that political participation is aligned with the desires of real selfhood. Again, we must contend that 1) political practice is not obstructive to the self, 2) other practices are obstructive to the self, and 3) if a person does not seek liberation from their subordinations that is because her self has been so alienated from its truth that it does not even recognize its real desires without the encouragement of others.

Ironically, the Panchayat Raj is celebrated for its ability to secure local and authentic communalism, culture and morality. Consequentially, women must overcome tradition and liberate themselves as individuals, only to subject themselves to their nation and preserve the community that restricted them in the first place.

For the women I stayed with, their political inclusion affirmed their spiritual selves by creating a new means for each woman to serve others and live a selfless existence, bringing them closer to God. Autonomy was not verbalized as the aim of women's decision to become a representative in the Panchayat. Rather, most women said that religious obligation was the dominant incentive for their work. For Vimla, "it is not about women becoming more powerful than men. Women are the backbone of the society; by giving women the ability to act, the government is helping the whole hamlet." Again, Vimla is not self-affirming in her account; she speaks of women's power in the idioms of concern for others.

The representation of the Panchayat as instrumental in empowering women's individuality does not present the ways in which the Panchayat champions women's service and virtuous devotion to others. The morality of womanhood, particularly (sacrificial) motherhood is described in ManuSmriti, an ancient Hindu text:

The mother feels it her privilege to give. If woman as wife is socially significant, woman as mother is spiritually glorious. The culture of the Hindu trains him to look upon all women as forms of the one Divine Mother. The mother is more worthy of reverence than father or teacher according to our scriptures (ManuSmriti 11.45).

In Hinduism, spiritual power is given to those who seek to serve their gods by performing their dharma and upholding the natural order. Similarly, in government, the responsibility of authority is endowed to those who seek to serve others. In both instances, service is the key to ascendancy. The misrepresentation of domestic duty as disempowering and, by consequence, of women as unconscious participants in their own subjectification, is specific to the liberal tradition.

The *Times of India* ran an article on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011, two days before international women's day, titled "Modern Indian Women and Befuddled Men." In the article, the reporter praised the new liberated women of India:

Today an Indian woman proudly holds on to traditions but not the subordinate status in society anymore. Our culture has for long regarded passiveness as a feminine virtue. But on Women's day, let men and women together affirm as individuals and parents, to stop advocating to girls that to be dominated and passive are feminine virtues.

According to the *Times of India*, modern women are able to hold on to cultural traditions without subordinating themselves to an imagined traditional society. It seems to me, more persuasive that social expectations are changing such that women who are not modern according to liberal discourse are rendered social unacceptable; it is not simply characteristic of modern women to overcome cultural conventions and traditional women to fall victim.

There is a tendency in the United States to think that the modern/individualist way of being in the world is more authentic and meaningful than any other. I find this assumption to be based on misinterpretations and ideological trickery. Taylor (1991: 25-27) refers to an eighteen-century moral view, when being in touch with some source, God or the idea of the good- was considered essential to a full being. We never discarded this standard: we derive meaning from an authentic moral contact with *ourselves*. I think to understand the impact of modern liberal theory, it is helpful to revisit a similar historical example. Christian missionaries were arguably the original imperialists. I don't think that missionary work is malicious; its practitioners understand themselves as pure and benevolent: they feel so strongly about a truth that they have to spread the knowledge and satisfaction that truth has brought them to others. However, missionary work often patronized others, causes epistemological violence, and discredits other truths. While I'm hesitant to suggest that the spread of individualism and liberalism is equivalent to the spread of Christianity, the similarities (in argument and method) are noteworthy. Christian missionaries and human rights activists are similarly driven by a belief in the common good and an admirable need to help and serve others. But again, this service and assistance is riddled with disavowed power relations that are dangerous, especially when the service seeks to move individuals out of their belief system or worlds of meaning and into ours, where their way of life is considered inauthentic or illegitimate.

When I came into this project, my assumptions about meaning and truth were extremely ethnocentric; they have since been challenged. What I had originally perceived as oppression was, in fact, conformity to the ideal of the good wife or a



pious woman, an existence that begets self-dignity. We all conform in one way or another. It is by adhering to certain regulations that we shape our selves. It is through both observing and subverting the rules that we determine who we are.

All meaningful social action has a disciplinary dimension. I am a student, a friend, a daughter, and a sister. When I subordinate my self to my schoolwork, I feel satisfaction and self-esteem from my dedication. When I restrict my independence and elect companionship, I am strengthened by my relationships. The list goes on. Vimla chooses to subordinate her “self” to her faith and her family. Yet at the same time, she describes her “self” in terms of her faith and her family. Therefore, could it not be argued that her subordination is, to an extent, to her “self”, to a “self” she produces through her submissions?

Before you write me off as discounting situations of oppression, I want to emphasize that context and situations do differ. While I do not deny that many women face real, painful subjugation, I commend those women who are able to find multiple sources for joy in and perhaps even because of their subordinated status. We like to believe that we are above social forces of domination, that our choices are more meaningful because they originate within the self, however I contest that the condition of the self in our society has significantly improved.

I advocate for openness. If a woman works seventeen hours a day serving her family and finds emotional and spiritual fulfillment, who are we to discredit her joy? Humankind is extremely diverse, which is what makes the field of human rights so difficult. Human rights advocate for individual freedoms, yet we exist in webs of culture that restrict and influence our actions. If the emphasis is on ownership, why

do we classify some choices as authentically free, while a woman who chooses to wear the burqa or receive FGS (female genital surgery) is a victim of “false consciousness”? Liberal development programs tend to legitimize some choices and reject others; by focusing on equality and freedom these ideals are presented as the only rational choices (Phillips 261). Supposedly, if these oppressed women were fully rational beings, they would not choose to align themselves with a culture that minimizes their individual autonomy.

Women in the Panchayat offer a slightly different spin on this line of thought. Women are participating in politics, a rational desire that increases their autonomy. They are being celebrated by global feminists and international leaders as overcoming cultural obstacles. However, women in the Panchayat still describe this liberating work in ways that affirm their submission to domestic chores and restrictive practices of worship. Liberation and domination are thus at work in the same set of practices; the distinction depends on the observer and his or her classification of what is emancipatory or oppressive.

Vimla does not live true to individual ethics. She suppresses (and advocates for the suppression of) personal aspirations in the name of society. Even in the empowered space of the Panchayat, she submits herself to the community. She has not overcome subservience and domination; rather, her willingness to listen and act sensitively defines her political conduct and constructs her personhood as moral and feminine. Her participation deepens the relationships, which inform her person (her relationship with her family and with her Gods). Women’s Reservation is therefore an

empowerment, though perhaps not of the individual self that liberal secularism seeks to free and develop.

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