

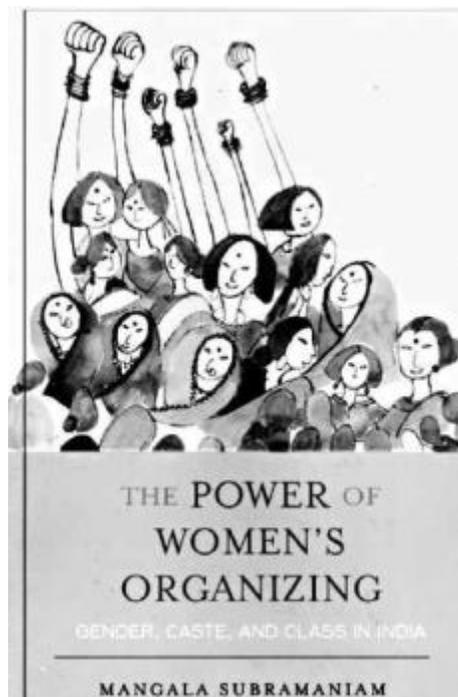
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## Deconstructing movements

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Examines the women's movement in India, its growth, and the tensions resulting from varied interests



**THE POWER OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZING — Gender, Caste and Class in India: Mangala Subramaniam; Lexington Books, a division of Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706. \$29.95**

Using Mahila Samakhya Karnataka (MSK) as a case study, the author of the above book provides some refreshing re-look at standard understandings of terms such as, 'organising', 'movement building', 'empowerment', and how these need to be problematised not only within the Indian context but also contrasted with western understandings and usages of these terms. The book also engages critically with the tendencies implicit in women's movement literature, particularly in the West, that view women in India as victims rather than agents of change and/or which perceive women's issues in India as related more to development and less with gender.

**Women's empowerment**

The state's mission of empowering women, particularly through credit programmes, implicitly assume that access to economic resources equals empowerment; further the state has redefined the term 'dependency' to mean 'poverty' thereby stripping the term of its earlier connotation of relations of power, domination and subordination. The empowerment-through-credit programmes do mobilise women into groups, but much literature does not specifically assess the effects of organising women in such groups. The author's contention however is that: "The state's positioning of poor women as dependents and therefore morally inferior is a script that can be challenged by collectives... These efforts are distinct from state interventions designed for directing change because they involve the women themselves." The author's study of MSK is aimed precisely at capturing the conditions that collectives such as Mahila Samakhya (MS) create for discussing social norms and beliefs. The more important significance of the case study is its emphasis on caste and the implications that caste has for the changing dynamics of women's movement in India.

### Beginnings

The MSK began as a literacy initiative for women, Dalit in particular, in rural Karnataka. Literacy and girl child schooling are important goals of the programme but the approach adopted to arrive at these goals had unintended consequences, namely, "the slowly emerging movement of rural women who have seen little beyond their immediate world of the home, the farm fields and the village." The organisational structure of the MS (described in detail in the book), and which includes the formation and emphasises the primacy of the village level collectives or sanghas, enables the sangha women to define 'who they are', set their own goals and course of action. The elaborate discussion of the processes involved in 'organising', particularly the changing role of the sahayoginis as a sangha takes off the ground, contributes much to our understanding of what constitutes 'leadership'.

The author makes an interesting distinction between an operational leadership and a facilitating form of leadership. In her opinion, the 'sahayoginis' of the MS provide a facilitating form of leadership "which is characterised by a relationship of trust and respect, one in which a sahayogini would not impose a decision on the group. This form of leadership impacts the structure of the sangha and the ways it functions." In fact, a measure of success of a sangha would be in terms of the diminishing role of its sahayogini; a 'successful' sangha being one which does not require its sahayogini to guide its activities any longer. The author provides very interesting and nuanced details of the process of social empowerment; she also records the fact that, even while the MS concentrated on organising and facilitating the process of empowerment of Dalit women in every village, the variations in the MS's experience across space differed but has not explored this variation in any detail and hence is not able to proffer an explanation for this observation.

### Difference in approach

In the author's opinion, the MSK's approach to empowerment differs from other NGOs in form, content and duration, in that, through making women's collectives or sanghas carve out their own course of action, "MSK expects to facilitate change at the individual level, the level of the family, and of community structures such as local governance institutions." Underpinning this approach is the emphasis on understanding the social context and the social basis of inequality that impact on power relations and therefore on strategies and levels of empowerment obtainable at any point of time. The implication for research of the MSK case study, according to the author, is at two levels: one, at the level of the programme itself where it is important to continue to assess the impact of such organising on poor women; and two, what constitutes and how 'movements' are understood in a non-western context, especially where participation in such groups and group activities is not akin to the informed voluntary participation that characterise western contexts.

Without in any way minimising the significant contribution of the book particularly its critical engagement with received notions and understandings of terms, what would have

considerably enhanced its argument is: one, an explicit engagement with the notion of `change' discernible in the villages/sanghas studied. Two, and related to the first is, in what way has MSK's particular way of `organising' challenged/changed relations between Dalits and non-Dalits within a village. Three, a larger context within which the book needs to be situated is: was a programme such as MSK complemented with other programmes that addressed other vulnerabilities of the marginalised groups or was MSK expected to play an all-in-all role as far as the Dalit women were concerned?