

Building a More Gender-Just and Equitable Society: Overcoming the Internal Contradictions to Self-Governance

Neelima Khetan and Ajay Mehta

This chapter is about creating opportunities for men and women to build more just relationships and about transforming oppressive governance arrangements. The insights in it are derived from the experiences of Seva Mandir, a grassroots nongovernmental organization (NGO) in India that has been working closely with women and indigenous people for the past 40 years. The emphasis in our work has been to enable communities and women to play a more central role in dealing with their problems.

The question of the inclusion of women is not new; over the past couple of decades, efforts have been made, both internationally and within India, to include women in social and political processes. These efforts have attempted to boost women's inclusion by building their capacities or by instituting affirmative action of various kinds. India can boast of some bold actions in this direction; the latest (now nearly 15 years old) is the reservation of one-third of the seats on all local councils for women, the third tier of Indian democracy. As a result of this provision, close to 1 million women hold elected office. Several civil society groups have also been active in promoting the cause of women's inclusion through the state. Civil society groups have driven the creation of Women's Development Agencies, the focus on women's rights to their bodies, and the environmental agenda (given that the degradation of the environment severely affects women, who bear most of the costs of fuelwood, fodder, and water shortages).

On the whole, however, these interventions have not led to the kind of results that had been hoped for. In India the ratio of females to males is falling and is cause for serious concern. The gap between literacy levels for boys and girls is still large, and there is evidence of violence against women on a pervasive scale. The rates of maternal and infant mortality in Rajasthan, and in the country as a whole, continue to be high.

Affirmative action in the field of politics has gained unprecedented spaces for women in the public sphere. According to a 2004 study conducted by Seva Mandir in West Bengal and Rajasthan, this shift has led to a distinct gendered prioritization of development expenditures. This observation is significant given that most people believe that women who hold elected office are proxies for men. Yet the increase in women officeholders has not led to an alteration in the character or functioning of these institutions. The local councils continue to be populist in perspective, riddled with corruption, and given to dealing with the concerns of the poor on terms that reinforce their dependency. Inclusion of women in a power structure that alienates and disengages the broad mass of poor and marginal people is not enough to bring about greater fairness and equality within society.

Seva Mandir's work and experience at a micro level also suggest that state- and policy-centered efforts to empower and benefit marginalized groups have not had a significant impact. The existence among both men and women of widespread malnutrition, low rates of literacy and immunization, pervasive poverty, and poor indicators of all-around health suggest an overall failure of governance, the state, and civil society. Even where policy spaces have been created for poor people and women to participate (and several such policy spaces have been created during the past two decades), the response has been muted. According to data collected from the region in which Seva Mandir works by the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003, although 81 percent of women voted in local council elections, fewer than 2 percent attended the general body meetings of these councils. Men's participation was somewhat greater, with 87 percent of men voting and about 20 percent turning up for meetings. The women's low turnout can be attributed to social structures that inhibit women's mobility, even after the radical affirmative action for women on these councils. It points to the limitations of the affirmative action lever to improve broad-based women's inclusion. The case of greater inclusion of minority populations in forest management is similar. After 15 years of a policy giving joint rights of ownership of forests to local and indigenous communities, the response has been muted. Several other such schemes designed around improving the participation of poor people and women have had equally unexciting results.

Likewise, the provisioning of public goods is rife with dereliction and corruption. The J-PAL study found that on any given working day, the government-run

health subcenters in Seva Mandir's working areas were closed 56 percent of the time. A nationwide study on the functioning of primary schools conducted by the World Bank found that teacher absenteeism averaged 25 percent. More disturbing is the fact that even when schools are open, very little teaching occurs and the learning levels of children attending schools are consequently low. Dereliction of duties is not confined to public servants but is also evident among teachers drawn from the community to run community-managed schools. In a J-PAL survey of nonformal education centers supported by Seva Mandir and run by individual communities, it was found that on any given day 36 percent of the teachers were absent. In spite of a decentralized governance system and enabling mechanisms such as the Right to Information law, India continues to experience high levels of absenteeism among health and education personnel, along with extensive corruption. The spectatorship of the poor in the face of corruption or complicity in poor governance—such as irregularity among service providers and in land management—points to a deeper malaise. Although the role of powerful agents such as state officials in this dereliction and poor governance is undeniable, the poor also contribute to their own sense of powerlessness by looking on the drama unfolding around them as a *tamasha*, or “spectacle,” that is removed from their powers of agency.

It may be possible to argue that one reason for the failure of all these efforts lies in the fact that the poor's own ability to make use of these spaces has become attenuated. Civil society has found it difficult to acknowledge that the vitality ascribed to the deprived is circumscribed by their own internal contradictions and the dominant trends that foster dereliction, spectatorship, envy, and power-broking tendencies. The lower one is in the power structure, the greater the necessity to accommodate oppressive social relations. In this situation women themselves choose to go for sex determination tests and abortions, further contributing to the declining ratio of females to males. The overall conditions of life also lead to the brutalization of men and the creation of self-demeaning ways of escaping the tensions of their lives (for example, as documented by Shankar Ramaswamy, sexist humor pervades the factory floors in the Delhi slums even as these men search for relationships of true companionship with women). These conditions have adverse consequences not only for women but also for men.

Creating spaces where women and men can overcome these negative power relationships goes beyond policy and requires poor people to practice and experience their own agency in the struggle against the oppressive and disempowering nature of their present context.

Sometime in the mid-1980s Seva Mandir recognized that its strategy of enhancing the capabilities of men and women was not enough to improve their well-being. Nor was it enough for them to organize themselves to demand entitlements from the state. For the most part, the state was not geared to respond meaningfully to

their demands, and when it did, it would reproduce the patron–client relations endemic to the functioning of India’s democracy. Furthermore, the strategy of collective action, when it did succeed, often required the intervention of Seva Mandir at higher levels of the bureaucracy or political hierarchy. This approach seldom affirmed the confidence of village group members in their own autonomous capacities to bring about change through pressure or persuasion. They realized that so much depended either on the clout of their village leaders vis-à-vis their political patrons or on Seva Mandir, an organization staffed by educated people with connections in high places.

Over time Seva Mandir recognized the limitations of this strategy of collective action focused on an outside body to deliver development, and it changed tack. It adopted a strategy that attempted to locate greater autonomy for action and deliberation within local groups. At the time, the reasons for doing so were crudely to promote bottom-up planning and an empowerment approach to development, but in hindsight the new strategy appears to have created a context in which local people could learn to overcome their own internal contradictions in their struggle for a better future.

This approach required Seva Mandir to have at its command resources and professional capacities to help villagers meet their own development needs and aspirations for a better society and to govern themselves. These development needs included improving the natural resource base on which peasant livelihoods depended and improving access to primary schooling, preschool childcare facilities, public health care services, and livelihood opportunities specifically for women. Eventually this strategy succeeded in creating a large set of new opportunities for village communities and individuals. More than an increase in opportunities, this strategy promoted a discourse among people on the common values and practices essential to build more dignified livelihoods and social arrangements in their communities.

This new strategy proved a significant learning experience for Seva Mandir as well as for the villagers. Contrary to expectations, the villagers did not make large demands for development. The large tracts of common property vested in statutory bodies such as the Forest Department and the village councils could not be taken up for development because these had been informally privatized. The process of getting encroachments vacated was slow and required sustained and deep discussions within the village communities. As a result of these deep consultations at the village level, not only did people, both powerful and poor, give up encroachments but there was an affirmation of the value of villagers’ discussions and decisions not to accept unfair practices that violated the interests of the community as a whole. In this climate the space for correcting discrimination against women also expanded.

The story of Savita Devi, a village woman, illustrates the transformative potential of opportunities for self-governance. Her story also demonstrates the critical

importance of people's coming together to affirm each other. Finally, her story shows the ephemeral quality of the changes under way and the enormous work that needs to be done to realize the desire of ordinary people to strive toward deeds worthy of respect.

Savita Devi, born into a tribal family in the tribal region of southern Rajasthan, was one of 10 siblings. Although her parents did not encourage her to go to school, she studied through the fifth standard on her own initiative. None of her five sisters and four brothers went to school. Soon after she finished the fifth standard, she was married and started living with her husband, Heeralal, in the village of Naya Khola, 82 kilometers from the city of Udaipur. Naya Khola has 175 households, most of which consist of tribal people. The monthly per capita consumption of tribals living in Naya Khola is around Rs 215 per month. The average level of self-reported literacy in the area is 27.5 percent for men and 5.5 percent for women.

Subsequent to her marriage, Savita did not give up her schooling. With the encouragement of her husband, she enrolled in a Seva Mandir-run informal education center. Her efforts at school made her one of the few formally educated members of her community. Her husband also encouraged her to participate in village meetings, often held in their home, to discuss community welfare matters. This exposure brought Savita into public life. She played an active role in mobilizing women in her village to prevent the theft of wood from their village forest. To prevent women from the neighboring villages from trespassing in their forest, Savita, with the help of 40 other women, guarded the forest every day for more than a year. In 1995 Savita Devi was elected the ward *panch*, or leader, of her village council unopposed. In this capacity she gained confidence and led many campaigns to prevent the sale of liquor during the daytime. In 1998 Seva Mandir trained her to become the local health worker.

Despite the presence of an active group of villagers and bold and able leaders like Savita Devi, however, development was slow to come to Naya Khola. The people of the village grew frustrated and became disenchanted with leaders like Savita. In 2000 Savita stood for election as the village council head but lost by a margin of six votes. One village male said, "We have always been behind our women. Neither sex is more important than the other. Both have to support each other. We have also done a lot of work together to protect our forests. Now Seva Mandir should help us earn some extra income."

In 2004 a long-standing proposal to afforest the village forest land in collaboration with the Forest Department was finally approved under a government scheme called Joint Forest Management. Getting this project approved was no small achievement for the village of Naya Khola. Obtaining permission from the Forest Department to rehabilitate this degraded site involved a long, drawn-out struggle on the part of the local federation of Forest Protection Committees, of which Savita was one of

three women officeholders. Only with great reluctance did the Forest Department agree to share land for rehabilitation with the local Forest Protection Committees. This agreement meant that the land in question was freed from encroachments, and the villagers decided to create a community forest there. Seva Mandir facilitated the process by providing technical guidance and funds for raising saplings in nurseries, building a boundary wall to enclose the site, and paying wages for the digging of pits and the planting of saplings.

While payments were being made as plantation work was under way, Seva Mandir workers discovered that a key and highly respected village forestry worker, a tribal from a nearby village, had claimed excessive payments for himself and his brothers. Although he had raised and planted 10,000 saplings, he claimed to have raised and planted 40,000 plants. Savita Devi, who was to verify the actual number of saplings planted in her village, certified that this exaggerated claim was correct. When the fraud was uncovered, Savita admitted, much to her credit and showing rare courage, that she had indeed faltered and had been a spectator to this wrongdoing. She also confessed that her husband had been paid more wages than he was owed for work actually done.

Savita Devi's story reflects the enormous pressures under which people live and the difficulties of holding onto their own ethical sense and vision of a better future. Seva Mandir, despite its new strategy, could not provide constant reaffirmation for people like Savita and her husband in their struggles to work for a more just society. Savita Devi, a highly trusted and much admired local leader, had been co-opted and made complicit in corrupt practices, although she stands out for having the courage to admit to her mistake. For the struggle against corruption and discrimination to succeed, local communities need to activate and affirm this kind of ethically motivated and self-critical analysis.

Despite large investments by government and civil society institutions, the economic status and well-being of men and women in rural areas of southern Rajasthan has not improved significantly. There is still a large gap between men and women in terms of their levels of education, health, and overall status. The experience of Seva Mandir in addressing the persistence of mass poverty and the attendant lack of progress with respect to improving the lives of women provides some insights as to what is needed to improve gender inclusion and progress toward a more just society.

Knowing how to help people like Savita Devi and her husband Heeralal remain on an alternative path to development could be the key to empowering local communities and to making the larger systems of development more accountable. For gender inclusion to occur and for deprived people to be able to improve their status and gain autonomy for self-governance, opportunities for development must be expanded, as Seva Mandir tried to do. More important, the deprived must be enabled to help each other resist becoming complicit in their own disempowerment

and to struggle to build just and ethical values in their communities. One important lesson then is that the bonds that bind microcommunities should not be based solely on securing mutual advantage but should be informed by values that reflect the nonhierarchical and nonexploitative society to which people aspire.

Another important lesson that one might draw from the experiences of Seva Mandir and the radical constitutional provisions for affirmative action reflected in the story of Savita Devi is that even as the gender gap in power is reduced, there is no guarantee that corruption and the self-aggrandizing tendencies of people with authority will decline. Similarly, as women catch up with men in terms of education and health, there is no reason to believe that they will have a greater sense of trusteeship in performing services (almost all the health subcenters at which absenteeism was in the range of 56 percent were staffed by women). Better governance and more motivated public servants are essential for gender inclusion, as they are for making society more caring and just, but achieving these goals requires interventions that deal not just with issues of sharing power and enhancing capabilities but also with the question of how people can be motivated to perform good acts.

For Further Reading

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