

# The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti

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## Introduction

Dalits are India's former "untouchables", so called because their touch was considered polluting due to the work they did – handling dead matter (the hides of animals, tanning, cutting hair) or faeces. The fight against untouchability is of long standing. The efforts of two great modern Indian leaders, however, had the greatest impact in bringing public awareness of the need for eradicating this acute and particular form of oppression: Mahatma Gandhi – who called them "Harijans" or "children of God", and B.R. Ambedkar, a brilliant lawyer, himself from an untouchable caste, who led the drafting of India's constitution. But although the Constitution of independent India outlawed untouchability and its practice in any form, and directed the government to take affirmative action to compensate untouchable castes for these historical wrongs, the stigma against them continues in both subtle and overt forms to this day. Accordingly, struggles by the oppressed castes have also persisted through both militant movements and advocacy.

## Historical and Political Context

During the Independence movement Gandhi gave a call to end untouchability by raising the value of all work and removing the indignity attached to "impure" work. Ambedkar is still worshipped across India for his mobilization and leadership of these oppressed peoples against caste discrimination and all its attendant evils and cruelties, including the unique strategy of mass conversion to Buddhism. After India's independence from British rule, untouchable and other oppressed castes became known as the "Scheduled Castes" (SC) since they were listed in a schedule, or annexure, by the first President of India under Article 341 of the Indian Constitution.

In the late Sixties and Seventies, vibrant mass movements of these oppressed castes adopted the name "Dalit", which derives from the Sanskrit root verb *dal*, meaning to crack or split. The term Dalit refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate

way. The word also inherently denies the notions of pollution and karma that were used to justify caste hierarchy and exclusion, and rejects the paternalistic and charitable connotations of the term Harijan, as well as the caste system as a whole. It is interesting to note that the original conceptualization of the "Dalit" identity included all oppressed groups, particularly women. The Dalit movement thus considered women of even the highest castes as Dalits, because of their oppression.

Dalit assertions emerged at different points in different regions of the country. It was a combination of mass movements, powerful writings about caste oppression, and electoral politics, with many parties vying to woo Dalit voters. Strong Dalit Movements took root in several parts of Southern and Western India.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), formed in 1995, has forced women's movements in India to address the caste question seriously. Dalit feminists have articulated the three-fold oppression of Dalit women as:

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1. Anandi is a feminist NGO based in Gujarat, India, working on the empowerment of women through economic, social, and political awareness and mobilization.  
2. Particularly in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra

1. Dalits oppressed by upper castes;
2. Agricultural workers subject to class oppression, mainly at the hands of upper caste land owners; and
3. Women facing patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own castes.

Dalits today make up **16.2% of the total Indian population**, but their control over resources of the country is less than 5%. Close to half of the Dalit population lives under the official Indian Poverty Line and even more (62%) are illiterate. In the agriculture sector, most Dalits are landless or near landless agriculture labor. The total household income for Dalits in 1998 was just 68% of the national average. Less than 10% of Dalit households have access to safe drinking water, electricity and toilets. Worst of all, Dalits are daily victims of the worst crimes and atrocities, far outnumbering other sections of society, despite the fact that many attacks go unreported for fear of further retaliation. Between 1992 and 2000, a total of 334,459 cognizable offences against Dalits were registered nationwide with the police.

Despite Constitutional guarantees to provide social and political equality since Independence, the practice of discrimination against lower castes – and particularly Dalits - is upheld as part of tradition. A reputed feminist historian, Uma Chakravarti, elaborates on the relationship between caste, gender, feminism and politics in her recent work, *Gendering Caste*.<sup>3</sup> The forms of discrimination may have changed but the basic essence is explained in Dr. Ambedkar's<sup>4</sup> formulation.

*Caste is a system of graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt... i.e. as you go up the caste system, the power and status of a caste group increases and as you go down the scale the degree of contempt for the caste increases, as these castes have no power, are of low status, and are regarded as dirty and polluting.*

In practice, this translates into strict rules and norms about purity and pollution, based on the nature of their occupation. The lowest caste groups are considered impure because of the work they do and the materials they handle, and hence their living areas are located outside the main village. They are not allowed access to water from the village well, or allowed to worship at village temples. The food they cook is considered impure and in some extreme cases, even their footsteps and their shadows are considered polluting, forcing them to keep away from the main streets of the village or town, lest they pollute upper caste pedestrians.

There is a crucial link between caste and class, and in the relationship between caste ideology and production relations. The upper caste Brahmins (priests and scholars) and the Kshatriyas (rulers and powerful landowners) held the monopoly over knowledge, intellectual professions, land, and political authority. The lower castes were banned from even basic literacy or the right to read and write - and were severely punished if they violated the ban. Yet, they were the ones who laboured, developed and preserved the knowledge of agriculture, of plants, domestic livestock, carpentry, black smithy, fishing etc. Although these skills were vital to the survival and comfort of the upper castes, there was no recognition of this fact - indeed their vital skills and knowledge were (and are) denigrated as inferior and polluting as well. While the rigidity of the caste system has eroded over the past half a century, the basic concepts of purity and pollution still have a strong hold in the culture of the subcontinent.

### History and Formation of the Dalit Mahila Samiti

The Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS) is the organizational name for a movement of Dalit women in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). DMS is supported by Vanangana, a feminist NGO that has its roots

3. Uma Chakravarti : *Gendering Caste through a feminist Lens*; Series Ed:Krishnaraj M; Stree ; Calcutta; India;2003
4. Dr. Ambedkar the chief Architect of the Indian Constitution adopted after Independence, was born a in a dalit family. His role in challenging the caste hierarchies through the Independence struggle and providing alternatives continues to provide inspiration to Dalits even today.

in the Mahila Samakhya (MS) program, which was launched by the Government of India in the late 1980's to empower women through the popular education approach. The Mahila Samakhya staff were given a firm grounding in feminist thinking, and trained in grassroots mobilization and leadership based on feminist empowerment principles. In the Banda District of UP, the MS program achieved effective mobilization of Dalit women, including training Dalit women as hand pump mechanics to repair and restore the hand pumps of borewells, on which most of the local populace depended for their water supply. In 1993, the leadership decided to form a separate voluntary organization, named Vanangana, to enable further work with Dalit women. Over the next few years, Vanangana developed a strong presence in the villages in and around the Chitrakoot and Banda Districts of UP.

The women hand pump mechanics mostly belonged to the Dalit or Adivasi<sup>5</sup> communities. Therefore, there was a lot resistance from the upper castes and tension when the trained Dalit women were sent to repair hand pumps in upper caste localities. Since the mechanics moved in groups, they learnt to deal with issues of untouchability and were able to break these taboos. This had some impact on caste barriers, though not widespread. Madhavi, one of the founders of Vanangana, notes that their focus was on the women who had gained access to technology, how it had altered their own personal identities, and how this was a source of strength for them to take on other issues.<sup>6</sup>

The roots of the Dalit Mahila Samiti lie in feminist organizing. It has taken many years for Dalit women to emerge as leaders of their own movement. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, it was a struggle for

these women simply to step out of their homes and demonstrate that they could handle technology. As they gained experience, they developed the ability to form a separate women's movement with a clear focus on Dalit women's issues. Since 2002, Dalit women leaders have engaged in the sharpening of their goals and structures, and the formal naming of the Dalit Mahila Samiti took place in 2003.

The area known as the Bundelkhand region where the DMS is active consists of ravines, and forests, and access to villages is difficult due to poor roads and infrastructure. Because of its inaccessibility until very recently, this region has also been known as a safe haven for dacoits (armed gangs). The Dalit communities there faced repression not only from the upper caste state, but were also often caught between the violence of the state and the dacoits.<sup>7</sup>

### a) Organizational structure

The Dalit Mahila Samiti is an organisation of over 1500 women. They are organised in 7 different clusters across two sub-regions of the Chitrakoot District. Women are the primary members of the organization, though men can be enrolled as supporters (*sahayogi*). Most DMS members are illiterate, so they accept the support of the literate men of their communities who are willing to support their cause.

Membership in DMS is based on agreeing to give up untouchability with others through a formal pledge, and paying a yearly membership of Rs. 20 (about 50 cents). Each member is given a badge and a write up about pioneer Dalit leaders

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5. Indigenous or tribal people

6. Madhavi Kuckerja founder member of Vanangana at the interview conducted in Lucknow on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2007

7. Bundelkhand has strong feudal social and economic structures. The nexus between the upper castes, administration, and police, which has thrived on the exploitation of the lower castes, continue even after independence. One of the forms of rebellion that thrives in such conditions is dacoity. Sometimes, the thieves engage in principled targeting of the upper caste, but they are definitely very violent. The dacoit gangs use force to get the poor and Dalit communities to provide shelter, water, and food as they hide in the ravines. The police harass the poor and Dalit communities to seek information regarding the whereabouts of the dacoits. Later in the narrative, there is a reference to *Dadua*, who was a leader of a dacoit gang. He however had the blessing of the Dalits, as he seldom used force against them and offered better support than the state administration when they had problems.

## FRAMING OF THE VANANGANA AND DMS AGENDAS

Dr. Ambedkar, Savitri Phule and Jyotiba Phule.<sup>8</sup> In many villages, DMS membership is drawn from the Self Help Groups<sup>9</sup> formed by Vanangana, though non-SHG members are also members. The table

below provides some basic data on the distribution of DMS members and their male supporters across the various clusters in Chitrakoot District:

No.	Name of the cluster	No. of villages covered	Women DMS Members	Male members (Sahayogi)
1	Bhowri	30	484	69
2	Sariya	16	384	53
3	Manikpur	7	77	0
4	Unchadih	10	179	0
5	Markundi	8	125	0
6	Dadri	7	123	19
7	Asoh	10	293	54
	<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>1665</b>	<b>195</b>

Vanangana has its own independent organisational structure, with the following units:

1. **Manav Adhikar Ekai** (Human Rights Unit)– in Chitrakoot and in Banda
2. **Sangathan Ekai** (Organising Unit), with three sub units:
  - a. *Samudayik Sashaktikaran* – Collective Empowerment
  - b. *Bachat* (Savings And Credit), supporting 144 SHGs<sup>10</sup>
  - c. Natural Resource Management
3. Administrative team
4. A *Natak* (Theatre) team comprising some staff from the three units.

Vanangana carries out programs in areas where the Dalit Mahila Samiti does not yet have a formal presence. The DMS leadership looks to Vanangana for information, strategic guidance and support.

### Framing of the Vanangana and DMS Agendas

The relationship between Vanangana and DMS is intertwined in a way which is typical in many feminist movements, and consequently hard to unravel. Initially, Vanangana itself functioned as a grassroots organisation led by feminist thinking. Although the formal structure of DMS emerged much later, the principles of participation and voice for Dalit women followed by Vanangana ensured that Dalit women's concerns were always central to Vanangana's agenda setting process. At the earlier stage, there was little need to separate the middle class leadership from the grass roots leadership - the structures and divisions were minimal. So in order to understand how the agenda of the Dalit Mahila Samiti has evolved, it is essential to also understand how Vanangana set its agenda with the Dalit women.

8. Famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian social reformers who preached against untouchability.

9. Savings and credit groups that are also involved in consciousness raising and political education.

10. Self Help Groups, a term widely used in India for savings and lending groups.

Initially, Vanangana focused on the individual Dalit women who were the target of its mobilization. As these Dalit women began working for change, they challenged patriarchal norms as well as the caste structure. The women gained a lot of experience, and their interventions on cases of violence became sharper and more skilled. However, the emphasis in analysis and strategizing at this stage was still on the woman seeking justice, not the caste to which she belonged. This was more or less true for nearly a decade of Vanangana's work with women from Dalit communities.

All this changed with anti-Muslim carnage that took place in western Indian state of Gujarat in 2002, with Muslim women being violently targeted for the first time.<sup>11</sup> Like the entire feminist movement in India, Vanangana was confronted with the problem of how religious identity intersects with the various other identities of a woman. As a feminist organization, Vanangana took this issue to the women they worked with, in a conference that brought together about 300 Dalit women in their area. The discussion opened up the meaning of and perceptions about caste, Hinduism, and the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. Issues such as religious fundamentalism, and the position of the Dalits and minorities, were discussed for the first time with community leaders.

At around the same time, a political party with a Dalit woman leader, the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), was gaining power and acceptance in UP. Bahujan literally translates as "the people," or "the masses," and Samajwadi means socialist. The political ideology of the BSP is to promote the interests of Dalits, and their leadership is drawn from the Dalit community. There was a lot of opposition from the upper castes, which turned violent in many places. The murder of the Dalit political activist Harish Chandra, who was from one of the villages where Vanangana works, proved to be a catalyst in sharpening the Dalit identity of the women at the grass roots level. The upper caste not only killed Harish Chandra, but they also burnt other Dalit homes in his village.

When the women who had been associated with Vanangana heard about the crime, they rushed to the village and showed great courage in confronting the upper caste terror by registering a police complaint and bringing back the homeless Dalit families to their villages. They also informed the Vanangana team about the incident, and the case was taken up to ensure justice was done. Vanangana activists and the Dalit women leaders in the villages played a major role in ensuring that the culprits were arrested. Many in the village where the crime took place reported that, "what the political party to which the deceased belonged could not do, these women have done." This heightened the confidence and credibility of the Dalit women leaders associated with Vanangana among the general Dalit community.

Meanwhile, Vanangana went through an organizational re-structuring process through the end 2001 and the first half of 2002. They re-examined and reflected on their values, modes of organizing and mobilizing, and beliefs about untouchability. As a result of this process of self-reflection, they found that there was prejudice, even within the organization, to some communities and some tasks associated with untouchables. Gradually the team came up with strategies to change their own practices – such as giving their cleaning lady an off day and taking turns doing the cleaning themselves (task usually done only by Dalits).

These dynamic processes culminated in 2002 in the *padyatras* – foot marches - which the Vanangana team undertook in all the villages where they worked. They conducted meetings with the Dalit community, and began the process of foregrounding Dalit identity issues. In each of these villages there was already some form of Dalit women's leadership as an outcome of the previous decade's work. These meetings were essentially dialogues and debates about the women's Dalit identity, its meaning in their lives and practices, and what they would like to change. This was the benchmark in the framing of a joint agenda, and the recognition of the need for a separate structure for the women's

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11. When Hindu fundamentalist gangs, with the full support and collusion of the state government and police, attacked Muslim homes and businesses, killing hundreds, raping hundreds of Muslim women, and displacing thousands of Muslims most of whom are still living in camps, too afraid to return to their homes and villages.

struggle. The need for a separate local women's organization, with a clear Dalit identity, and a structure different from that of Vanangana's emerged, resulting in the formation of the Dalit Mahila Samiti.

The women leaders were involved in several rounds of training and exposure to other Dalit organizations in Gujarat. An exposure trip to Gujarat to a well-established Dalit Organization opened up the possibilities they could explore as DMS. Vanangana consciously moved into a facilitator role and the primary leadership and strategizing role fell on DMS's shoulders. The DMS leadership laid down the norms for their organization. They decided that the primary members would be Dalit women, and that men would be given a space as supporting members. A membership fee was established, and over a period of time, they determined that Self Help Group membership was not necessary to become a member of DMS. This was based on the fact that SHGs filled a specific economic need for those who had surplus cash to engage in saving and lending, while DMS offered much broader support to uphold the dignity of the Dalit women.

## Initial Strategies

As explained earlier, the Vanangana and the Dalit women's constituency were not very distinct until the creation of the formal DMS structure in 2002. The discussion of strategies is therefore divided into two phases of development: Phase I looks at strategies that emerged out of the interface between feminist thinking and principles and the issues and problems raised by rural Dalit women, where the lead organization was Vanangana. Phase II presents the strategies adopted in the years after DMS emerged as a separate identity.

### Phase 1

Initially the mobilization done by Vanangana was around individual women's struggles, with 10-12 Dalit women from a village and Vanangana staff

working to seek justice in a particular case. For example,

*Cases of violence against women were usually reported after a group of rural Dalit women attended a Vanangana training program on gender justice, citizen rights, legal awareness, health care, or another such issue. When they went back to their communities and spoke about what they learnt, some woman either came forward after hearing that there is a way out of her violent or exploitative situation, or the trained women decided on their own to speak to women they knew were suffering. Thus a woman ("case") came to the office of Vanangana and a strategy would be worked out to seek justice and remedy the situation. The process included analyzing her situation and seeking other local women to support her as she took legal measure or filed a complaint with the police. Thus the relationship was built around the woman who sought justice and those who stood by her. There was no formal support group that lasted beyond the resolution of the case.*

When Vanangana was founded, there was no quota of places for women in the elected village council,<sup>12</sup> so they had to function in a very feudal system where the same person had been the village head for 10-15 years. In order to handle cases of women being exploited or ill-treated, Vanangana leaders also had to learn how the village system works, how the police function and so on, and this was a process of learning by doing. Madhavi and other leaders of the organization ensured that all the information was made available to the local women's leadership. It was a phase of applying their feminist ideology at the grassroots level in the context of a very feudal part of rural India.

In the first 7-8 years, violence cases took up a great deal of the time and energy of the organization. Everyone had to understand the case and analyze it in detail. The women who sought justice went through their ups and downs and went back and forth -- when they felt it was taking too long, and when there was too much pressure, they would say they did not want to pursue the matter. Often, however, they would come back after a new incidence of

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12. See Annex 2 for an explanation of the Decentralised Governance System for Rural Areas in India.

violence. Although Vanangana also took up issues of wages on government work sites and housing rights, their identity was primarily that of a group of women working for justice for poor women. It was not seen as a movement, although this early work was clearly the foundation on which the DMS movement rests. Vanangana supported issues that were raised by the women and the community and then developed the response and strategy.

Finally, in this initial phase, Vanangana focused entirely on women and strengthening their capacities and awareness, but once a cadre of grassroots Dalit women were established in leadership positions, they began to work with some men as well. Madhavi notes that in the initial years, there was a need to “create time and space for women” - the entire effort of taking feminism to poor rural women was new, there was no road map, and anxiety that involving men would dilute or subvert the fragile process.

In summary, Phase I strategies were essentially about building from individual women’s experiences of oppression and creating collective power for the fight for justice. Translating feminist ideology into practice also meant dealing with other vulnerabilities that poor women faced in their day-to-day lives, like non-payment of wages, harassment by forest guards, lack of access to water, and so forth. It was through these struggles that they eventually came to the understanding that there is a need to look at the larger culture that promotes inequality.

## Phase 2

This phase is marked by the establishment of DMS as an organization with a separate identity in 2002. In this phase, the strategies used worked to highlight the Dalit identity and its significance in the overall fight for dignity and justice. This involved a series of dialogues at the community level to see the linkages between the women’s struggle for justice and a life of dignity, as well as the larger social inequalities in which the cast structure and the concept of untouchability creating conditions of indignity and injustice. Out of these dialogues a Dalit consciousness – and a Dalit feminist consciousness - was created, as well as the ability to take leadership in the cases of violence. In fact, cases are now being voiced

first to the leaders of DMS in the community/cluster level meetings.

For Vanangana, individual cases of violence are now located in the context of Dalit exploitation and dealt with in a different manner. Among women as well, there is greater willingness to report cases of violence, and the organization has developed such credibility that women feel they will get justice with Vanangana’s support. Now, Vanangana does not take up issues as they arise, in a reactive mode, but based on a strategy and an annual plan: they pick the villages where they will work in advance, and then go about mobilizing and deciding on the issues they will take up. This may seem a top-down approach, but they ensure a space for issues to be raised at the grassroots level. Vanangana does, however, strategize about which issues will be given more attention and focus in a given year.

There are some important shifts and features to the strategies that came into place in Phase II, after the birth of DMS:

### Alliances Built by DMS

Over the past five years, Vanangana and Dalit Mahila Samiti have been engaged in a process of developing distinct identities. For instance, Dynamic Action Group (DAG) is a network of organizations in UP that work on Dalit issues. Dalit Mahila Samiti is a member of this network in its own right. Nevertheless, the alliance between DAG and Vanangana is still stronger than with DMS, although DAG has as much to gain from working with either group, as both provide the female balance to their otherwise primary male membership.

Apart from this formal membership, many village level members of DMS have alliances with the local workers of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (currently in power at the state level) who support the women’s cause. However, so far these alliances have been informal and there are no formal ties between the DMS and the BSP. Vanangana has played a crucial role in negotiating the basis on which the local workers of the BSP protect DMS from being fully co-opted by the party at the local level or district level. For instance, BSP leaders are invited to DMS rallies or conferences, but they are asked not to bring their party banners. In this man-

ner DMS is in control and not the political party. The local non-party based alliance with the male Dalit leaders ensures that DMS too retains its autonomy and gets issue-based support. Thus DMS has built effective local level alliances with larger political and civil society forces.

## Leadership Structure and Levels / Layers of Leadership

The leadership of Dalit Mahila Samiti is still evolving, and the demarcations of leadership and decision-making are not very clear. DMS leaders have developed the ability to respond to problems on their own to a large extent, and seek support from Vanangana only when necessary. For example, primary decisions about which cases to take, and the strategies to be adopted, are taken by DMS leaders - Vanangana members are kept informed, and when required, called upon for help.

In every village, two women are selected by the local DMS members to represent them at the cluster level. Each cluster has an *Adhyaksh* (President), *Koshaadhyaksh* (Treasurer) and a *Sachiv* (Secretary). Similarly, at the block or multi-cluster level, there is a President, Treasurer and Secretary. The cluster leaders meet once a month to share their experiences, take decisions collectively and those issues that need further discussion are taken to the block level. Representatives from Vanangana attend these meetings and offer information and guidance as required.

Three years ago, Madhavi and Huma, feminists providing leadership to Vanangana, moved to the capital of UP, Lucknow, from their earlier base in Karvi town, in Banda district, where the main office of Vanangana is located. Vanangana is also experiencing a change in leadership and is dealing with a separate and formal structure of DMS, with women holding formal positions and roles for the first time. For the local Vanangana team this has involved valuing the independent decision-making

capacity of the DMS leaders and maintaining boundaries as separate organizations. At times it is a challenge as informal relationships, especially personal friendships and familiarity, can make it difficult for both DMS and Vanangana to maintain very clear boundaries.

## Goals of the Movement

The current goals of DMS are as follows:

1. To change caste equations in the area/region where they work
2. To promote the leadership of local women
3. To protest against all forms of violence against women and men
4. To negotiate their terms with members of the upper caste during elections
5. To ensure that the benefits of government schemes announced under the new Dalit-run regime, and that power flows to all eligible Dalits.

The strategies used to reach these goals are varied. Vanangana has had several public meetings wherein they have had ceremonies to burn effigies of untouchability as well as “chua- achut<sup>13</sup>,” or untouchability. Dalit Mahila Samiti now has a strategy of going from village to village to perform a play, “Jhootan,” that brings out the issue of untouchability. They then seek women members who agree to work and struggle to end untouchability and invite the men to become *sathi dars*, givers of support. The women are given a badge and write up about Ambedkar, JyotiBa Phule and Savitirbai Phule – icons of the Dalit Movement in the western parts of the country.

Along with making public statements, the Dalit Mahila Samiti is working on changing practices at the household and individual levels. There is an insistence of drinking water and eating together, and thus getting families to change untouchability

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13. *chua*-touch comes from *chua*: touch, *achut*: untouchable, a phrase to describe a whole range of do's and don't's about touching, cooking, eating, etc., dictated by location of the person in the caste hierarchy.

practices based on their new understanding of the concepts of purity and impurity (which traditionally reinforce untouchability). The women are using nuanced but powerful strategies to challenge untouchability and concepts of impurity. Many *Dais* (Traditional Birth Attendants) are from Dalit communities, but they are called for deliveries by upper castes. The *dais* are paid in kind or cash for their work. In order to break the untouchability stigma, they attend to the birthing process, but refuse to discard the placenta and to cut the umbilical cord. These tasks were traditionally done by them and seen as impure tasks not done by upper castes. The Dalit women have identified some key activities which they refuse to perform as a strategy against traditional norms regarding untouchability.

Most violence related cases come through the Dalit Mahila Samiti, although some victims approach Vanangana directly.<sup>14</sup> From 2002, Dalit Mahila Samiti has a membership of 1600 women from a certain set of villages. However, the violence cases are from all over. As mentioned earlier, instead of treating each of the cases as standalone cases, the DMS leadership adopts a strategy of scrutinizing the various elements at play in the case. These are discussed in their various forums - at the cluster level, and if required, at the regional level. By sharing information on the cases, DMS builds solidarity and communicates the support of a larger movement to the victim. This builds larger stakes and strength beyond caste and class barriers.

In addition, the movement is working on a government scheme of Midday Meals in schools to ensure that Dalit children are fed alongside children of other castes and not discriminated against.

## The Role of Vanangana

Vanangana's role has been to lead by example, keeping up the discussion within the team and the

community about power, and inclusive power. The leadership model promoted in both Vanangana and DMS is based on collective power. Although the word empowerment is easily used to describe women's journeys from domestic to more public domains, and from submission to assertion, there is a hesitation to recognize the word and the meaning of "power". As a facilitating organization, Vanangana had to demonstrate how power could be used differently - not a top down authoritative model of power, but rather one that respects the power that each one in the collective has to achieve common goals - i.e., inclusive power.

The leaders are encouraged to use their power for change, to take risks, and to involve others in the decision-making process. The organization went beyond representational participation, but invested in a process of putting women in the leadership of building the movement. In terms of leadership, it meant taking risks, which shook the core by putting the larger movement at risk on various issues - big and small-- particularly when it came to taking up individual cases. There are two significant instances that led to a lot of pressure on Vanangana and the DMS. One was the child sexual abuse case in 1999 and the case of Sohagiya in 2003.

i. In 1999, Ila Pande approached DMS to take up the case of her daughter who had been sexually abused by the father. This was the first case of an upper caste (Brahmin) to come before them. The father was of course denied the charge. This was at a time when child sexual abuse was yet to emerge in the public realm in India. So local society was completely shocked, and the father, who was also a government employee, fought hard to keep the truth hidden. He gathered support from his colleagues and the local upper caste leaders of the Bharatiya Janta Party.<sup>15</sup> The accused and his supporters used the media to viciously malign the character of Vanangana activists, and threatened to kidnap

14. The rule is that DMS will only take up a case of someone who will drink water from a Dalit; meaning she truly does not practice untouchability.

15. Bharatiya Janta Party - BJP - is the political wing of right wing Hindu nationalist organisation which largely serves the interests of Upper caste Hindus. In Uttar Pradesh they are positioned in opposition to the BSP - Bahujan Samajwadi Party.

or physically harm them and their families. It was a tough time for the Vanangana activists as they were completely unprepared for such reactions from the upper castes. No one in the community had heard of the incest either. Hence a lot of energy had to be spent with the village community to first explain why they have taken up the case and fight the barrage of false allegations made on the team. For almost six months all other work of the organization was stalled, because the entire team was working on different fronts on just this one case.

- ii. In the Sohagiya case, the police were involved in beating up a kol (Dalit) woman in 2003. Vanangana and DMS suddenly found that there was no support from within the law enforcement machinery. Even those officials who had played an unbiased role and till then had supported women's struggle for justice, turned against Vanangana and DMS. Vanangana was accused of being supported by the dacoit Dadua, since he also belonged to the Dalit community. The two organizations had to rethink all their strategies to ensure that the focus remained on the injustice to a Dalit woman, rather than being derailed by the subversive tactics of the police force to demoralize their organizations.

In both these cases, the responsibility for emerging victorious lay largely on the leadership of Vanangana. Their grit and firmness, along with the support of the local Dalit women, ultimately strengthened the movement, but these were trying times. The leaders were seen as troublemakers in a society that had so far functioned smoothly within feudal norms and traditions. The DMS leadership played a crucial role by gaining community support by unravelling the interconnections between upper caste leaders and the state, and the implications of this nexus for the struggle for Dalit rights.

While taking on the legal aspects of the violence against woman cases, working with a community-based approach meant investing in communicating to other women the various elements of injustice at play, and then to demonstrate strength in negotiating with the combined power of the state and local elites.

On speaking about the relationship between Vanangana and Dalit Mahila Samiti, Madhavi,

founder member of Vanangana says that consciously foregrounding the Dalit identity was an outcome of several years of experience. All the women they worked with were Dalits, so talking about Dalit identity at the community level was not a problem. But many of the slightly educated Dalit women who became community mobilizers, and later part of the leadership, initially did not want to call themselves Dalit. Finding strength in the experience of overcoming socio-economic, cultural and educational hurdles was something that is being provided by Vanangana. However, Madhavi is quick to point out that given the stand the organization adopted, some of the Brahmin team members also did not like to flaunt their upper caste identity, implying a larger change in attitudes towards caste and socio-economic status.

One of the constraints that a local organization or movement faces is its inability to communicate in the language of the larger donors, which is usually English. In addition, their articulation of issues will come from their lived experiences and may not fit into the frameworks and strategy plans of the donors. Thus DMS needs the support of an organisation like Vanangana that is able to fill the gap. Therefore, Vanangana raises financial support for capacity building within DMS. The latter simply takes care of the costs of the travel of their leaders for meetings and campaigns. Due to the fact that most of the DMS leaders are illiterate or neo-literate at most, fund-raising responsibility will continue to remain largely on Vanangana. Vanangana will also continue to play a critical role vis-à-vis DMS in the following areas:

- Proposal-writing and fund-raising;
- Dealing with state, legal and judicial systems, which requires not just literacy, but a strong feminist perspective;
- Contributing to knowledge building – trained, educated middle class women can provide the link between the contexts in which the Dalit women create a movement and the questions confronting a feminist scholar; and
- Managing accounts and audits, mostly to meet legal / statutory requirements, given that numeracy and accounting skills are still poor, if non-existent, within the DMS.

## Achievements so Far

The achievements of the Dalit Mahila Samiti movement are many. The fact that the DMS movement has matured through a process of consistently being grounded in the reality of Dalit women is in itself a unique achievement. In addition, surviving beyond their fight against state and upper caste violence, which involved work done on a case-to-case basis, and evolving to the formation and development of a Dalit women's identity, is providing strength to further expand their movement. The women are aware of the political shifts occurring at the state level with a woman Dalit Chief Minister in place, but are also alert to the local challenges at hand.

The collective nature of the movement leadership is also a strength, since it is not based on one or two charismatic leaders. The leadership of Dalit Mahila Samiti also comes from a large geographical area, and draws on the long years of activist experience of many of the women.

The formation of a separate Dalit Mahila Samiti has taken place simultaneously with the successful entry of Dalits in formal electoral politics. This recently culminated in the appointment of Ms. Mayavati, a Dalit Woman, as the Chief Minister of the state of UP. For those who have experienced centuries of indignities at the hand of upper castes, having a representative among them in a seat of power is in itself a great source of pride. There is much rejoicing and hope that things will improve for their localities. However, there are sceptics who feel that it will be a long time before real benefits flow to those in remote villages.

Several important cases clearly establish that the Dalit Mahila Samiti will fight until justice is done to the Dalits in UP, including two incidents that took place in 2003, one of which was mentioned earlier—the murder of Harish Chandra in Bhowri. In this case, women from Dalit Mahila Samiti intervened to get complaints registered and compensation for their losses when their homes were burnt. Another incident involves the role played by DMS in achieving justice in the case of an expecting Dalit mother, Shanti, who was beaten up by three women (a mother and her two daughters) belonging to an upper caste. Both these cases were followed closely by the local media and administra-

tion, and had it not been for the women's resolve, they would have been buried and forgotten due to the nexus between the accused upper caste people, the police, and the local administration.

In addition, the fact that Dalit women are providing leadership and are a voice for the women from their area in national meetings on women's rights is strong evidence of the shift in leadership in the women's movement. As a feminist movement they are also building alliances with other groups working on Dalit issues, including Dalit groups that are led by men. Thus DMS does not rely entirely on traditional feminist allies.

## Lessons for Feminist Movement Building

What makes the DMS movement feminist in character, approach, and strategies? Feminist organizing involves:

- Giving time and space to women
- Providing for rotational and shared leadership. This necessarily requires a consensus-building process.
- Going at the pace of women and being flexible—sometimes quick and sometimes slow
- Working on issues of sexuality
- Reiterating that the personal is political, and bringing what you practice to the movement and making the values of the movement your own.
- Recognizing individual journeys
- Celebrating strength in being a survivor
- Using symbols, especially local symbols and examples, and
- Using public spaces for celebrations

### Feminist Leadership, in turn,

- Has multiple identities (e.g. the identities of Dalit, woman, poor);
- Requires mental preparation and awareness of the risks they are taking; and
- Is always challenged and subject to slander, so

the movement has to have the strength to support its leaders in difficult times.

One important factor in looking at the nature of the DMS movement is the definition of Dalit and its relation to the movement. DMS is composed of women and men who have faced discrimination and want to fight it, and has a strong feminist perspective. This means that there is a clear representation and predominance of women in decision-making positions, and their work-spaces are women-friendly. When prioritizing within issues that have several aspects that could be challenged simultaneously, they have enabled women to use a feminist perspective, and provided opportunities for women to develop and test their leadership abilities. DMS has also undertaken fact-finding missions to investigate issues, and conducted training that involves a combination of theory and practice.

DMS has adopted process-oriented perspective building, which may be slow, but is important to go through before issuing a manifesto or making decisions. This is important because a feminist perspective necessitates balancing many issues. DMS mentors and supports changes in the personal lives of the women and men who join the movement. In addition, the movement provides training on the law and focuses on how they can deal with the law enforcement machinery and otherwise strengthen their struggle for justice.

### Critiques of the mainstream feminist movement

Initially the DMS team was mixed, with many former activists of the Mahila Samakhya program who came from lower-middle class backgrounds, and who took a long time internalize feminist values. There were many tensions that the leadership had to deal with – such as gender trainers who came from cities, and raised issues with the grass roots women related to very personal matters (such as sexuality), whereas the women were still dealing with basic problems such as lack of access to resources. The local leaders had to deal with these issues and balance the different views.

The agenda of the women's movement at the national level is still framed by middle class women's

perspectives. For instance, in the organizing of the national autonomous women's movement events, DMS and Vanangana leaders participate but with some level of disconnect. Issues of identity are difficult to incorporate into the national movement, and mainstream Indian feminists need to bring in the politics and priorities of other identities. For instance, when national women's groups would determine that the focus of Women's Day events would be violence against women, but for the local women, the critical issue was access to water.

### How movement members define "movement building"

Some key elements of how DMS members define movement building are worthy of note:

- Internalizing the goals of the movement
- Being able to generate mass mobilization when required
- Having strong leadership

The activities or actions that DMS members consider movement building initiatives include the following:

- Holding public events to denounce untouchability
- Generating public debate in the community on the issue of untouchability, e.g. regular performance of the play "jhootan" to raise consciousness against the practice of untouchability and what it does to human dignity
- The play also provides some pointers towards the way out i.e. through education and making courageous changes.

### Conclusion

When we began this assignment we were surprised with the title and wondered "Are there any movements left?" When the team was asked the same question, their response was telling: "When you say "movement" the image that comes to ones mind is of large numbers of women, sitting on *Dharna* (strike) or marching in the streets on a regular basis. And therefore we hesitate to call ourselves a movement." This tells us something

about the images and the meaning that the word movement has created in our minds. We then explored why our organizations - DMS, Vanangana and ANANDI (which prepared this case study) - hesitate to call ourselves a movement, we realized that a feminist perspective has meant dealing with a very wide range of issues, while our image of a movement is quite narrow. The 'enemy' (patriarchy) manifests itself in many ways, and is therefore everywhere. It is not a monolithic structure to be overcome or brought down. Hence the meaning of what is a movement needs to be expanded to integrate the whole range of activities and processes, which a feminist organization working for fundamental change has to undertake to build a movement, as explained in this case study.

There are many things that DMS does today with the support of Vanangana that is contributing

to building a movement of Dalit women. In building an understanding of feminist movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the partnership of DMS and Vanangana offers critical insights. The road to equality, justice and peace with dignity will be a long one, but the fact that today 1600 Dalit women from a remote area in a very feudal part of India have set out on that road is evidence of a movement. This 'movement' sometimes takes physical shape and is visible, and sometimes it is in the mind and therefore invisible. Those who are oppressed have to first walk a long path in their own hearts and minds, in order to realize that there is a way out of their oppression. To enable this, organisations like Vanangana are required to change peoples' consciousness and to provide opportunities to think and act differently. Trainings, interactions, and exposure all form an integral part of building a feminist movement.

## Timeline of Key Events and Evolution of the Movement since its Inception

### 1990-1993

The first phase of mobilization- critical analysis of issues, collective reflection and action by women. The issues were taken up at the village level, or within a cluster of villages. There were sporadic cases of individuals/ hamlets around land that were taken up by the Dalit women's leadership.

Issues such as eviction of Dalit families from the lands that they were residing on which legally belonged to the landlords. The actions were to implement government orders, which stated that the lands where Dalits had resided for over 10 years had to be turned into gram panchayat lands and that they would continue to have the right to residence. Sporadic demonstrations and struggles in villages- women speak up and resist the evictions.

### 1990-1995

Individual cases fought between 1990-1995. The case of Semia: In the village of Suvargada, four sisters who were kol tribals<sup>16</sup>, claimed that 40 bighas<sup>17</sup> of land should be in their name. A *bania* (upper-caste merchant) had captured the land, pushing the women to fight. DMS fought the case with individual lawyers and well as simultaneously engaging with the state. Support from the women's collective to enable Semia to till her land and resist the bania on the ground.

Struggle in one cluster around **wages for work** done on road construction- Women recover lost wages.

16. One of over 500 tribal (or indigenous) communities in India historically oppressed and excluded in ways similar to untouchables.

17. A bigha is roughly equivalent to a third of an acre of land, thus 40 bighas is about 13 acres, a very large holding in rural India

*Tendu* leaf (leaves used to roll tobacco) collectors (forest dwellers) struggle sporadically to get the **wages set by the** Forest Produce Corporation - women find voice and assert their rights collectively. Limited agency since *Dadua* ( a dacoit who had the sympathy of the lower castes) set the price and took part of their wages.

**Water campaigns-** 1991 drought year. 1992 The Vidhan sabha (State Assembly) inquiry highlighted that 90% of hand pumps in that area not working. 1992-1994: Training of hand pump mechanics. Water was an issue that brought people together, forcing government and local village leaders to become accountable

**1994**

Take-over of the block of Manikpur for maintenance. Only Dalit women trained. They became technically savvy, gaining them status and money for their work.

**1994-1998**

Maintained the hand pumps handed over to local village councils; Trained women mechanics to become entrepreneurs.

**1994-1997**

60-80 Self help groups were formed in order to get out of the hands of money-lenders. They gained access to the bank, and the identity of poor Dalit women was now more formal compared to earlier times. Some of them gained skills in dealing with banks, accounting, and book keeping. They now had an alternative source to fulfil their credit needs.

**1997**

A case of violence against a dalit - kurmi woman was taken up by the Dalit women's group which later participated in the formalizing of DMS. They organized a silent rally in the town to ensure that the police acted upon the complaint. This was an early case of taking a public stand as Dalit women.

**1999**

The campaign "*Mujhe Jawaab Do*" - "Answer Me" - was launched to highlight the causes of violence against women. A study of 30 cases showed that:

- 50% of deaths were either recorded as suicide or murder
- Domestic violence was taking place across all castes
- Dalit women started taking up cases of violence against women of other castes as well. They began responding to news appearing in papers or on hearing from others.

**1999 June**

A case of incest was reported to the Dalit women's groups by an upper caste woman. The case drew a lot of attention as child sexual abuse and incest were supposedly unheard of in that sector of society. For the women it became a rallying point not just to fight for justice for the girls, but because the supporters of the accused were the same Brahmins who kept them as bonded labour. The women's groups had to put up a huge fight for a very long period, there was a lot of media attention, and political pressures through right-wing Hindu fundamentalist parties like the Shiv Sena<sup>18</sup> and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad<sup>19</sup>.

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18. Shiv Sena is a political party of influence in the state of Maharashtra, and it draws its ideology from communal identities.

19. Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad – a students group associated with the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janta Party

National Commission of Women member, Ms. Sayeeda Hamid, came to the district through the efforts of the women's groups as part of the investigations and heard the women's case. The case took an incredible amount of energy and the organization was not prepared for what unfolded. But it played the role of highlighting many aspects of the struggle of Dalit women. The case has only now come up for hearing.

This was also a time when the *Chamars* (also a Dalit caste- those engaged in leather work) decided that they will give up their traditional occupation. When an auction for leatherwork was held by the government, it was members of the upper caste who filled up the tenders to do the leather work. The link between caste and work that was seen as impure was beginning to be challenged in that area.

## 2002

Gujarat lived through horrible communal carnage, which led to Hindu-Muslim tension in U.P. Some Vanangana members went as volunteers to Gujarat and returned to discuss what had happened in communities. They held a peace march in their area to bring out the role of upper caste in supporting Hindutva (Hindu Fundamentalist) forces in fostering religious divides.

Another incident took place that year - the killing of a Dalit man, a worker of the (BSP) party who openly challenged the upper castes and was seeking an electoral mandate to power. He was killed by upper caste men, who also looted other Dalit houses in the village. The Dalit Mahila Samiti leaders of the nearby village came to support and ensured that police recorded their complaints. A rally to highlight Dalit Manav Adhikar Hanan (abuse of Dalit's Human Rights) was held. An enquiry was ordered by the State Commission of Scheduled Castes, arrests were made, and due compensation was paid. The communities and the women began to understand the nuances of electoral politics.

The rise of BSP- the Bahujan Samaj Party and several smaller examples showing Dalit power in the area and Dalits choosing to give up tasks associated with their caste because of notions of "impurity". Mayawati, a woman leader of BSP, came to power for a short while.

A reflection process was initiated to examine where the Dalit women's groups and leaders that later took on the formal DMS structure had come in their journey- they looked at caste identity. They began reflecting on the forms in which they are still oppressed as Dalit women and worked to understand caste and untouchability within Dalit castes. They looked at external as well as internal processes. They made rules to reflect their understanding.

## Formal naming of Dalit Mahila Samiti.

## 2003

Sohagiya - a kol (Dalit) woman was beaten up. The police did not take action. The Superintendent of Police (S.P.) was involved in the cover up. A Delegation from DMS and some Vanangana leaders went to the state capital, Lucknow, to highlight the biased attitude of the police. They also initiated a legal process. An enquiry was instituted, and eventually, the S.P. apologized to the community. Instead of conducting a demonstration in block or district towns, the women held demonstrations at the village level to enlist the solidarity of the women. While large numbers of village women joined the protest, most of the men stayed at home, reluctant to challenge the police in this way.



## TIMELINE

**2004**

A public hearing was held in partnership with Dynamic Action Group on violence against Dalit Women and violations of Dalits' rights. A joint fact finding team from Vanangana provided feminist leadership to the larger Dalit movement.

**2006**

Dalit Mahila Samiti event involving a ritualistic burning of symbols on a mock funeral pyre after raising consciousness about the symbols that promote untouchability.

**2007**

There is a an ongoing campaign at the village level to mobilize women members and create an understanding that Dalits are not just victims or survivors, but have positive agency, embodied in the struggles of women and men who have experienced indignity and fought against it. It is about building a positive identity.