Logics of Empowerment

Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India

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For my grandparents, Champa and Tulsi Das Dhawan, and my parents, Versha and (late) Sushil Kumar Sharma

Contents

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Introduction

The Politics of Empowerment

India Enters the World Stage

The cover of the March 6, 2006 issue of *Newsweek* featured the Food TV celebrity Padma Lakshmi, in an ethnically marked outfit and hands folded in a *namaste*, the common Indian gesture of greeting. The captions read, "The New India" and "Asia's Other Powerhouse Steps Out." Inside was an article by Fareed Zakaria titled "India Rising." Written in the wake of the 2006 World Economic Forum held in Davos, Zakaria's article outlined India's economic coming of age and extolled some strategies used by the Indian government to mark their arrival on the world economic stage.

> In the decade that I've been going to Davos, no country has captured the imagination of the conference and dominated the conversation as India in 2006. . . . As you got off the plane in Zurich, there were large billboards extolling INCREDIBLE INDIA. Davos itself was plastered with signs. WORLD'S FASTEST GROWING FREE MARKET DEMOCRACY! proclaimed the town's buses. When you got to your room, you found an iPod Shuffle loaded with Bollywood songs, and a pashmina shawl, gifts from the Indian delegation. When you entered the meeting rooms, you were likely to hear an Indian voice, one of the dozens of CEOs of world-class Indian companies. And then there were the government officials, India's "Dream Team," all intelligent and articulate, and all selling their country. (Zakaria 2006, 34)

Zakaria chronicled the recent economic strides that India has taken and credited many of these not so much to the "dream team" of bureaucrats who were at Davos, but to an entrepreneurial society. He contrasted China's authoritarian growth model, a favorite point of comparison I might add, with India's. Unlike China's efficiently planned development, "India's growth is

messy, chaotic and largely unplanned. It is not top-down but bottom-up. It is happening not because of the government, but largely despite it" (Zakaria 2006, 36). The author attributed India's economic miracle to innovative individuals who have discovered their potential, and who have the desire to make money and also the "smarts" to overcome bureaucratic hurdles.

Zakaria set up India's recent economic growth as an example of the struggle of society against the state. He noted that 1947 marked

> the birth of India as an independent state. What is happening today is the birth of India as an independent society—boisterous, colorful, open, vibrant and, above all, ready for change. [India] . . . is not a quiet, controlled, quasi-authoritarian country that is slowly opening up according to plans. It is a noisy democracy that has finally *empowered* its people economically. In this respect India, one of the poorest countries in the world, looks strikingly similar to the world's wealthiest country, the United States of America. In both places, *society has triumphed over the state.* (Zakaria 2006, 37–38; emphasis mine)

Zakaria described society as the driving force behind India's bottom-up development and painted the state as a tedious, obstacle-ridden, overgrown entity that needed to be reformed and rid of both its socialist and corrupt elements. He did not, however, deny that the state had a crucial role to play in India's continued economic success but limited it to providing an enabling institutional environment for the proper functioning of markets, to producing a skilled labor force (through its technology schools), and to addressing the environmental and AIDS crises. Therefore, he warned, "If India's governance does not improve, the country will never fully achieve its potential" (Zakaria 2006, 40).

This *Newsweek* article tells a now oft-repeated story about the economic success of neoliberal India as a battle pitting two giant, yet evidently distinct, entities—the state and the society—in which the latter has finally trumped the former. To be sure, the "society" that Zakaria lauded, is not one billion strong. The visionary and entrepreneurial society that he counterposed to the cumbersome and slow-changing state consists of the estimated three hundred million upper- and middle-class urban Indians whose "can do" spirit is credited for firing the economic engine of their country. It is this society, painted as the ideal civil society, that is viewed as being at loggerheads with

the Indian state, and if it were not for the persistence and empowerment of this society, as Zakaria suggested, India would not be as "incredible" as the bureaucrats at Davos claimed it was.

Celebratory narratives about economic liberalization in India often gloss over its underbelly—the over three hundred million Indians who eke out a living on less than a dollar a day on the social, economic, and political margins of the country. The exploitation of their labor has enabled the success of the dominant classes. Their survival, meanwhile, has been rendered increasingly tenuous by the very processes of liberalization that have benefited some.

Postliberalization India looks quite different when seen from the margins of society. Whereas Indian elites and middle classes have gained from economic liberalization, those on the fringes have suffered its spectacular unevenness and inequalities. While the dominant classes have successfully avoided bureaucratic hurdles along the path of economic growth, the subalterns have had to contend with bureaucratic agencies that might be avoiding them. How do those left out or cast out of the successes of liberalization understand and address their marginalization? How do they encounter and interpret the changing faces of the state and governance in contemporary India? Finally, if the upper third of Indian society (in terms of income and wealth) is economically *empowered*, as the *Newsweek* article claimed, what is being done to address the simultaneous *disempowerment* of the bottom third?

This book takes up precisely these questions and narrates less-often-told stories about the state, development, gender, subaltern subjects, and popular protest in neoliberal India. I engage these issues through the lens of grassroots "empowerment."[1] I ethnographically detail the paradoxes and politics engendered by an innovative women's empowerment project undertaken by state agencies and feminist groups in partnership with each other. The program, Mahila Samakhya (MS),[2] is structured as a hybrid "government-organized nongovernmental organization" (GONGO), and aims to collectively empower and mobilize low-caste, rural Indian women who have been actively and systematically disempowered by economic forces and by social and political structures.

Empowerment in the Neoliberal Age

In the contemporary neoliberal era, empowerment has emerged as a keyword effectively replacing the now much-maligned term *welfare*. The former U.S. president Bill Clinton (2006) pointed to this transition in an opinion piece

titled "How We Ended Welfare, Together." The erstwhile U.S. welfare system, he wrote, urgently needed overhauling and many "Democrats and Republicans wanted to pass welfare legislation shifting the emphasis from *dependence* to *empowerment*" (emphasis mine). Clinton credited the success of his decade-old welfare-reform bill to bipartisan partnerships, a strong economy, and especially "empowerment policies [that] made a big difference." I am interested in exploring the conceptual sleight of hand by which the "end of welfare" (and of "dependence") becomes coded as "empowerment," and discussing the material, discursive, and political implications of the use of empowerment as a state-driven development policy targeting subaltern women in India.

The recent focus on empowerment is an important part of neoliberal transformations taking place around the world, as states attempt to downsize their welfare bureaucracies and reinvent themselves as streamlined and efficient institutions. Along with economic liberalization, austerity programs, privatization, and participatory governance, empowerment is now an accepted part of development orthodoxy. Various development actors, including international agencies, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working at international, national, and local levels, are scrambling to implement grassroots empowerment programs. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG), for instance, featured the need to "promote gender equality and empower women" as a key objective of our times (United Nations n.d.); the World Bank's new "human" face is about poverty alleviation and empowerment (Kahn 2000); the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is facilitating empowerment programs (Leve 2001); and the Government of India declared 2001 as "Women's Empowerment Year" (Menon-Sen 2001).[3] Tempered by the current emphasis on dismantling welfare, exerting fiscal discipline, and privatizing state services, the neoliberally imagined empowerment logic seeks to enable grassroots actors, and especially women, to fulfill their own needs through market mechanisms instead of relying on state largesse. I analyze how and to what effect the move away from welfare-style dependent development toward empowerment-style self-development has manifested itself in the "gender and development" (GAD) policy regime of the neoliberal Indian state. I use the Indian case to explore what happens when the state, in collaboration with NGOs, implements empowerment as a technology of government (Cruikshank 1999) or "a category of governance" (Chatterjee 2004, 69) and the tensions and unexpected results that follow from such usage.

This book elaborates how the mobilization of empowerment is altering the state and governance, reconfiguring the relationships between state and social

actors, transforming development, and reshaping citizenship and popular politics under the regime of neoliberal *governmentality*. Michel Foucault (1991) used the term governmentality to describe an important transition in the aim and modes of governance in Europe from repressive sovereign power that was primarily concerned with control over territory to a form of biopower and rule that is centrally focused on the care and well-being of the population living in a particular territory (Burchell et al. 1991). He drew attention to the entire range of practices and institutions of surveillance and governance, including but not limited to state agencies, which regulate the conduct of a population and direct it toward particular ends (Dean 1999). Following Foucault, I deploy the concept of governmentality to signal the diffusion of self-regulatory modes of governance, such as empowerment, throughout society and the imbrication of varied social actors, including individuals and NGOs, in the project of rule; the state, in this frame, is one among several nodes of governance, albeit a dominant, coordinating one.

Recent scholarship on neoliberal governmentality, which is largely focused on the global North, suggests that neoliberal mechanisms of self-governance, such as empowerment and participation, are reforming the state, rule, subjectivity, and resistance (Barry et al. 1996; Rose 1996).[4] I ask whether these shifts in the technologies and entities of governance follow a standard script everywhere and how an ethnographic study of neoliberal developments in one part of the global South might trouble the taken-for-granted homogeneity of their effects. Some scholars have recently highlighted the emergent nature of neoliberalism, its variegated flows, geographies and dynamics, and its contingent results (Clarke 2007; Ong 2006; Peck 2004). Ethnographies that analyze the workings of neoliberalism in those places where this doctrine is not the general, or even the primary, ethic and where it sits in sometimes teeth-gritting harmony (in the Althusserian sense) with other political projects, situated histories, and ethical discourses are important in that they reveal the nonessentialized nature and contested effects of neoliberalism (Ong 2006, 3–9). An inquiry into the "particular" and the "peculiar," in other words, complicates neoliberalism's so-called universal core and consequences and illuminates the cracks in its purported global hegemony.[5]

It is in this spirit that I undertook this study of the governmental workings of empowerment in a specific postcolonial, liberalizing Southern setting. The tale I tell is not one about a one-way localization, or "vernacularization," of global neoliberalism in India. Instead, I offer a situated look at how transnational neoliberal ideologies of development articulate and jostle with histories

of state and subject formation and of popular movements in India, producing a spatially uneven and ambiguous terrain of changes not easily captured by the rubric of dewelfarized states, depoliticized existence, and disciplined, consuming, individuated civic actors. I construct a nuanced picture of how neoliberal globalization mutates state identity and practices viz. development and citizen identity and practices viz. the state, and how these mutations impact governance and grassroots activism in contemporary India.

I approach these issues through a detailed analysis of the structure, practices, and effects of the MS program, a part-state, part-NGO subaltern women's empowerment project. The initiation of MS and of empowerment as a matter of state policy was the outcome of several intersecting factors, including the political mobilization of subaltern groups in India by grassroots organizations and political parties, feminist activism directed at Indian state agencies, Southern feminist debates about gender and development issues, and the transnational circulations of Paulo Freire's radical pedagogy. Interestingly, the launch of the MS program coincided with the liberalization of the Indian economy. Facing a balance-of-payments crisis in 1991, the Indian government, under pressure from the IMF, implemented a strenuous program of economic and social adjustment. Although the market-friendly reforms initiated in 1991 are often regarded as having liberalized the Indian economy, many of the restructuring measures were already under way by the mid-1980s, during the Rajiv Gandhi era (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Khilnani 1999). The temporal conjuncture between the implementation of liberalization policies and the MS program does not, in itself, make MS an archetypal neoliberal program. Indeed, MS can be seen as much as a response *to* the growing contradictions and inequalities of capitalist globalization as a selective manifestation of some ideas that have since been co-opted into the hegemonic neoliberal bundle. Even though MS is not a straightforward reflection of global neoliberalism writ large, it does provide striking examples of how certain development initiatives in India *articulate* with neoliberal principles. My book focuses on precisely such awkward confluences and analyzes their consequences for the reconfiguration of the state, governance, and subaltern subjectivities and activism.

Theoretical Groundings and Departures

This book investigates the politics, practices, and paradoxes of state-cum-feminist sponsored subaltern women's empowerment and development strategies with a critical anthropological and feminist eye. I analyze the discursive

meanings and material manifestations of the state, empowerment, development, subaltern women's subjectivity, agency and struggles, and feminist praxis under neoliberalism with insights drawn from political economy, poststructuralist theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. Instead of viewing development, empowerment, the state, and identity as definitive or ontological givens, I interrogate their performativity (Butler 1999) and mutual construction as cultural and gendered products of translocal historical processes. My purpose is not to ask whether development, empowerment, the state, or collective feminist politics are necessary or valuable, but rather to interrogate what these ideas mean in practice and how they are brought to life through everyday actions and interactions.

This book, therefore, is not an evaluation of the success or failure of empowerment-style development programs targeting marginalized women relative to the goals that they set for themselves. Such assessments rest on preconceived notions of what success and failure might look like, how it may be measured, and who might be qualified to make such a judgment. Taking a success or failure–oriented approach also forecloses the possibility of digging deeper into the workings of governmental initiatives and examining their unplanned consequences, even in the face of overt achievement or breakdown. My aim, following James Ferguson (1994), is to examine how empowerment is conceptualized and implemented as a strategy of development and governance and what it does on the ground, and to pay particular attention to the unintended results that follow.

Analyzing the inadvertent consequences of governmental projects also requires avoiding quick and easy "good versus bad" judgments about these effects. Here Foucault's assertion that not everything is bad but dangerous (1982, 231) provides a useful frame for my work. Neither development programs nor empowerment initiatives, regardless of their underlying aims or the nature of the agencies implementing them (i.e., states, NGOs, or feminist groups), are self-evidently good or bad; instead, I argue, these projects carry predictable and unforeseen dangers and provoke bitter and often empowering *political* struggles.

One of the key criticisms of development discourse has been that it depoliticizes poverty by rendering it into a technically manageable problem (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Harriss 2002). Ferguson closes his study of the operations and effects of the development apparatus in Lesotho by asserting that "since it is powerlessness that ultimately underlies the surface conditions of poverty, ill-health, and hunger, the larger goal ought therefore to be

empowerment" (1994, 279–280). I take the neoliberal rearticulation of development-as-empowerment as my point of entry. Is empowerment yet another weapon "in the armoury of the 'anti-politics machine' that is constituted by the practices of 'international development'" (Harriss 2002, 2)? Do the professionalization and bureaucratization of empowerment, as a prepackaged development strategy, represent a depoliticization of poverty and powerlessness? Or can this recent reworking of development orthodoxy be interpreted as an attempt to put power back where it belongs?

These questions get to the heart of the "dangers" and murkiness that empowerment presents. I contend that empowerment is a risky and deeply political act whose results cannot be known in advance; it is "a power relationship and one deserving of careful scrutiny" (Cruikshank 1999, 69). Although empowerment has generally been viewed as a good strategy for political mobilization by leftist and feminist groups, it is also a perilous means of governance in the Foucauldian sense. Under neoliberalism, empowerment has quickly become a preferred tool with which to produce self-governing and self-caring social actors, orient them toward the free market, direct their behaviors toward entrepreneurial ends, and attach them to the project of rule (Cruikshank 1999; Dean 1999; Hindess 2004; Rose 1996). While the neoliberal governmentalization of empowerment can connote depoliticization, I argue that it also makes possible political activism and transformation.

Whether radical or mainstream, NGO or state-implemented, projects that aim to empower subalterns are intrinsically political interventions and sites of contestation and, therefore, full of risks for the various actors involved. In a feminist-conceived GONGO program, such as MS, the women undergoing and facilitating empowerment face the ever-present dangers of state regulation, repression, and recuperation of an alternative feminist empowerment agenda. State actors, however, also face the risk that their initiatives might produce results that are contrary to what they had imagined—that empowerment programs will not bring about the orderly and manageable transformation that officials seek but will generate an uncontrollable excess, bitter opposition, disruptive conduct, and imperfect subjects. These lurking dangers compel us to carefully scrutinize the forms of political action (whether banal or exceptional, individual or collective) that bureaucratized empowerment projects open up and foreclose, and this is what my study undertakes. My goal is to shed light on the messy interplay between depoliticization and repoliticization, surveillance and subversion, and regulation and unruliness in the context of governance projects in India today.

In so doing, I heed Partha Chatterjee's call to postcolonial scholars to "dirty [their] hands in the complicated business of the politics of governmentality" (Chatterjee 2004, 23). Modern governmental systems, he argues, are altering the relationships between those who govern and those who are governed, and these relationships, in turn, are defining "political society" struggles in India today.[6] Chatterjee uses the term *political society* to denote underprivileged groups who do not fit the small, elite domain of lawful civil society "citizens" in India and who are constituted as "target populations" by governmental regimes and administrative classifications. He states,

> Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. But it is not as though they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics. As populations within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, they have to be both looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies. These activities bring these populations into a certain *political* relationship with the state. . . . It is to understand these relatively recent forms of entanglements [in postcolonial societies] of elite and subaltern politics that I am proposing the notion of a *political society*. (Chatterjee 2004, 38–40)

Chatterjee contends that depoliticizing governmental acts, such as development, ironically foster political identifications and political society mobilizations. This is a politics driven by entitlements, rights, and governmental regimes and often crosses over into the zone of illegalities.[7] Governmentality, Chatterjee further suggests, "always operates on a heterogeneous social field, on multiple population groups, and with multiple strategies" (Chatterjee 2004, 60). Thus the politics that governmentality makes possible is equally festering and ubiquitous: it is dispersed, multitactic oriented, tied to specific needs and exigencies, and fragile in the sense that victory is not given and endings are not always blissful.

I argue in this book that even though NGO and state-partnered, empowerment-based development interventions have the potential to deradicalize empowerment, depoliticize inequality, and reproduce power hierarchies, they also spawn subaltern political activism centered on redistribution

and justice. Whereas neoliberal policies aim to deflect poor people's gazes and demands away from the state and toward themselves, their communities, and other civil society bodies, the use of administrative or governance techniques such as empowerment paradoxically ends up producing a critical practice directed at state agencies; this is a politics of citizenship centered on demanding resources-as-rights from government bodies.[8] In the face of neoliberal orthodoxy, which desires to sculpt dewelfarized states, poor people's activism in India today refuses to let the redistributive state fade away. The state, in other words, is remade from "above" (by neoliberal gurus and state managers) as well as "below" (by subaltern struggles).[9]

My book takes a cultural and transnational approach to delineating how the state is discursively transformed through neoliberal rhetoric and strategies and through grassroots praxis (Sharma and Gupta 2006). A cultural framing of the state means that instead of seeing the state as an already-constituted, known, and unified actor, I examine how its discreetness and singularity is defined through development practices and encounters (Mitchell 1999). In so doing, I build on anthropological analyses of the state, which argue that the state is not a thing but a performative effect or a product of everyday bureaucratic work, people's interactions with officials, and public cultural representations (Gupta 1995; Hall 1986; Scott 1998).[10] Such studies, as Steinmetz (1999b) notes, have refocused attention on questions of culture that were insufficiently addressed within dominant, macrolevel Marxist (Lenin 1943; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1973), and neo-Weberian analyses of the state (Evans et al. 1985; Skocpol 1979).[11] Enculturing the state means disaggregating the structural unity and "itness" (Abrams 1988) the word connotes and paying attention to how the state manifests in the daily lives of people through specific policies. Here the work of feminists is helpful. Feminist scholars have laid bare the patriarchal or masculinist (Brown 1995) dimensions of state power through examining the gendered assumptions, operations, and results of different state policies (Alexander 1997; Fraser 1989; Sunder Rajan 2003).[12] I draw upon these studies to analyze the MS program's GONGO structure, practices, dynamics, and effects, thereby illuminating the discursive and gendered aspects of state reformation in neoliberal India.

In addition to viewing the state as a cultural artifact conjured up by routine development practices and encounters, I also approach it as a product of processes that cannot be contained within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Locating the state in a transnational frame is imperative in the context of globalization (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Trouillot 2003). The apparatuses and instruments of transnational governance, such as structural adjustment, environmental accords, military maneuvers, the international development machinery, and the human rights regime, complicate the idea of nation-state sovereignty (Gupta 1998; Sassen 1998). The boundary-transgressing movements of policies, images, capital, the instruments and ideologies of violence, and people have rendered nations transterritorial and citizenship transnational (Basch et al. 1994; Coutin 2003; Grewal 2005; Ong 1999). They have also upended the bounded sanctity of states and the territorial effectiveness and reach of state work. Using a transnational approach, I delineate how the Indian state is fabricated as a shifting effect of development ideologies that operate both above and below the nation-state frame.

Official and popular imaginations of the state in India are inextricably linked with development. Development provided the basis for the nationalist demand for independence from colonial rule (which had caused the underdevelopment of the nation) and continues to serve a crucial legitimating function for the postcolonial Indian state (Chatterjee 1993, 1998; Ludden 1992). Given this ineluctable relationship, discursive productions of the state in contemporary India simultaneously reference development. The meaning of development in such narratives, however, is anything but fixed.

This book emphasizes the performative and heteroglossic nature of development and argues that it does more than simply regulate and suppress. I have gained much from critical analyses, which contend that development functions as an ideological system of domination that defines norms and identities for the nations and peoples of the global South, thereby exerting control over them (Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992; Sachs 1992).[13] However, such an overarching and one-sided picture of development allows little room for examining how various actors engage with development discourse or how they locate themselves in relation to the identity slots made available to them (Cooper and Packard 1997; Moore 1999; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Walley 2004).[14] In this book I illuminate how subjects and identities are made, political agency enacted, and the meaning of development debated in the context of everyday development encounters; I do so by putting the critical scholarship on development in conversation with the literatures on performance (Kondo 1997; Turner, 1988), performativity (Butler 1999) and (post)colonial modernity (Bhabha 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Mitchell 2000).

The story I narrate is not so much about a unified and smoothly-functioning hegemonic development discourse but about contestations,

ruptures, and counterhegemonic moves; it underscores the point that the process of maintaining the hegemony of dominant development ideas and hierarchies is bitterly contentious and requires an enormous amount of work. My purpose, therefore, is not to replace a critical narrative about development with a celebratory one, but to ethnographically tease out the tensions, contradictions, redefinitions, and, indeed, suppressions that development work generates on the ground. I underscore the ambivalent nature of development that condenses both emancipatory and dangerous possibilities—it engenders a (political society) politics of citizenship that is, to borrow a term Stuart Hall used in another context, without "absolute guarantee" (1989, 72).[15]

I illustrate how development operates not as a moribund discourse, but as a fecund terrain for argumentation, identity formation, and resignification. Although development is indeed a powerful mode through which subaltern subjects are named and normalized, it also enables counteridentifications. Marginalized actors use the development idiom to fashion themselves as morally upright and deserving citizens, to reflect on their rights, and to criticize and reimagine the state. They not only imbue dominant notions of development with new meaning, but also contest neoliberal ideas about self-interested, entrepreneurial citizenship, abstract rights, and dewelfarized states.

I position subaltern women as vital actors on the political society stage and analyze their critiques of powerful ideologies and agents, and struggles with and for development. In so doing, I heed feminist calls to strategically include subaltern women as subjects of history and, I might add, politics (Spivak 1988a, 1988b). This is an enormously important political project, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests, given that poor "third world" women have been largely depicted within development literature as victims who "have 'needs' and 'problems,' but few if any have 'choices' or the freedom to act" (1991, 64). Furthermore, an analytical focus on the lives of marginalized women, as many feminist activists and scholars have suggested, provides a broad and inclusive perspective on social justice and equality,[16] which is a key motivation for and concern of my work.

The women I write about are not timeless beings, subordinated by equally timeless traditions. Rather, they are historically positioned actors who, given their marginalized locations (in relation to class, caste, gender, and geography, for instance), experience disempowerment, inequities, and injustices in and of the modern, capitalist, governmental world. They are also not unidimensional subjects, whose existence can be captured by the single word *oppression* and whose consciousness, if it exists at all, is *prepolitical*. I view and

represent subaltern women as the political actors they are. While undoubtedly subjugated by larger forces, they are not passive and fatalistic beings, who unquestioningly accept their lot and cannot imagine a different present or future. They fight to survive against formidable odds, negotiate oppressive situations, and act to bring about change. It is the minutiae of their daily struggles—the micropolitics of routine critique and resistances, as well as mass mobilization conditioned by modern governmental practices—that interest me (see also Chatterjee 2004; Scott 1985; Susser 1982). I set the everyday and exceptional political acts of subaltern women against the backdrop of powerful translocal projects, putting forth an analysis that links "the micropolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle . . . [with] the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" (Mohanty 2002, 501).

Feminist and cultural theories of subjectivity, especially those that focus on subject formation in the context of (post)coloniality and state policy, guide my endeavor to illuminate the "material complexity, reality, and agency of Third World women's bodies and lives" (Mohanty 2002, 510).[17] Rather than assuming that women come into development programs as preconstituted subjects, I delineate the performativity of gendered subjectivities, which are constituted in conflicting and sometimes inequality-producing ways through statist development practices. Subaltern women's identities are neither rigid, nor singular, nor necessarily cohesive but represent a fluid and morphing amalgam of multiple axes. Women are both positioned by various social relations (such as class, gender, caste, kinship, and age) and discourses (such as development) and also negotiate these hegemonic positionings; it is in this interplay that their identities and subjectivities are defined (Hall 1989). This open-ended and ambivalent process of subject formation, as I show, raises thorny problems for a feminist collectivist politics that is rooted in assumptions of a common (gender) identity and naturalized sisterhood and problematizes any easy notions of the inevitably good consequences of collective empowerment.

Ethnographic Design and Locations

This book is based on more than twenty months of multisited ethnographic fieldwork in India, the bulk of which I conducted between July 1998 and September 1999. My research included an institutional and rural-level study of the practices, micropolitics, and effects of the MS program. This meant interacting with a wide variety of rural, program, development, and state

actors. I chose as my primary subjects the women associated with MS: those who participated as clients and those who worked for the program. Although clients and functionaries are differently positioned in terms of their class, education levels, and relationship to development, both groups are affected by their participation in MS; they also play equally important roles in shaping the meanings and forms of empowerment, as I demonstrate later.[18]

The rural component of my research took place in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) and was set up as a comparative study of the effects of MS on program participants and nonparticipants. In addition to intensively observing empowerment, development, and gender dynamics in two neighboring villages (one where the MS program was operating and one where it was not) and discussing these issues with the residents, I also visited several MS villages in my fieldwork district. I attended village-, block-, and district-level program activities such as meetings, rallies, and training workshops and through these forums met and conversed with over seventy-five MS participants.[19]

The institutional component of my ethnography focused on the organization and practices of the MS program and was carried out at the national, state, district, and block levels. In addition to observing organizational dynamics in U.P., I also visited MS sites in the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Assam, and conducted important parts of my institutional ethnography in New Delhi, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Jaipur, Mumbai, and Mussoorie. I attended staff meetings, accompanied program functionaries on their daily beats, and observed their interactions with one another and with MS clients. I interviewed, both formally and informally, ninety individuals who were directly or indirectly associated with the program or who worked in the field of gender and development. These included MS staff members at all program levels, program advisors, key representatives from the Indian bureaucracy who oversaw MS and other women's programs, NGO functionaries, prominent Indian feminists, representatives from the Dutch government who initially funded MS, and experts affiliated with the Ford Foundation and the United Nations.

I relied on ethnographic methodologies, such as participant observation, household surveys, and both open-ended and structured interviews.[20] My multisited ethnographic study was enriched by a documentary analysis of a variety of cultural texts on gender, empowerment, the state, and development, including newspaper articles and reports published by international development agencies, the Indian government, the MS program, and feminist NGOs.

The Institutional Setting

Well before the mainstream international development regime took up the cause of empowerment, the Indian government, with Dutch funds and in partnership with women's groups, launched the MS program in 1989 as a pilot project in ten districts of U.P., Karnataka, and Gujarat.[21] MS was inspired by the empowerment vision and innovative methods of the Women's Development Programme (WDP), which began in the state of Rajasthan in 1984.[22] The MS program has since expanded to include the following states: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, and Uttaranchal.[23]

MS was initiated with the specific goal of realizing the objectives outlined in the Indian government's National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986). The NPE is considered a landmark document, in that it underscored the integral and dialectical relationship between women's empowerment and education: education was a critical means for women's empowerment, and empowerment was a necessary precondition for women's education and gender equality. MS was designed and implemented under the aegis of the Department of Education (Ministry of Human Resource Development) in order to translate the visions of the NPE into practice. Operating under the banner "Education for Women's Equality," MS regards education

> not merely as acquiring basic literacy skills but as a process of learning to question, critically analyse issues and problems and seek solutions. It endeavours to create an environment for women to learn at their own pace, set their own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices. (Government of India 1997, 3)

MS aims to empower subaltern women through radical pedagogical techniques that help to engender critical thinking or conscientization (Freire 1970) and antioppression struggles. The program uses empowerment as a means to achieving gender equality, development, and social change. It works with low-caste, primarily *Dalit*, poor, landless, rural women, because they are considered to be the most disadvantaged.[24] MS believes that these women's location at the bottom of the social pyramid acts as a formidable barrier, preventing them from knowing their rights and accessing information about government programs. The program, therefore, views social hierarchies and the ignorance they spawn as the main obstacles to just and equitable development. It envisions empowerment as a collective and ongoing process of knowledge production and struggle whereby women learn to reflect on their situations, take

action to address their problems, change their self-image, and redefine themselves as agents of development and social transformation. Although adult women's empowering education is the primary focus of the program, MS also runs village preschools and alternative residential schools for young girls.

The main programmatic vehicles for subaltern women's collective empowerment are village-level *mahila sanghas*, or women's collectives.

> The *Mahila Sanga* [*sic*] will provide the space where women can meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analyzing and above all feeling confident to articulate their needs through this collective action. (Government of India 1997, 7)

All program villages have MS collectives and women's participation in them is voluntary. The sanghas are, for the most part, homogenous in terms of caste. While the bulk of MS participants are Dalits and women from other lower castes, some village sanghas do have upper-caste participants. In rare cases, villages have separate groups for upper-caste and lower-caste women to avoid intercaste conflicts among participants. MS collectives generally meet weekly to discuss and take action on various issues such as wage labor, government development programs, violence, laws, local legislative bodies (and women's participation in them), health, and rights. Since the mid-1990s, MS members have also been involved in peer-group savings and loan activities. Program functionaries support their clients' efforts by providing them with relevant information and training.

In its initial years, the program used the *sakhi* [friend] model for collectivization. This process entailed identifying one or two women in each village who demonstrated leadership qualities and training them to organize MS collectives and to take the lead in addressing local problems. Sakhis were expected to attend MS workshops and share the information received with other program participants. They received a small honorarium of Rs 200 per month for their MS-related work. This model is no longer used in the program. MS now relies solely on the sangha model, in which all collective members play active roles in taking up issues. Each sangha has a core committee of *karyakarinis*—women who work on specific issues such as health, law, environment, labor, cleanliness, literacy, and political participation. The Rs 200 that was awarded to sakhis as monthly compensation now goes to the collective fund and is slated for village development.

The activities of village sanghas are overseen by field-level motivators called *sahyoginis*.[25] Sahyoginis play a crucial role in MS—they are the primary link between the participants and the program—and MS pays special attention to enhancing their capacities. Sahyoginis act as facilitators, trainers, information disseminators, mediators, and liaisons between MS participants and other entities, such as government officials, bank employees, health-center functionaries, and the like. They help collectivize village women and assist them in mobilizing around local problems. Each sahyogini is responsible for ten program villages and periodically meets with village sanghas separately in addition to conducting monthly meetings attended by representatives from all her program villages.

The work of sahyoginis in every block is coordinated by an MS block unit or office. This office is managed by a block incharge, who arranges training sessions and block-level meetings for MS participants. The activities of several program blocks are coordinated by district offices managed by district programme coordinators (DPCs) along with a team of resource persons, consultants, and clerical staff. Above the district offices are the state-level MS offices, which oversee the activities of all program districts and are located in the capital cities of their respective states.[26] State offices are headed by state programme directors (SPDs).[27] All staff members at the block, district, and state levels are drawn from the NGO sector and are not considered government employees.[28] The highest level national office of the program is located in New Delhi. This office is under the direct charge of the national programme director (NPD), who is an Indian Administrative Services officer, an elite-cadre civil servant, within the Department of Education. Support staff and consultants at the national office are, however, drawn from the NGO sector.

The primary responsibilities of the national office include communicating with government departments and donors, managing program funds, ensuring that the program fits within the larger policy framework of the state, and providing programmatic support to the different state-level MS offices. Senior bureaucrats in the Department of Education and a National Resource Group (NRG) oversee the work of the national-level team. The NRG is an advisory body comprising of feminist and development activists as well as academics who are appointed on three-year terms. This group meets periodically to discuss MS program issues, challenges, and future directions. Government officials representing relevant ministries and departments also attend NRG meetings. Whereas the NRG operates as a national body, an Executive Committee (EC) supervises the work in each program state.

EC members participate in administrative and financial decisions (such as approving senior hires and releasing program funds) but are not involved in everyday programmatic strategy decisions. Although the ECs are chaired by the state-level Secretaries of Education and include ex officio representatives, the majority of EC members belong to the NGO and academic sectors.[29]

MS is a part-state, part-nonstate GONGO, or what many of my informants dubbed as a "semiautonomous" organization. While MS is considered a central government initiative whose national office is housed within the Department of Education, state-level programs are implemented by independent, nongovernmental MS Societies that are registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860) of the Government of India.[30] According to the people involved with the initial program design, including feminists, NGO representatives, and government officials, the MS program's semiautonomous GONGO structure was put in place to prevent direct government intervention and to ensure relative independence for its staff.[31]

Many of my informants regarded MS as a one-of-a-kind program when compared to other state-sponsored development initiatives, because of its innovative structure and approach. First, it is not a straight-up government organization. Second, MS recognizes social hierarchies as obstacles to women's empowerment and education, and ultimately to equitable national development. The program's objectives, such as enhancing the self-image of women and strengthening their capacities to act as agents of social transformation, are unique. Third, unlike most other government programs, MS is not a target-driven program but takes a process-oriented, flexible approach to addressing a variety of issues in different locations.[32] MS is guided by a set of inviolable principles, such as accountability of the staff to rural women, decentralized management, and bottom-up participatory planning, which must be adhered to at all program stages (Government of India 1997, 6). Fourth, MS is not a delivery program—that is, MS does not give tangible goods to its participants. Instead, it provides women with information about their rights and government programs and raises their awareness through collective organizing around local issues.

Spatial Coordinates

The bulk of my rural-level ethnography took place in three adjacent blocks in eastern U.P.—Seelampur, Chandpur, and Nizabad—where I accompanied MS employees on their regular field visits to villages and participated

in internal program evaluations and was thus able to interact with a large cross-section of MS participants and non-participants. The U.P. plains were an unfamiliar territory for me and I therefore sought the assistance of local MS staff members in choosing a primary program area for my study. Most staff members suggested Seelampur block, where the MS program had operated the longest (for over nine years) and was being phased out in 1998–1999. Basing my research in Seelampur, they felt, would give me a good idea of MS activities and of the changes the program had brought about in the lives of participating women. Moreover, Seelampur was a shorter commute from the city of Begumpur, where the MS district office was located and where I was to conduct a significant portion of my institutional ethnography. I left the selection of particular villages up to these program functionaries as well, explaining that I wanted to work in an MS and a non-MS village (with fairly similar socioeconomic indicators) in order to do a comparative study of the effects of the program. The staff members, after some deliberations (in which I did not participate), chose Nimani, an MS village, and Gamiya, a non-MS village that were in close proximity to each other and a relatively short walk from my place of residence.

Seelampur is an agricultural region. Although paddy is the main crop, Seelampur also grows other grains (*bajra* and *jowar*), lentils (particularly *arhar*), and vegetables (potatoes, peas, etc.). Besides agriculture, weaving is an important activity in the area. Seelampur lies adjacent to important carpet- and silk-weaving centers of eastern U.P., and some residents are involved in home-based handloom production. The total population of the block, according to the 1991 census, was 158,541; of this, Dalits constituted approximately 17.5 percent and women 48 percent.[33]

The main Seelampur bazaar and administrative center lies roughly twenty-seven kilometers southwest of Begumpur. After a sixteen-hour train journey from New Delhi, one has to take a bus from the Begumpur railway junction to reach this area. The buses, run by private contractors licensed by the state transportation authority, are profusely decorated with religious imagery, lights, and Bollywood-inspired artwork, and are usually bursting at the seams with people, grain, vegetables, and other kinds of luggage. These vehicles ply the road connecting Begumpur with Seelampur and beyond at intervals of fifteen minutes and take approximately an hour and a half to reach Seelampur bazaar. The fare depends on who you are. If you are a regular commuter (for eg., a schoolteacher), the fare is Rs 2 each way, an occasional commuter, Rs 7 each way, and if you are a local bigwig belonging to

a land-owning, politically prominent, upper-caste family, then you ride for free (the bus conductors dare not ask for the fare). The last category of travelers, as I would discover later, are key participants in what local MS women call the "mafia," consisting of men who embody and represent the daunting nexus between caste status, economic capital, and political power against which MS functionaries and clients struggle (see chapter 3).

The village of Nimani is about one and a half kilometers west of the main Seelampur bazaar bus stop. Nimani, like other villages in the area, is made up of various hamlets, or *bastis*. People belonging to different caste groups, including Dalit, *Thakur*, *Brahmin*, *Yadav*, *Kurmi* [agriculturalists], *Gadariya* [shepherds], and *Naat* [street performers], live in segregated hamlets on both sides of the main Begumpur–Seelampur road. The total population of Nimani, according to the 1991 census, was 1,456; the village chief reported that this number had grown to four thousand in 1998 and an estimated 40 percent of the residents were Dalits. Nimani has three Dalit hamlets. The hamlet in which MS operated lies to the south of the Begumpur–Seelampur road, about three hundred yards behind a well-known local temple dedicated to the Hindu god *Shiv*. A significant part of my village-level fieldwork was conducted here. The total population of this hamlet in 1998 was approximately two hundred and almost all households in this hamlet fell within the government-stipulated "below poverty line" socioeconomic category. A tiny proportion of families owned small pieces of land (which were primarily titled to males). Only four families owned concrete brick houses; the remaining residents lived in one- or two-room mud huts. Most adult male residents were literate, whereas most adult women were not (all younger girls, however, had some formal education).[34] Men were involved in weaving, leatherwork, cattle rearing, petty commodity production, agriculture, and clerical work (at a local bank); some had migrated to cities such as Mumbai and Surat seeking employment as auto-rickshaw drivers and textile mill workers. Nimani's female residents were primarily involved in agricultural activities, working as sharecroppers and agricultural laborers on farms owned by upper-caste families. Some women also assisted their husbands with weaving. In addition, women were responsible for most household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, collecting fodder for cattle, and child rearing.

The Dalit hamlet in Gamiya lies close to the main Seelampur bazaar. The total population of this hamlet in 1998 was listed as eighty-two in government records. The literacy levels and other socioeconomic indicators and the activities of Gamiya's residents were similar to the ones in Nimani. MS, however, did not operate in Gamiya.

Chapter Sketches

This book discusses the changes in governance, development ideologies, subject formation, and political struggles taking place in neoliberal India and uses the prism of women's empowerment to explore these issues.

In chapter 1, I ask what empowerment signifies in the world of neoliberal development. It is among those ideas that "can be interpreted in different ways . . . [and are therefore] particularly powerful in 'policy-making' because they provide a spacious . . . hanger on which those of different persuasions are able to hang their coats" (Harriss 2002, 1). I chalk out a layered picture of empowerment as a translocal assemblage, condensing varied meanings and spatiotemporal histories that articulate in contradictory and unexpected ways. The hegemonic frame I examine is that of neoliberalism, using as exemplary the World Bank's discourse on gender, empowerment, and social inclusion. The three counterhegemonic visions of empowerment that I discuss are those put forward by feminist scholars of development, Paulo Freire, and Gandhi. These various frames, regardless of their underlying ideological premises, use empowerment as a governmental technology in that their purpose is to direct the behavior of individuals and collectives toward certain ends. Thus, even though the means and ends they envision are often divergent, both oppositional and mainstream strategies also overlap. The tense articulations of these varied conceptualizations of empowerment overdetermine the context in which MS works; they make for a fraught dynamic and outcomes that cannot be determined in advance, as I unravel in the remainder of the book.

Chapters 2 and 3 reveal the cultural and gendered logics of state formation and the paradoxical effects of neoliberal governance strategies in India that help to regulate gender norms and identities and to simultaneously unbound empowerment from hegemonic and controlled expectations. The governmental use of empowerment in a state-partnered development program, in other words, works in ways other than to simply governmentalize.

In chapter 2, I tease out the discursive shaping of the developmentalist Indian state, through the lenses of the MS program and the transnational neoliberal doctrine, complicating the latter's purportedly universal effects on

state transformation. Specifically, I analyze the MS program's innovative cross-bred GONGO form and empowerment goal, its location within the government system, and its definition of marginalized women as the paradigmatic subjects–objects of empowerment and illustrate how the neoliberal Indian state is imagined and gendered as a demarcated, vertically authoritative, if ambiguously masculinist, body. I examine how the process of state reformation in India both *reflects* hegemonic ideologies of transnational neoliberal governmentality that celebrate participation and empowerment and also *deflects* away. Despite the transition to empowerment, the transformed neoliberal Indian state is not a postwelfare state. Not only does the Indian government continue to implement redistributive programs because of populist imperatives, welfarist ideologies also, ironically, continue to define the supposedly post- and antiwelfare empowerment framework. I detail these welfarist incursions and carryovers and delineate their gendered implications through a discussion of the MS program's placement within the bureaucratic hierarchy and its definition of the women who need empowerment. The prevalence of welfare-based programs and welfarist assumptions in India today, as I contend, is an illustration of postcolonial "exceptions" to neoliberalism (Ong 2006, 4), which problematize the latter's global uniformity.

Whereas chapter 2 focuses on the MS program's GONGO position (as neither wholly in the state nor wholly of it) and its representations of the women it targets to unravel the gendered and discursive nature of state formation, chapter 3 illuminates this further by examining the concrete impact of the GONGO form on the identities and empowerment practices of the women who work for MS. I do this by analyzing the constraints and paradoxes that state participation in MS raise for its staff members and how they strategically use the program's hybrid identity—part-state, part-NGO—to skirt around these very dilemmas. I argue that the GONGO nature of MS gives its functionaries "two hats"—a nongovernmental hat and a governmental hat. They switch between these hats to strategically position themselves against official and subaltern perceptions of the state and NGOs. I narrate a series of ethnographic vignettes, explaining how MS representatives are viewed by their interlocutors and, in turn, position themselves in a shifting manner in different contexts. These instances tell us much about how the state and its putative "other" (NGOs) materialize through everyday MS program dynamics and about the kinds of empowering challenges that are thwarted and facilitated in the context of this government-partnered program. I show that the usage of empowerment as a state-sponsored, governmental, development technique,

bureaucratizes the everyday lives of the women involved in the program, but it also unleashes unexpected consequences that are indeed empowering for some women.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 highlight the disciplinary *and* generative aspects of development discourse. I argue that development is neither a totalizing nor a dead discourse; rather, it operates as an argumentative and productive ground on which different sorts of subjects and communities are engineered, agency articulated, and a politics of citizenship enacted. Although development interventions depoliticize poverty by rendering it into a technically solvable matter, they also provoke popular struggles surrounding redistribution and moral citizenship that are directed at the state. Even as development attempts to create and regulate disciplined individual and collective bodies, it also breeds subversive tactics and unruly subjects who protest their subjectification and subjection, who test the state and unbound it from its presumed limits, and who resignify development.

Chapter 4 illustrates the performativity of development and subject formation. Written in the form of a two-act play, this chapter reenacts a development encounter between MS clients, program functionaries, state officials, and World Bank experts in Nimani village. I demonstrate how everyday development encounters operate as reality shows or social dramas where developmental identities, hierarchies, and norms materialize and are subverted, actors are fashioned, dominant scripts are enacted and improvised, and different meanings of development and modernity are proliferated. In scripting this development event as a drama, I unmask development's positivist and mimetic logic, highlighting ethnographically its disciplinary under- and overtones. I also, however, revisit questions of subaltern agency. Unlike anti-development critics who assume that the real agency of marginalized people lies in rejecting development, I argue that subaltern struggles are not antidevelopment or antimodern per se; rather they repudiate dominant meanings of development and enunciate discrepant modernities.

I carry these themes forward in chapter 5, where I focus on the trope of *failure*, which was frequently used by state and subaltern actors in their discussions of development. Instead of viewing "arrested development" as a point of closure, however, I use it as a point of entry into analyzing what these widespread narratives about failure enable. I argue that official and subaltern stories of development's breakdown are a form of highly antagonistic, public, and moral "citizenship talk," which explains and criticizes power inequalities, articulates mainstream and oppositional notions of rights and national

belonging, and redefines proper statehood and personhood. Although these hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives share a common conceptual grid—that of development—I pay special attention to their dissonances. Officials blame the failure of redistributive development programs on poor people's lack of maturity, of knowledge, of discipline, and of self-motivated entrepreneurialism; meanwhile, subaltern actors explain it as a matter of official error, cunning, and dishonesty. Officials code self-reliant development as the moral responsibility of common people who have failed in that task and are, therefore, undeserving of rights-bearing citizenship. Subalterns, in contrast, see development as the moral duty of the state. They invoke ethical discourses to contest the socioeconomic inequalities in which they are embedded, to criticize the corruption and self-centeredness of powerful and developed people, to rightfully demand that the state redistribute concrete resources, and to position themselves as morally upstanding, deserving citizens. This, I suggest, is a remoralized form of citizenship politics that attempts to resolve the tensions inherent in the neo/liberal meanings of the term *citizenship* and that contests the ideas of privatized states and dewelfarized development. Subaltern talk and political practices thus put forth alternative, ethically imbued, and experientially grounded understandings of citizenship, personhood, the state, and development.

In chapter 6, I delve into the complex relationships between development, gendered subjectivity, and community. I problematize mainstream and critical analyses of development that view idealistic communities as engines of either development or antidevelopment alternatives. Both these perspectives assume that communities precede development and are essentially homogenous bodies made up of individuals who share identities and interests. In contrast, I demonstrate that modern, governmental practices, such as development, do not act on or confront a tabula rasa—*the* community—but engineer contingent and contentious collectivities. I retell a series of incidents surrounding an issue that the MS women's collective in Nimani village took up—that of building a government-sanctioned village-council house-cum-women's center. This proposition, which was seemingly universally beneficial and not simply "prowomen," turned out to be controversial and brought out class- and kinship-based fissures between MS and non-MS women and among MS women. I use these tensions to critically analyze the assumptions that guide the MS program's focus on collective empowerment. The program mobilizes low-caste women *as women*, on the presumption that their identities are alike, that they constitute an organic community, and that

they will, therefore, stand in solidarity with each other. Gender identities, however, are anything but monolithic or necessarily cohesive; rather, they are a shifting and context-specific ensemble of multiple, intersecting axes and are shaped and brought together in contradictory ways by administrative practices, such as development. MS, as I show, inserts itself in this open-ended and already fraught process of identification, altering gender identities and relationships on the ground and instituting new affiliations and hierarchies. The complexities of subject formation and the conditional, ad hoc nature of communities in the context of development makes the MS program's strategy of collectivization—which presumes that women already know their gendered interests, act in accordance with these interests, and automatically struggle against gender subordination—risky and without necessarily happy endings. I use the Nimani case to examine the ambiguous implications of collective feminist transformation that is based on a similarity of identity, not difference . And I ask what an "ephemeral" feminist politics that is attentive to the provisionality of identity and community and that *forges* commonality and solidarity through struggle might look like.

I conclude this book by knitting together the various threads of my story about empowerment and development, the state and governance, neoliberalism and its articulations, subjects and subjection, feminist activism, and grassroots politics. I weave in current events in India, ethnographic vignettes, and popular cultural snippets to highlight the paradoxical workings and uneven, unpredictable, and dangerous effects—both enabling and limiting—of neoliberal governmental mutations and discuss their implications for popular struggles in the postcolonial world.