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Solidarities in and through Resistance: Rethinking Alliance-Building through Protests in Plantations in India

ABSTRACT

The tea plantations of Dooars in West Bengal, India are among the primary tea growing belts in the country. The 2000s saw a crisis in the plantation sector with the closing down of some of the plantations and curtailed operation in others coupled with traditionally low wages in the sector. The paper uses this moment of crisis of livelihood to interrogate resistance and solidarity. Focussing on three protests—one organised by trade unions, another by social movement organisation and the third by the women workers of the plantation, the paper looks to understand the divergences and convergences between the three. How are intersectional alliances formed and what part of one's identity is foregrounded in such alliances? Who owns protest movements? How does language of protests differ across these? How does the neo-liberal state interact with such challenges to its authority? Social movement literature tends to focus on how professional activists create coalitions to strengthen movements. Through the ethnography of the three protests, this article suggests ways in which activists are also produced by movements. It asks can collective actions energized through affective bonds achieve ends which institutional social arrangements are constrained from striving for?

Keywords: labour movement; activism; women workers; protest; friendship; organisation; affect; solidarity

“Why am I sitting here? In this cold? To claim the ground under my feet, to claim the roof over my head, to claim the fire in my kitchen, to claim the sky and this air, to claim the future of my children.”¹

1 Nur Jahan in Shaheen Bagh protest 2019, at: Sankarshan Thakur: ‘Our nation to keep and guard’: Shaheen Bagh isn't stopping to say: NO CAA (published on 31 December 2019), <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/anti-caa-protest-at-delhi-s-shaheen-bagh-our-nation-to-keep-and-guard/cid/1731630> (accessed on 1 January 2020).

The last year has witnessed a spiralling number of protests on a global scale. Rallies and demonstrations have broken across countries ranging from Lebanon to India, Spain to Chile, Hong Kong to Ecuador on issues ranging from rising inequality, lack of political freedom, violence against women, corruption and climate change. Braving state brutalities, students, working class people, women and youth have come out on to the streets protesting for their rights against the neo-liberal state, its market and the consequent inequality it unleashes. Such popular resistance to the failure of the state often begins as grassroots initiative against state repression and other forms of dispossession, which might then go on to spread in scale and take the shape of movements.

With the rise of the protests comes the question: who claims ownership over such protests especially if sustained over time. Evidence from protests across the world (e.g. Chile, India etc.) show that the militancy of the marginal lies at the core of these resistances. Yet, to sustain themselves over a period of time, such grassroots initiatives often form alliances with organised political parties which, while mainstreaming the protest, also reduces its autonomy and allows for a certain appropriation. Rather than focus on the bigger frame of political economy, I direct my lenses onto the smaller platform of grassroots protest to understand structures of resistance—its limitations and possibilities. Through looking at motivations and subjectivities of the participants in movements, this article follows a body of work which provides textured analysis of structures of movement at the centre of protest of the marginalised². The contours of such protests, its roadblocks, both internal and external not only provide us insights into ways in which anti-poor neo-liberal state negotiates and deals with such responses, but also enables us to understand the possibilities and limitations of solidarities that emerge or are organized through such protests³.

Through ethnography of three protests in tea plantations in Dooars India, I look at solidarities which are formed through resistance and/or resistances which are made possible through solidarities. I ask how alliances are formed. Who owns protest movements? Dooars had a long history of workers' movements. The first section will outline a brief history of this to provide the context through which we can trace continuities and changes. This is followed by an analysis of three protests which demonstrates how organization of protests and their internal dynamics shape not just the staking of claims but also the very contours of participation. In looking at movements and their

- 2 Amita Baviskar: *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, New Delhi 2004; Kenneth Bo Nielsen: *Contesting India's Development?: Industrialisation, Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal*, in: *Forum for Development Studies* 37:2 (2010), pp. 145–170; Michael Levien: *Dispossession Without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India*, New Delhi 2018.
- 3 Kenneth Bo Nielsen: *Contesting India's Development?*; Uday Chandra: *Beyond Subalternity: Land, Community and the State in Contemporary Jharkhand*, in: *Contemporary South Asia* 21 (2013), pp. 52–61.

internal dynamics, the paper will investigate solidarities and seek to understand their implications for mobilization and finally activism.

Methodology⁴

This paper is based on ethnography and oral histories in tea plantations in Dooars. These materials were primarily gathered through interaction with the women workers. Focused on a tea plantation called Kaalka, I also did some work in the neighbouring plantations Raagini, Disha and Naamchi. The ethnography is located in the immediate post-crisis period of 2010–2013, when the plantations had reopened but still required state support for functioning. The area under investigation was an especially crisis-ridden part of Dooars, where many of the plantations had faced closure. Kaalka itself was closed for ten years from 2000–2010 and reopened in August 2010. While the description of the first protest is based on ethnographic evidence, the examinations of the latter two are based on extensive oral histories gathered from the participants of my interviews and other workers. I tried to talk to as many kinds of people as possible to get a holistic sense of the protests and their implications. Having negotiated with the crisis and government aid programmes makes the workers and organizations in the Kaalka area more aware and puts them into constant negotiation with the state. While the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted by 2013, follow-up interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2017.

Context

History of Labour Protests in Dooars

Dooars, located in the foothills of the Himalayas in the state of West Bengal, is one of India's main tea growing regions. The tea plantations of Dooars had a very specific history of resistance and we see evidence of workers' agitations even before organised trade union movement comes into effect. Dasgupta⁵ notes that, as early as 1916, Oraon workers in Dooars were involved in resistance which, while influenced by the Tana

4 While some of the ethnographic incidents in this paper have also been used in my monograph *Agency and Activism in India: Nurturing Resistance in Tea Plantations*, the framing and analytical insights are different and not reproduced in any way.

5 Ranajit Das Gupta: From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of Labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850s to 1947, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 21:4 (1986), pp. 2–10.

Bhagat movement in Jharkhand⁶, took overt political and anti-colonial tones in its expression. This agitation, however, remained invisible to the nationalist movement emerging in Jalpaiguri, which was premised on a strict separation between the nationalist politics of the Bengali *bhadralok* and tribal anti-imperialist cultural movements⁷. Organised labour movements in Dooars (as well as Darjeeling) began around the late 1930s with the Communist Party organising the workers. This was an important period in the growth of working class politics in Dooars⁸. In early 1946, the Bengal Assam Rail Road union organised workers of Dooars for the first time for collective action⁹. This support was instrumental in the growth of the trade union movement in Dooars. In 1946–1947, the labourers organised by the Communist Party took part in the Food Movement and Tebhaga Movement. The staking of political claims thus challenged the erstwhile portrayal of their resistance in primarily cultural and religious terms.

The industrial relations, while retaining some aspects of paternalism, began to be largely mediated through the trade unions. As Xaxa¹⁰ notes, the grinding poverty, rising expenses and lack of sufficient wages prevalent in the tea plantations provided fertile ground for the Communist Party to organise the workers. The other leftist parties like the Forward Bloc and Revolutionary Socialist Party were active, too. Congress also became active in the area, as they saw an opportunity to exert influence on India's developing working class. It was, however, the left parties and their radical politics which clashed strongly with the planters, whereas the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the Congress' trade union, showed reluctance to enter into conflict with this group¹¹. The energy of labour politics was echoed in the larger political space when in 1946, Ratanlal Brahman, an important trade unionist of Communist

- 6 The Tana Bhagat Movement (1914–1919) was a tribal uprising of a part of the Tana Bhagats and Oraons under the leadership of Jatra Oraon in Chotanagpur. The Tana Bhagats opposed the taxes imposed on them by the British and staged a civil disobedience opposing the *zamindars*, the *banias* or moneylenders, the missionaries, Muslims and the British state. Sanjay Kumar: The Tana Bhagat movement in Chotanagpur (1914–1920), in: Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 69 (2008), pp. 723–731.
- 7 P. Ghosal: Changing Political Economy of Tea Plantations in North Bengal: Crisis, Workers' Politics and interventions of the state since the 1990s, Unpublished MPhil thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University 2016.
- 8 Ranajit Das Gupta: Oraon Labour Agitation-Duars in Jalpaiguri District, 1915–16, in: Economic and Political Weekly 24:39 (1989), pp. 2197–2202; Virginius Xaxa: Economic Dualism and Structure of Class: A Study in Plantation and Peasant Settings in North Bengal, New Delhi 1997.
- 9 Sharit Bhowmik: Class Formation in the Plantation System, New Delhi 1981.
- 10 Virginius Xaxa: Economic Dualism and Structure of Class.
- 11 Ranajit Das Gupta: From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers; Sharit Bhowmik: Class Formation in the Plantation System.

Party of India (CPI) was elected in the Darjeeling labour constituency. The Zilla Chabagan Mazdoor union (District Tea Plantations Workers' union) was formed in 13 tea gardens during this period. The trade unions thus emerged as important political actors in North Bengal. Focussing on better wages and other facilities, the trade unions along with their workers fought for this matter of rights both through wage negotiations and agitations.

That the labour movement had gained momentum became evident when, in the early 1950s, police fired on a group of workers from the Margaret Hope tea plantation in Darjeeling who were agitating for better wages, housing and the like, killing six of them¹². This led to a region-wide strike, bringing the entire tea production to a halt and pushing the central government to intervene. The plantation labour standing committee was set up and brought the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 into effect. This act was of crucial importance to the history of workers' resistance in the tea plantations. Not only did it codify wages and working conditions as a matter of rights, it acknowledged the labourers as a rights-bearing working class, rather than coolies. This was also a great vindication for the role of trade unions, especially left trade unions, in labour politics of North Bengal.

From the mid-1960s, the labour unrests in Dooars tea gardens were consistently volatile, with political claims being staked and underscored through strikes, blockades and rallies. The coalition United Front government also seemed to give the labour movement some support. The 1977 election of a Left Front government, a coalition of Marxist and other socialist parties, continued to support labourers' demands. The second term of the government from 1982, however, saw some changes in the attitude of the government, discouraging labour strikes for potentially vitiating the atmosphere for prospective investors.

The long history of trade union activism in the region, suffered a steady decline in the post-liberalisation period, especially from the early 2000s¹³. This article will show that trade unions still continued to organise around issues of wages and boni (as was evident in the massive wage strikes in 2005), but the agitations were less frequent in nature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect at length on the reasons for decline in the trade union movement in this region. But to contextualise the arguments I make later in the paper, it is necessary to critically interrogate the decline of left trade unionism, as well as to place it within the context of dominance of global capital.

- 12 Union turns to History (published on 13 June 2004), <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/union-turns-to-history/cid/744111> (accessed on 10 December).
- 13 K. Ravi Raman: *Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India*, London 2010.

The climate of crisis in the tea plantations¹⁴ coupled with increased competition from small tea growers¹⁵ resulted in a push for casualisation of a workforce so far holding onto a secure, albeit low-paid, job. Further, the closure and threat of closure of the plantations greatly curtailed the bargaining power of the workers and their unions, even for their rightful wages, boni etc. In my earlier work¹⁶, I have shown how instead of articulating demands as matters of rights the trade unions are largely limited to negotiations for their mere survival. As Ghosal¹⁷ notes, the restructuring of the political economy of tea plantations through proliferation of small tea growers enjoying state subsidies and incentives further weakened the trade union movement, which was structured around the infrastructure of traditional tea plantations.

The massive strikes in July 2005 shut down the entire region of Dooars with the participation of all workers and the major trade unions¹⁸. In the midst of the crisis, this was indeed remarkable. At the same time, the 2005 strikes brought to light the contradictions which had so far been lying beneath the surface in the rhetoric and action of the left government. In the tripartite agreement that followed the government proposed an increase which was closer to the proposal of the planters' association than of the striking workers and their unions. Even this meagre increase agreed upon on paper was wilfully neglected by most of the tea plantations, to which the state seemed to turn a blind eye¹⁹. In spite of rhetorical assurance the duplicity of the Left Front government was re-enacted by the incumbent Trinamool Congress government, when it came to power in 2011.

Limitations of Left Trade Unionism in West Bengal

The trade union movements, while hampered by the onslaught of capitalism, have also been curtailed by their structural limits. The sustained dominance of left trade unions aided by a left state government had resulted in a structure of patronage in which trade union leadership could use its power to browbeat the workers²⁰. The hierarchical structure of the workforce of the tea plantations and its correspondence with

14 Ibid.; Supurna Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India: Nurturing Resistance in the Tea Plantations*, London 2017.

15 P. Ghosal: *Changing Political Economy of Tea Plantations in North Bengal: Crisis, Workers' Politics and interventions of the state since the 1990s*.

16 S. Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India: Nurturing Resistance in the Tea Plantations*.

17 P. Ghosal: *Changing Political Economy of Tea Plantations in North Bengal: Crisis, Workers' Politics and interventions of the state since the 1990s*, p. 62.

18 Sharit Bhowmik: *Tea Plantation Workers' Strike: Workers lose out on wages*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 40:38 (2005), pp. 4103–4105.

19 Ibid.

20 Supurna Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India*.

the trade union hierarchies resulted in what Chatterjee called “postcolonial labour elite”²¹. Accounts of workers reveal their misgivings about the leadership of the trade union, even including suspicion of complicity with the management. Further, the trade unions affiliation to political parties led to them adjusting their movements in relation to their party’s policies²². While the Congress trade unions were always closer to the management, the left trade unions enjoyed a reputation of militancy and radicalism. With the Left Front government, however, this underwent a shift. The trade unions affiliated to Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Revolutionary Socialist Party recast the relations between workers’ representatives and management into one of convenience and mutual interests²³.

The crisis of the 2000s brought this change out into the open when the trade unions, instead of acting as representatives of workers’ grievances, often functioned as state agencies in quelling agitations. The alienation of the left trade unions was further facilitated by their composition. Rather than bringing up leaders from the most exploited sections of the workers, usually the left trade unions demonstrated a middle class, educated largely Bengali leadership, who were often not even from the tea plantations. This aspect of identity and resultant hierarchy will become relevant in later analysis of the protests.

The distinct history of tea plantations of North Bengal makes it a heterogeneous site with politically layered terrain. The majority of the workforce was recruited from the tribal population of Central India, who were impoverished and provided a catchment area of cheap labour²⁴. These workers, originally known as the *madesias* (of the plains), call themselves *adivasi* (original inhabitants). The tea plantations of Dooars also employed a sizeable number of Nepali workers who were called *paharis* (of the mountains). These two ethnic groups formed the bulk of the workforce. The questions of identity, long submerged under left hegemony though never dying down, have re-emerged in the present political climate.

The clashes between the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM)²⁵ and Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad (ABAVP)²⁶ have resulted in divides within the labour

21 Piya Chatterjee: *A Time for Tea: Women, labor, and post-colonial politics on an Indian plantation*, Durham 2001, p. 143.

22 P. Ghosal: *Changing Political Economy of Tea Plantations in North Bengal: Crisis, Workers’ Politics and interventions of the state since the 1990s*.

23 *Ibid*, p. 72.

24 Sharit Bhowmik: *Class Formation in the Plantation System*.

25 Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (A Platform for the Independence of the Gorkhas) is a political party campaigning for the creation of separate state of Gorkhaland within India, out of the districts in north of West Bengal.

26 Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Bikash Parishad (All India Committee for Development of Adivasis) is an organisation active in West Bengal fighting for the rights of the Adivasis in the state.

community, between the Nepali and *adivasi* workers²⁷. While a straightforward equating between the crisis in the plantations and the re-emergence of the Gorkhaland movement²⁸ might be simplistic, it can be argued that the continued immiseration of workers, coupled with a lack of redressal by mainstream labour unions and the state, fed into the renewed imagination of a Gorkha identity²⁹. The rise of the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha and ethnic divides also pointed to the left trade unions' failure to address the question of identity. Elsewhere, I have spoken about how the CPI(M) became identified as the party of the Bengalis by both the *adivasi* and Nepali workers³⁰. While the rise of the two ethnic movements seemed to bring to the forefront more local leaders and questions that had hitherto not been asked, the focus on ethnicity rendered invisible the question of labour. The modes of political protest found expression exclusively in cultural idioms of attire and dances. Economic questions inherent to their labour were eclipsed³¹.

27 Supurna Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India*.

28 The Gorkhaland movement has been one of the longstanding regional movement in the state of West Bengal which began as early as 1907. It has been based on the demands of the Gorkhas, an ethnic regional group (see footnote 29) for recognition of their autonomy. In the initial phase of the movement the demand was for separate administrative units in recognition of their distinctive identity, practices and culture but soon escalated into a demand for separate statehood. The movement was forefronted by the Gorkha National Liberation Front from the 1980s to 2000s with mixed success. A combination of various factors caused it to cede its leadership position to the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha who continues to be the leader of this movement presently. For more see: Miriam Wenner: *Challenging the State by Reproducing its Principles: The Demand for "Gorkhaland" between Regional Autonomy and the National Belonging*, in: *Asian Ethnology* 72:2 (2013), pp. 199–220; Anjan Ghosh: *Gorkhaland Redux*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 44:23 (2009), pp. 10–13; Jugdep S. Chima: *Ethnic Subnationalist Movements in Contemporary South Asia: An Introduction*, in: *Asian Survey* 49:6 (2009), pp. 915–923.

29 The ethnic identity of Gorkhas originates in the district of Gorkha in Nepal. The term has been used by people of Darjeeling and Dooars to distinguish themselves from the Nepali speaking people of Nepal. They are indigenous people living in North Bengal among other regions. They have a long history going back to the pre-independence period in India. See: Kumar Pradhan: *The Gorkha Conquest of Nepal: The Process and Consequences of the Unification of Nepal, with Particular Reference to Eastern Nepal*, Calcutta 1991.

30 Supurna Banerjee: 'We are still junglis to them': Institutionalising marginalities among the Adivasis in Dooars (chapter 3), in: Hugo Gorringer/Roger Jeffery/Suryakant Waghmore (eds.): *Institutionalising Marginal Actors in South Asia: Processes, Policies, Practices and Pitfalls*, New Delhi 2015.

31 Sarah Besky: *The Darjeeling distinction: Labor and justice on fair-trade tea plantations in India*, Berkeley 2013, p. 149.

Crisis and its Management

The tea plantations of Bengal and Assam were in the throes of a crisis from the beginnings of the 2000s. The decade from 2000 to 2010 saw closure of many of the tea plantations in the area and curtailed functioning in others. Both exogenous and endogenous factors were behind the crisis in the plantations. The crisis in Dooars tea plantations was both a product of wider global phenomena and immediate local factors like mismanagement, corruption, lack of investment in the plantations³². The crisis has to be understood as fallout of neo-liberal processes of globalization contextualized within the local history of varying phases of incorporation, accumulation/dispossession and shifting relations of production.³³ The government of West Bengal, as well as the central government, provided a semblance of protection to the workers of the closed gardens. This included commitment to providing Financial Assistance to Workers in Locked Out Industries (FAWLOI) which, as the name suggests, is a monthly allowance to the workers³⁴, Antyodaya Anna Yojna (AAY)³⁵ which provided for subsidized food grains.

Organizing Protests, Embedding Hierarchies?

In this section, I focus on three protests with different organizational structures and scales. Mapping the ways in which mobilization of workforce plays out in the three contexts, the section provides an insight into how modes of organization shape participation in specific ways and create (or constrain) solidarities.

32 Surpurna Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India*.

33 The period 2015–2017 also saw closure of other plantations but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

34 FAWLOI was introduced in 1998 by the Government of West Bengal to provide financial assistance to workers in closed-down industrial units. Initially, the financial assistance under the scheme was Rs 500/- per month per worker. Presently the enhanced rate of financial assistance is Rs 1500/- per month per head. Since the year 2007, the beneficiaries have been provided one time Eid/Puja ex-gratia, which has subsequently been enhanced to Rs 1500/- per beneficiary from the year 2011. See: <https://wbcl.gov.in/fawloi> (accessed on 14 August 2013).

35 AAY (Destitute Welfare Food Scheme) was launched in 2000 by the Government of India to ensure food security for all. It contemplates identification of 10 million families out of the number of Below Poverty Line families who would be provided food grains at the rate of 35 kilogram per family per month. The food grains will be issued by the Government of India at Rs.2/- per kilogram for wheat and Rs. 3/- per kilogram for rice. The Government of India suggests that in view of abject poverty of this group of beneficiaries, the state government may ensure that the end retail price is retained at Rs.2/- per kilogram for wheat and Rs.3/- per kilogram for rice. See: https://dfpd.gov.in/aay_C.htm (accessed on 14 July 2010).

Wage Agitation and Trade Unionism

Given the centrality of trade unions in workers' movements in tea plantations, the first vignette looks at workers' participation in trade union movements. The plantation sector in India is among the lowest-paid formal sectors of employment.³⁶ The demand to increase the cash component of wages has been a constant of trade unions in the region over the years. The wages for the plantations are fixed through industry-wide tripartite agreement (between the state, industry and labour) and are binding on all the plantations under its purview. The movements for wage increase tend to gather momentum before the tripartite agreement to mount pressure on the state and industry to accede to labourers' demands, as was also evident in 2011–2012. The agitations organised by the trade unions, sometimes in specific gardens, sometimes across regions and sometimes in the entire district, used blockades, rallies and strikes as tools of protests.

Conversations with trade union activists suggested that such agitations were not just organized movements but were considered professional activism which required specialized knowledge.

The agitation for the increase in wages is not a very simple ad-hoc movement. It is not just about blockading and shouting slogans. There are calculations and strategies which need to be applied. You have to make a realistic demand for wage increase. You do not want to demand an amount which will lead to the crisis of the company, so you need to have a sense of the financial status of the company. Also the management will never accept whatever amount you demand so you have to hike the amount such that it is realistic but a cutback to that is still enough to ensure reasonable benefits for the worker. Can you imagine an ordinary worker being able to do all this? No. The wage movements are thus controlled centrally and then played out across the different plantations. There is complex planning involved³⁷.

36 According to the Plantation Labour Act the company was to provide for ration, fuel-wood, living quarters etc. which were all added as the non-cash component of the wage. Therefore, the cash component of the wage was fixed at Rs. 67/day (until 2014) was much lower than the minimum wage in other formal sectors. The 2015 tripartite fixed this wage at Rs. 132.50. The struggle discussed here is in relation to this wage negotiation. See: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/stalemate-over-tea-wage-negotiation-in-west-bengal-is-over/articleshow/46315272.cms?from=mdr> (last accessed 05 June, 2020). With a view to bringing about a further raise in wages in the tripartite agreement in 2017, a joint Forum of all the trade unions was formed to launch a unified movement in this direction.

37 Interview with RSP branch secretary Kaalka.

This claim to expertise by trade unionists automatically naturalizes a hierarchy between rank and file in such organisations. Chakrabarty³⁸ in his work on jute mills, points out a *babu-coolie* (manager-labour/employer-employee) relationship which emerges among the (usually) Bengali trade union leaders and the migrant workers which naturalizes the chain of command. The semiotics of domination and subordination in the tea plantations between the tribal workers and usually the non-tea plantation Bengali leadership at the unit level might be different; the manner of speaking, dressing, body-language reproduces a hierarchy between the workers and their representative trade union leadership. A sense of ownership is often implicit in assuming such leadership positions.

In spite of a long history of having claims laid upon themselves, the workers were a mass to be mobilized in support of the various actions.

Sana: There will be no work tomorrow in our division. We will blockade the factory. If you stay on at this time you will see a lot of protests like this. It is about increasing our daily wage. If we don't demand it, no one will give it to us on a plate. This is what our leaders say. I think that is true. For us poor people, no one cares. They will not give an inch if they can avoid it.

[The blockade, however, lasts for only two hours, after which the workers are asked by the union leaders to resume work]

I: This was a short blockade wasn't it? I had thought there will be work stoppage for the whole day.

S: Who knows what they plan. Our job is to follow their (trade union's) command. We do like they say. If we ask too many questions they become impatient.

Asha: Yes. The union leaders always do the negotiations. They have that clout, you see. If we want to go and make demands why will the management listen to us? It is for us to make noise so that the demands they start becomes deafening. But the direction will always have to come from the leaders.³⁹

The leaders as professional activists need the noise made by the crowd for their demands to be taken seriously, but retain the authority to frame these demands. Chakrabarty⁴⁰ argued that the organizational logic of trade unionism especially of the left, implicitly or explicitly, foregrounded workers' lack of political education. The figure of the ignorant worker mentioned in the interview above, also implicitly accepted by women like Sana and Asha, has thus emerged as central to explanations of limita-

38 Dipesh Chakrabarty: Trade Union in a hierarchical culture: The jute workers of Calcutta, 1920–50 (chapter 3), in: Ranajit Guha (ed.): Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society, Delhi 1994, p. 143.

39 Group discussion in Kaalka tea plantation.

40 Dipesh Chakrabarty: Trade Union in a hierarchical culture.

tions of working class organizations. Further, the nature of this *babu-coolie* dynamics was not only based on class but intersected with ethnic (Bengali vs. tribal or Nepali) and gender identities.

Throughout my fieldwork it was evident that not only was the central leadership male but the organizing bodies within the plantations responsible for its immediate logistics were also men. The women, the more numerous portion of the workforce, were mainly the crowd who legitimized the intent of the protest by attending. In the tea plantations in North Bengal, in spite of high unionisation, the proportion of women in leadership positions is abysmally low⁴¹. This masculinisation of organized protests seemed to devalue the women's potential to contribute to agitation apart from bringing the numbers.

Anand: These women are all *buddhu* (fools). You can't give them any work outside the house, and they have no *matha* (head) for politics. So no point in speaking to them!

Usha (A's wife): Yes, we are guided by the men. That is how it should be. Everyone has their own roles. Ours is to follow the more experienced⁴².

While this view seemed to enjoy certain legitimacy, there were also contestations around this perception of the women as passive followers, as will be seen.

That the task of organizing is entirely premised on availability of certain forms of knowledge, not accessible to the workers, reduces trade union organizations to simply political educators without developing reciprocal relations of consciousness⁴³ and co-learning between the trade union leadership and the workers. In societies, as in the tea plantations⁴⁴, entangled in various pre-capitalist relationships, this conversely curtails forming working class solidarities across different ethnic groups. Mobilisation depends on political affiliations frequently built on ethnic identities. While trade unions like the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (affiliated to the Communist Party of India), the Indian National Trade Union Congress (affiliated to the Indian National Congress) and other mainstream parties largely drew on a mixed support base (although with more support from one ethnic community than the other), ethnic parties like the Adivasi Bikash Parishad (ABVP) and Gorkhaland Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) were sharply divided in their ethnic composition. It was not the shared identity of workers with the same paltry wage that determined their identification with the movement,

41 Kanchan Sarkar/Sharit Bhowmik: Trade Unions and Women Workers in Tea Plantations, in: Economic and Political Weekly 33:52 (1998), pp. L50–L51.

42 Interview with Usha in her house in Kaalka about the strike.

43 Dipesh Chakrabarty: Trade Union in a hierarchical culture, pp. 130f.

44 George L. Beckford: Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World, London 1972.

but rather their ethnic affiliations. The role assigned to poor and non-elite sections of society is to be governed and to suffer from poor governance. They react, in the end, in primordial ways, turning to identities of caste and religion to reject the state and its failure to represent them or to give them what they need⁴⁵. Baviskar⁴⁶ holds that to privilege people's own understanding of what is important, such splits and feuds should not be neglected in the analysis. The embedded antagonisms and solidarities shape and are shaped by local politics and provide the context in which such politics takes place, mutually conditioning each other. This often is utilized by organizers of movements to solidify their support base.

The wage movement illustrated the fragmented nature of workers' identities both in the perception of those participating in the strike and the leadership. Some of these constraints can be understood through considering the magnitude of the mass movement. Given the limitations in organic participation of such mass movements, the trade unions often are unable to address localized problems. In such instances of failure of trade unions to organize collective actions, they have been replaced by localized responses from civil society organizations, mainly in the form of the burgeoning number of non-governmental organisations active in the region since the crisis in 2000.

Building Solidarity Networks: Civil Society Organizations

NGOs provide social actors in civil society an opportunity and opening for a renewed engagement in redistributive politics⁴⁷. Located at the margins, these organizations become crucial standpoints for struggles, for altering the terms of public debate and management of economic and social life thus empowering communities⁴⁸. Svatantra was an important NGO active in the Kaalka region for a long time. It became focal from the 2000s with the crisis in the tea plantations and the resultant closures. Having had ties with radical left politics, Svatantra focussed on workers' rights. It aimed to empower the workers through movements against the state and its injustices. The agitation I now discuss was led by Svatantra and provides us interesting insights into how hierarchies play out in such scenarios and influence solidarities.

45 Raka Ray/Mary Fainsod Katzenstein: Introduction: In the Beginning there was the Nehruvian State (chapter 1), in: Raka Ray (ed.): *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics*, Lanham 2005.

46 Amita Baviskar: *In the Belly of the River*, pp. 126f.

47 N. Barot: Speech, quoted in Planning Commission, in *Proceedings, All India Conference on Role of the Voluntary Sector in National Development*. New Delhi 2004, http://planning-commission.nic.in/data/ngo/vac_prced.pdf. (accessed on 10 December 2019).

48 Neema Kudva: *Uneasy Partnerships: NGO-State Relations in India* (chapter 9), in: Raka Ray (ed.): *Social Movements in India*, p. 234.

As a part of sustenance for workers in closed tea plantations the National Rural Employment Generation Scheme (NREGA)⁴⁹ was very central as a source of livelihood. During the period of closure, the workers or members of their families applied for jobs under this scheme to the *panchayat*. In this particular instance the *panchayat* dismissed the claim of the applicants from Kaalka saying that they did not have jobs available.

When the *panchayat* turned us away some of us went to Shiva and told him about this. He then asked the leaders (of *Svatantra*) for advice. They told him that if they cannot give jobs within a certain period, they are bound by law to give unemployment benefits to the applicants (for two weeks). (Rustam, Kaalka fieldnotes)⁵⁰

Shiva, the son of a worker in Kaalka, was the nodal person running the organization in the area. He and a few others then mobilized the workers and went to the *panchayat* to submit a deputation demanding either job allocation or unemployment benefits.

Seeing we knew our rights, the members could not do anything. They told us to come the next day and then began our hide and seek for almost 6–7 weeks. We took turns and went but they did not accept our deputation. The villagers were also losing hope. Then we sent the deputation through registered post and tricked them into signing the receipt of the deputation... But it was a long road even after that. They found one delaying tactic after another for 3 months. Finally, we had a meeting. Bhavani babu and Tarun babu (the leaders of *Svatantra*) were also there. They supported our decision to take action and we all planned it. Next day, we took the villagers who had applied for the job and blockaded the *panchayat* office, locking the *panchayat* members inside. The *pradhan* (head of the *panchayat*) was not there. It was only after he had given a signed assurance of giving us all jobs or benefits within 7 days that we let them go. (Kaalka, 05.06.11, group discussion by Shiva, Rustam, Avinash, Shonali, Chameli and Chandni)⁵¹.

The NREGA movement was a grand success for the *Svatantra* and mobilized the workers to move for their rights. While the workers' participation in agitation was articulated on more equal terms, there was a clear leadership structure here, too. In-

49 NREGA is a Government of India welfare scheme to provide for enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, <https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx> (accessed on 22 March 2020).

50 Rustam's response, group interview, Kaalka.

51 Supurna Banerjee: *Activism and Agency in India*, pp. 162f.

terestingly, the organizational structure of *Svatantra*, in its composition, was not that different from trade union leadership being helmed by Bengali, middle-class, usually upper caste educated men. Having been active participants in radical Left politics in their youth, they had the expertise and skills to lead such worker movements. While the top crop of leaders sought to create a second rung indigenous leadership from the plantations, final decisions were hardly made without consulting them. This movement, however, drew on the energy of the participants and in a lot of ways it was their anger, desperation which took the movement forward. These activists' work to some extent altered workers' perceptions of risks, potential of collective actions. Further, through their access to outside resources and networks, they provided a semblance of protection for the workers.

The participation structure of protest had important implications for the question of alliance building in grassroots movements. Baviskar⁵² argues how relations in participating communities, in her case *adivasis*, contain contradictions which emanate many of the tensions of daily life, while at the same time also shaping the politics of the community. Extensive conversations and close observations in this case too revealed fault-lines in the participatory structure of this movement.

We (Chandni and her group of friends) were there right from the beginning. As I was studying in school I also could help with writing the deputation. We put a lot of energy into this. But you know, at some point we felt that we were not so central to the movement. Shiva *bhaiya* (elder brother) would always communicate directions to the boys and our job was to follow them. It was disappointing in a lot of ways. But since the movement was bigger than individuals we kept quiet. But that hurt remains⁵³.

The young girls came in complained to us that Shiva does not give them any important work. I have been part of *Svatantra* for so long, when Shiva was a little boy. I have learnt a lot from this organization. And one important lesson I learnt was that planning is seen as the domain of the men. Even if you are very good, resilient, intelligent, Tarun babu and the others will never choose you to lead. You are the support structure, to shout slogans but not to compose them. I told the girls this is the way it is⁵⁴.

Chandni, daughter of a plantation worker, was an active participant in the movement and felt slighted at the differential treatment. Lachmi's experience had made her ac-

52 Amita Baviskar: *In the Belly of the River*, pp. 106f.

53 Interview with Chandni, Kaalka.

54 Interview with Lachmi, Kaalka.

cept the gendered division of the organizational structure, a reality which disturbed Chandni and other younger women. Can women be leaders in such movements or are they just a means to a political end? Bandopadhyay⁵⁵ in her reflection on participation in the radical politics of the Naxalite movement confesses her disappointment about the reproduction of gender hierarchy within a movement which was looking to re-imagine the class hierarchy of the extant society. The patriarchal leadership structure of organizations has been evident in the work of other women activists too, where the specific roles assigned to the women always fell back upon gendered perceptions.

The organizational structure and everyday workings of *Svatantra*, in spite of a unity of purpose, illustrates how social hierarchies tend to be replicated in organizational structures. While in the case of the trade unions this is quite easily observable, in the case of smaller organizations like *Svatantra* this remains couched in the language of inclusion. The gendered hierarchy of the organization was unacknowledged and played out in practice as a default.

The women are the heart and the soul of this movement. How can you ignore the women while organizing in tea plantations, they are the most numerous. Also having women protestors in the frontline is an old and very clever tactic. The police are usually careful about hitting a woman. It is the women in the movement who protect us⁵⁶.

The inviolability of the women's body served as a protective shield for the movement, whose violation in any form had the potential for moral outrage. Placing the women in the front of marches, blockades etc. in this movement was the reproduction of the norm of enabling the men, where the women were allocated the front line for their gendered bodies but not as leaders. Leadership, decision making and shaping organized protest was a default masculine category. Much like the trade union movement, though different in its articulation and belief, the second rung of male leadership of this organization showed that the gendered forms of participation had become discursive and structural.

55 Krishna Bandopadhyay: Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative, in: Economic and Political Weekly 43:14 (2008), pp. 52–59.

56 Interview with Bhavani babu, Kaalka.

Affect as Solidarity: Beyond the Public Registers of Protest

In one of the neighbouring plantations of Kaalka, Naamchi, the trade unions had called a strike regarding non-payment of workers' boni.⁵⁷ As it was peak season, the manager was impatient to break the strike which had already continued a week. He put pressure on the workers through non-payment of wages. Agitated about the non-receipt of wages, a group of workers had gone to the office to demand the wages. In the argument that followed, one of the women, Shaanu, allegedly abused the manager calling him *haraami* (a Hindi cuss word). The manager, beside himself with rage, kicked the woman into her stomach. The woman was pregnant and suffered a miscarriage and injuries. This incident led to a severe backlash and gradually went on to become a rallying point for the workers. Interestingly, the protests were not organized by any political party or civil society organization but started by four women and built upon through their social networks. This protest was an organized action. The terms through which it was organized have, however, been usually outside the realm of public registers of what constitutes political and political protests.

The four women at the forefront of the movement, Lachmi (Adivasi), Paanita (Nepali, Kaalka), Kamal (Nepali, Naamchi) and Lalita (Adivasi, Ragini) were all originally from Kaalka and childhood friends (also with the injured woman, Shaanu) but were now scattered over the neighbouring plantations through marriage. How were four women living in different plantations and of different ethnic origin able to start a movement which was quite remarkable in its scale and continuity?

What could we do? Keep quiet while the unions kept debating and submitting deputations? 'After all she called him *haraami* in front of everyone', they said. We realized that the unions will do nothing. They were satisfied asking for compensation! How can you compensate the death of a child through money? She is our friend. We decided we could not keep quiet⁵⁸.

The anger that the women felt came from the injustice of the situation and the strong ties of affect that they had with Shaanu. They also asked *Svatantra* for help. While *Svatantra* promised to extend logistical support, they did not want to do anything overtly since the trade unions were involved. Movement organizations had their separate fields of operation and to avoid antagonism they tried to keep away from stepping onto each other's toes, thus limiting possibilities of coalition between these different establishments.

57 The bonus is a sum of money paid by the company to its workers annually on the basis of profits and productivity of the company.

58 Group discussion with Lachmi, Lalita and Paanita, Kaalka.

So far, in their experience, political registers of protests originated from the organized structures of institutions like trade unions and civil society organizations. While the women were not passive recipients, their resistance seemed to emulate more closely Scott's modes of weapons of the weak⁵⁹. In this case, however, without the fall-back structures, the women had to dig deep and reaffirm trust in themselves.

We had long conversations among ourselves and with elders like Bandhaindidi. "What could a handful of women like us do? What do we have?" We became very depressed thinking of Shaanu and how this deed was to go unpunished. Bandhaindidi told us of one incident where she and her *saathis* (Nepali word for friends) had beaten up her sister's abusive husband. It was then we thought that, "like Bandhaindidi had her *saathis*, we also have each other. That is our strength; that is our organization"⁶⁰. (Panita)

Like the word *sangtin* used by Nagar et al⁶¹ in their work, *saathi* is not just about friendship, it is about a fellow traveller—a term of solidarity, reciprocity, of enduring friendship among women which cuts across (in this case) caste, ethnicity and location within the hierarchical world of the plantation society. The first task was to talk to other women, convey their anger and create a support base. There were conversations and meetings that they held making use of their social networks. Their stories and efforts illustrated that often, more than institutional channels, friendships offered entry points to get ordinary people involved.

When we started organizing the women around this incident, we faced backlash from the unions. They warned us off, telling us not to interfere as they were already 'dealing with it'. So first we used to meet in stealth. In Bandhaindidi's house, in Bari's house and the men did not pay heed to these. "These were women discussing womanly affairs", they dismissed. But as our support grew, we became braver. We said why will we hide? We are not doing anything wrong. A month had already passed since the incident but the unions had clearly not been able to do anything. It was our turn now⁶².

The shrinking of democratic spaces of protest can be discerned not only in the ways the state reacts to protests but in the perception of exclusive ownership of protests by

59 James C. Scott: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven 1985.

60 Interview with Panita, Kaalka.

61 Richa Nagar: *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*, Minneapolis 2006, pp. ix-x.

62 Interview with Kamal, Naamchi.

some institutions, like the trade unions. The women here made use of the stereotyped perceptions about their activities to organize, build networks and create solidarities. The opposition of the unions enabled them to sharpen their political profile and also to ask questions which went beyond the immediacy of the singular incident.

The solidarity created was not only through a common identity of motherhood but a shared sense of destiny, a destiny of being victims, of being collateral damage.

It moved us to think of the unborn child inside her, murdered for no fault of theirs. But it was not only about being mothers, it was our fate as women. Our suffering is a given. Bandhaindidi spent her entire life being beaten up by a drunken husband. Why? Lachmi has to work so hard to support her family that all her blood has dried up, she is ill all the time. But there is no concern. These are never the cause of struggles. No, the unions and parties dismiss this as 'everyday concerns'. Why? Are we not humans?⁶³

While Sandhya and others like her might have felt the initial sense of sympathy through a shared identity of motherhood, their conversations and resistance also led them to understand and collaborate with each other as poor working-class women with shared life experiences of domestic violence, backbreaking poverty—issues which had become so banal that they did not feature in registers of protests. The agitation was fuelled on a high degree of emotional investment through which it was possible to think of this as a process of collective empowerment. The need to articulate and perform their emotions of anger, empathy and resistance were articulated as the politics of the protest. This emotionality was full of cognitive elements—it was the collective emotional and political journey of these women, who had chosen to reflect and struggle together as 'sister-activists' in the movement for redressal of the multiple forms of violence in their lives⁶⁴. In finding this sisterhood, these women were able to cut across the ethnic divide which regulated a significant part of their lives. Their lived experiences as poor women vulnerable to violence in the family, from the management and the state, led them to build a coalition across intersectional identities through their shared interest.

Mohanty⁶⁵ argues that solidarity is achieved through an active engagement with diversity rather than being defined homogeneously by neediness or powerlessness. In this protest, we see that while it was this extreme sense of violation which created dialogues across the communities, the solidarity was woven into the movement through accepting and productively making use of difference rather than downplaying it. The

63 Sandhya's response, group discussion, Kaalka.

64 Richa Nagar: *Playing with Fire*.

65 Chandra Talpade Mohanty: Foreword, in: Richa Nagar: *Playing with Fire*.

plays, dramas, demonstrations, street corners employed as forms of protest made use of the distinct history of tea plantation workers, cited different Adivasi or Nepali leaders of the plantations, made reference to the distinct Adivasi or Nepali history and cultural symbols.

The protest did not remain confined to the violence against one woman. Although the protesters demanded the dismissal of the manager, their demands were not just addressed to the management of Naamchi plantation but raised questions to the state. The violation of the woman's body by the attack became the symbol for the vulnerability and exploitation of the workers in general and women workers in particular. Drawing on narratives of forced migration, duping by the state and little improvement in their working conditions under the post-colonial state, the protest historicised their exploitation and constructed a frame which became larger than an incident of individualised assault. While the frontliners in the protest were all women, the protest was registered and articulated as women and as workers. It was not enough to hold the management accountable, but to critique the state. The neo-liberal state had sided with the industry and taken away from the workers any semblance of state protection.

All the time these gardens were closed, the management ran away stealing our dues, what did the state do? Nothing. It was giving us charity, not our rights and for that too we had to fight every step of the way. Not only can it not protect us from our hunger but also cannot protect our bodies. The government has to answer, has to take responsibility to deal with such miscreants⁶⁶.

Mitchell⁶⁷ argues that democracy in India can be understood by exploring the everyday practices which broadcast political messages, placing them within their historical genealogies. In pegging the state as answerable, the protesters did not just claim personhood but in fact citizenship, framing their demands within the moral economy of rights. We will come back to this point in the next section.

This was also evident in the modes of the protest. The women's involvement in various organized actions of the trade unions and/or *Svatantra* gave them a working knowledge of laws and a sense of legality and illegality. Participating in these movements familiarized them with tools of activism—writing deputations, blockades, strikes, rallies and the like. They used these tools of political protest not only with the management, but also by blockading police stations and the Block Development Office (BDO) in their demand that the incident be taken up by the state. In addition, there were street plays and songs sung in rallies. The women felt that these forms gave

66 Interview with Bandhain, Kaalka.

67 Lisa Mitchell: 'To Stop Train Pull Chain': Writing Histories of Contemporary Political Practice, in: *Indian Economic Social History Review* 48:4, (2011), pp. 469–95, p. 471.

them a scope of self-expression and ownership of the protest in specific ways. Symbols such as these are collective means of emotional communication and formalising shared feelings into articulate form of politics⁶⁸. But these emotions do not exist apart from their content; rather, in this case, they exist because of it. Such public forms of protest, through their binding quality, embody a promise of solidarity.

Expectedly, a protest against a powerful institution like the state also meant backlash. With the realization by the state that the aim of the protest was no longer about this single act of punishing the manager but larger questions of violence and exploitation expressed through blockades of police stations and BDO offices, it initiated a counter-attack. There were *lathi* charges, threatening and some of the women like Lachmi even had to spend a night in lockup.

But we were not scared. Every time the police hit us, we arrived with bigger and bigger groups. The more violent the state became the more support swelled for us. What started as a movement by a handful of women was soon joined by more women and men too. The newspapers supported us. Soon it was becoming difficult for the unions too to threaten us publicly. Some even helped by offering advice. The movement was now bigger than ourselves and there could be no looking back⁶⁹. (Lachmi)

The disciplining mechanisms that the state tends to employ to protect its interests have usually been successful in keeping the poor and the marginalized in their place, but there are moments when such coercion fuels further protest. Naamchi was such an instance. With the protests showing no signs of abating and gaining support from the population outside the tea plantations, the administration responded with a compromise. It presided upon the company to dismiss the management and promised to bear the entire medical expense of the afflicted woman. While at some level this was a victory for the protesters, it was also a clever strategy by the state to reduce the momentum of the protest. Basu⁷⁰ identifies that a central challenge of grassroots movements is their relation with the state. By accepting some of the demands of the movement; the state might initially seem to legitimize the movement while subsequently eroding its strength.

68 Colin Barker: Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power: The Making of Solidarity at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, August 1980, in: Jeff Goodwin/James M. Jasper/Francesca Polletta (eds.): *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, pp. 175–194.

69 Interview with Lachmi, Kaalka.

70 Amrita Basu: Grass Roots Movements and the State: Reflections on Radical Change in India, in: *Theory and Society* 16:5 (1987), pp. 647–674, p. 666.

Postscript to the Protest

In the way the women remembered these protests and spoke about them there was alteration of fear, laughter, despair, optimism, panic and resolve. Through all these moments emerged new ideas, new promises and strengthening of their solidarities.

Lalita: At that time there was great celebration. We were all very happy. Even the unions congratulated us.

Panita: Yes, we went around the streets distributing sweets and hugging each other. But years down the line we sometimes think, what has really changed? Nothing if we are honest. The bigger questions we asked were cleverly avoided. We still don't get our wages on time, there is still violence.

Sandhya: When I think like this I feel too sad. It seems like a waste. But then I think of these women with me—my friends, my sisters and the battle we fought together⁷¹.

Many of the women had troubled domestic lives. Panita's husband was an alcoholic and spent all his money on drinking, Lalita's husband had left her when her daughter was born and she was the sole bread earner in her family of elderly parents and two children. Lachmi was ill and had been hospitalised twice already during my time there for over-exertion and lack of nutrition. Kamal was a widow and was facing tremendous opposition and violence from her son for her decision to marry a second time. Such troubles were the lot of many of the other women in the plantations. The protest did not change these everyday lived realities. While some resisted, others remained resigned to their fate subscribing to stealthier forms of disruption. Nagar⁷² talks about the limitations of any vision of empowerment that does not address the continuous devaluation and disempowerment of women within their homes and communities. But the lived experiences of these women seem to suggest that empowerment is often an experience of disjuncture. While there was an absence of volatile acts of resistance, conflating this with absence of agency is inaccurate. Their agency could not be understood through protests alone, rather the women handled and perceived their situation in different ways and agency was accordingly played out in diverse manners, some of which often even upheld the status quo⁷³.

The comradeship in the movement gave them a support network, a group of friends.

71 Group discussion in Naamchi, in 2017.

72 Richa Nagar: *Playing with Fire*, p. 348.

73 Patricia Jeffery/Roger Jeffery: *Don't Marry Me To A Plowman!: Women's Everyday Lives In Rural North India*, New York/Abingdon 1996, pp. 16–19.

We try to meet once a week in the evening to discuss the problems of the women. This is not like the Svatantra meets with their formal structures, but informal discussions where women come from the different plantations and discuss their issues. It is a space where women can talk freely, share their trouble and get some support. Some come here and cry, they release all the tears stored through days and years⁷⁴.

The formation of this support-group like space was an effort to sustain the camaraderie, the solidarity that protesting together had given these women. It was not able (and probably not intended to) reverse the hierarchical social norms which operated in the plantations. But what it allowed the women was a safe space to share their troubles. While it did not necessarily make the women activists in their own lives, very often it made them better managers of their troubles. All the meetings were not well attended, the numbers varied but this was a semi-public domain that the women created and held on to where they could critically reflect on questions of violence, poverty and the like, which had so far been subscribed to the private realm of the home.

Discussion—Politics of Movements

The ethnographies of the three protests do not intend to suggest a binary opposition between organisation and spontaneity. All three had elements of spontaneity (evident in a day long strike being called off after a few hours by the trade unions) and organization. Rather, the internal dynamics of the protest or the politics of the protest movements give us a scope to think through various modes of organizing solidarity. Works on internal politics of social movements⁷⁵ illustrates that the formation of political subjectivity is a complex and often a contradictory exercise.

Friendship as Solidarity

While existing scholarship on social movements attributes successful cooperation to shared interests, identities or opportunities, it often falls short as it does not consider the relations of domination and hierarchy which are present within these groups, thus

74 Group discussion in Naamchi in 2017.

75 Amita Baviskar: *In the Belly of the River*; Kenneth Bo Nielsen: *Contesting India's Development?*; Michael Youngblood: *Cultivating Community: Interest, Identity and Ambiguity in an Indian Mobilization*, Pasadena 2016.

obfuscating the development of shared interests⁷⁶. The overemphasis on ideological consensus and loyal body of participants which Youngblood⁷⁷ terms a ‘fallacy of solidarity’ might lead our analysis to miss or underestimate the political subjectivity and rationality of the movement’s actual participants, the least empowered whose views might well be at odds with the neat version that the movement portrays. The understanding of progressive consolidation in a movement, based on an *a priori* assumption that successful social mobilization corresponds with maximized shared identity among the movements’ participants⁷⁸, drowns out those voices which speak of dissonance or of alienation, as was evident in the ways the women workers articulated their participation in the first two organized movements. Hollinger⁷⁹ argues that commonality of identity is not automatic to solidarity and sometimes not even central; solidarity is more in the nature of ‘willed affiliation’⁸⁰. Rather than belonging to a community by virtue of identity, solidarity, therefore, is built on some degree of conscious commitment. Solidarity is thus agential. The specific traits of solidarity cannot be understood if we conflate it with possession of identity traits through which one belongs to a community⁸¹. It was the act of friendship which created solidarity rather than the passivity of belonging to a community of women and labourers. Solidarity therefore needs to be re-inscribed through everyday commitments and cannot be considered as automatic consequence to organizational principles. The Naamchi protest seems to emerge from a common context of affect and injury which led the protesting women to make a common cause of their injured womanhood and exploited labour by deciding to be *saathis* in a long and arduous struggle. At the same time, it is difficult to ascertain whether these voices did drown out the discordant expressions within the movement which my narrative fails to capture.

In my analysis of solidarity as one of the key lenses to read the protest—the organisational solidarity of the first two protests contrasted sharply with affect-based solidarity emerging out of a lived relation of friendship. The intention here is not to vilify organizational protests. It is presumed that the trade unionists as well as leaders of Svatantra were committed to developing agendas beneficial to the workers. But in their translation in everyday life instead of being mediated through foregrounding an organic leadership, this was actualized through a hierarchical system of status and power mapping onto existing ethnic, gender and class stratifications.

76 S. Laurel Weldon: Inclusion, Solidarity, and Social Movements: The Global Movement against Gender Violence, in: *Perspectives on Politics* 4:1 (2006), pp. 55–74.

77 Michael Youngblood: *Cultivating Community*, pp. 4ff.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

79 David A. Hollinger: From Identity to Solidarity, in: *Daedalus* 135:4 (2006), pp. 23–31, pp. 25f.

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*

On the other hand, friendships, especially female friendships, have been usually ascribed to the arena of leisure. What friendships look like in a state of economic insecurity and restrictive social norms in which friends often take on support roles based on affect and shared reality has hardly been talked about outside feminist literature. For these women it was a way to forge new relationships with themselves and their communities, independent of men and/or family. It was these friendships that explained solidarity between women of different caste, religion and political affiliation. These friendships gave the women the courage and resource to negotiate their everyday reality. Foucault⁸² notes how friendship performs in a distinct activist project by entailing localized resistance to social normalization. By disconnecting itself from totalizing and normalizing systems of power relationships that govern social connections, it creates marginal spaces where novel relations can be constructed. For the women embedded within the patriarchal structures of home and work, who are dependent on their husbands, fathers and managers as protectors and providers, this creation of alternate networks of support outside familial networks was in itself a subversion of social normalization and creation of a collaborative new subjectivities. Not all of the friendships between these women can be understood as political but through their maintaining of solidarity, challenging of prevailing norms, these friendships need to be examined for their potential to resist the neo-liberal economic system's colonization of our lives⁸³.

While the subversive potential of friendship has been highlighted, there is a need to guard against romanticisation of friendships. Politics of friendship, like all other social relationships, is not simple. Friendships between these women could also be hierarchical. It is possible that some women may have assumed leadership in their support network. My fieldwork did not reveal any obvious trend towards such hierarchies. While there were disagreements and falling out, there did not seem to be an obvious order. The women did not define their friendships or subscribe rules to the same. It was maybe this ambiguity that enabled them to remain easy. By being disconnected from the most totalizing and normalizing systems of power relationships, these relations were instead characterized by dynamic and unstable power relations⁸⁴. Discussions and disagreements happened simultaneously. The collective memory of the movement helped to sustain a sense of joint responsibility.

82 Michel Foucault: *Friendship As a Way of Life* (chapter 15), in: Paul Rainbow (ed.): *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* volume 1, New York 1994.

83 Benjamin Shepard: *Rebel Friendships: "Outsider" Networks and Social Movements*, New York 2015.

84 Michel Foucault: *Friendship As a Way of Life*.

Building Subjectivity

Preventing women from assuming decision making roles in popular movements, unfortunately has a long history in South Asia⁸⁵. Movements such as the left trade unionism or the Naxalite movement produced its particular notion of masculinity and femininity, where the ‘male revolutionary subjectivity’ was idealized, and women participants ‘struggled to inhabit’ this subjectivity⁸⁶. The inherent patriarchy as well as middle class of the leadership structure makes solidarity possible only in a hierarchical form. By aligning with a middle-class, patriarchal system the political agency of those falling outside it is rendered invisible. But the women workers were not passive recipients. They used their experience in shaping resistance both within and outside these organizations and in the political as well as the domestic space. It is here that I argue that organic modes of creating solidarity need to be more prominently included within the social movement literature. As the Naamchi protest illustrates, protest movements can be based on social relationships which are simultaneously constituted by “meaning, scarcity and by power”⁸⁷. The protest which quickly took the shape of a movement did not begin with a clear materialist concern. But over time it became a critique of the non-democratic anti-poor state that the workers were living in.

This brings us to the question of the relation between the post-colonial state and the tribal working class subject. As poor, marginalized primitives in a modern state, the tribal person (in this case the image of Nepali workers also extends to being considered tribal) is a subject of intervention—either as a victim in need of protection or as a savage in need of civilization⁸⁸. The leadership of organizations working for workers’ welfare and rights, be it trade unions or civil society organisations, are therefore naturally vested in the hands of outsiders more capable of providing guidance. The state or saviour institutions do not acknowledge the possibility that such groups are capable of constructing their own subjectivity. When a group of such tribal women workers, however, challenges the state, not only do they counter this perception but stake claims to agentive political subjectivity.

85 For example: Jeff Goodwin: *The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affectual Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946 to 1954*, in: *American Sociological Review* 26:1 (1997), pp. 53–69; Srila Roy: *Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence and Subjectivity in India’s Naxalbari Movement*, New Delhi 2013.

86 Srila Roy: *Remembering Revolution*, pp. 72f.

87 William H. Sewell: *Towards a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labour History*, in: Lenard R. Berlanstein (ed.): *Rethinking Labor History—Essays on the Discourse and Class Analysis*, Illinois 1993, pp. 15–38, p. 33.

88 Uday Chandra: *Beyond Subalternity*, p. 53.

Towards a Conclusion

With the loss of state protection, there has been increased impoverishment undercutting the survival strategies of marginal groups. This is evident in eviction for developmental projects⁸⁹ and land acquisition⁹⁰. While such projects gave rise to experiences of exclusion, disempowerment and immiseration, at the same time they gave rise to new forms of popular protest⁹¹. Social movement literature has usually focussed on how professional activists create networks and coalitions to strengthen movements. My paper suggests ways in which activists are also produced by movements. Collective actions energized through affective bonds often achieve ends which institutional social arrangements are constrained from striving for. Here I have argued that activism is a lived experience beyond the binary of women as activists and/or victims. Instead of being framed by pre-existing, fully formed political ideals, the politics of a protest is here developed through engagement in particular projects that often follows complex, multiple and even contradictory articulations. As is evident, friendships inform such movements, infusing them with the social capital necessary to resist the normative economic and social foundations of their reality. I argue that social movements are able to weave a more solid network of support if the connection is based on love and care. The protest eventually seemed to enjoy indirect support from other organizations, as indicated in the section above, thus opening up possibilities of alliance building. I conclude here with a brief quote by a Centre of Indian Trade Unions activist in Doors:

We did not think they will get this far. How to imagine that a handful of women can shed their fear and fight? But fight they did, like wounded tigers. There were defects in their methods, all that can be a matter of discussion but there was also a lot to learn. The women of these plantations in their fight for their friend showed us what it meant to be comrades⁹².

89 Amita Baviskar: *In the Belly of the River*; Uday Chandra: *Beyond Subalternity*.

90 Kenneth Bo Nielsen: *Contesting India's Development?*; Michael Levien: *Dispossession Without Development*.

91 Sara C. Motta/Alf Gunvald Nilsen: *Social Movements and/in the Postcolonial: Dispossession, Development and Resistance in the Global South* (chapter 1), in: Sara C. Motta/Alf Gunvald Nilsen (eds.): *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance*, Houndmills 2011, pp.11f.

92 Interview with CITU activist Anand, Kaalka.

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