The State and Women's Empowerment in India: Paradoxes and Politics

Aradhana Sharma
Theorizing NGOs

STATES, FEMINISMS, AND NEOLIBERALISM

NEXT WAVE
New Directions in Women's Studies

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pening in Chorgaon, although people there acknowledged that Maoists often visited the schools and staged different types of "programs."

54. The mother of one girl told me that she knew her daughter was alive only because the Maoists had not yet come to tell her she was dead.

55. One local boy had a similar tale, having left for the jungle only to be fetched by his mother, who was a friend of the regional commander and not willing to risk the death of her only son. After bringing him back, that family moved to the district center and eventually to Kathmandu.
"[MS] is partly governmental, and it is also nongovernmental. . . . The national level [program in New Delhi] is strictly governmental. . . . [But] from the state level onward, [MS] is an autonomous organization." In the development world MS would be considered a Government Organized Non-governmental Organization or GONGO, a seemingly contradictory para-statal entity. Pathak's elucidation of the program's hybrid nature cleared up some of my confusion, but it led me to question why the program was structured as a GONGO and why its personnel identified the program in a shifting either/or (NGO/GO) manner rather than as a GONGO in front of government and rural audiences.

In this essay, I take up these questions and use the MS program's hybrid organizational form and empowerment activities to point to some of the ways in which governance, the state, and women's political activism are being transformed in neoliberal India. The current regime of neoliberal governability, as scholars building on Foucauldian insights have argued, is characterized by the rise of novel mechanisms of self-governance (like empowerment), new institutions of rule (like NGOs and GONGOs), and the increased entanglement of such institutions with state bodies in the project of governance. Grassroots empowerment, along with participation and state-civil society partnerships, have emerged as key words under neoliberalism and are being promoted by various actors, including the United Nations, the World Bank, NGOs, and states, as ideal strategies of development and governance (Sharma 2008).

How does one position the MS program and make sense of its workings in this larger transnational neoliberal context? Does the program's combination of certain critical aspects of neoliberal governance, such as empowerment and state-civil society collaboration, make MS a typical neoliberal intervention? I contend that it does not. Indeed, the MS program's alternative and layered borrowings from feminist, leftist, and radical pedagogy-based (Freire 1970) empowerment frameworks and its emphasis on women's collective, anti-oppression-focused political work make it difficult to qualify it as a model neoliberal initiative, writ large. What I hope to show is how MS articulates with the globally dominant neoliberal mantra and what this tells us about the reconfiguration of governance, the state, and subaltern and feminist struggles in postliberalization India.

I begin this essay by discussing the rationale behind the MS program's GONGO form. I then analyze how this GONGO form materializes in the work identities and lives of its personnel, describing the constraints and opportunities that MS's hybrid structure brings up. While the program's linkage with the state puts restrictions on the mobilization work its representatives do, its crossbred GONGO form and NGO affiliation also afford some maneuverability. I argue that MS functionaries' shifting usage of the two aspects of the program's identity—its government and nongovernmental labels—is a strategy that allows them to sometimes subvert state discipline and repression, and to expand the meanings and practices of empowerment.

I analyze both the discursive and material effects of the program personnel's tactical moves and unravel the paradoxes that arise when empowerment is implemented as a category of governance: it can simultaneously bureaucratize women's lives and unleash unexpected forms of empowerment. These uneven consequences of the MS program's GONGO nature raise broader questions about feminist partnerships with state agencies in postliberal India. MS began as an experiment that gave women's movement activists a testing ground for working with, rather than against, the state and implementing large-scale projects for equality and justice (Jandhyala 2001). I conclude this essay by exploring the potential of feminist-cum-state collaborations under neoliberalism. My intention is to not make easy judgments about whether feminist alliances with state agencies are good or bad (Ferguson 1990) or whether the effects of empowerment programs undertaken by such alliances are uniformly liberatory or conformist. Rather, I take my cue from many of my informants and from Foucault to argue that the governmentalization of empowerment is "dangerous" in that it is laden with risks and unexpected possibilities (Foucault 1982, 231; Sharma 2008). The tale I tell, therefore, is not one about the unequivocally depoliticizing effects of empowerment; rather, I tease out the forms and modalities of subaltern and feminist politics that are enabled by the governmentalization of empowerment in the neoliberal age and signal their limits (see also Chatterjee 2004).

Why a GONGO?

In 1989 the Government of India initiated the Mahila Samakhya program with Dutch funding. MS was patterned after the Women's Development Programme, or WDP, then operating in Rajasthan, which had empowerment as its explicit goal. Transnational feminist scholarship and activism in the field of development identified empowerment as an ideal strategy for gender-equitable and just development (Sen and Grown 1987; Young 1993, 127–46; Kabeer 1994). Women's movement activists in India borrowed from such feminist thinking and other radical frameworks to de-
sign MS; a senior civil servant, Anil Bordia, facilitated this process (Sharma 2008). The program views social hierarchies and women’s lack of awareness about their rights and about government programs as obstacles to their development. MS does not distribute material resources; rather, it mobilizes marginalized rural women through collective empowerment or “conscientization” strategies (Freire 1970), whereby they reflect on their oppressions, take action to address their problems, and come into their own as agents of change (Government of India 1997).

MS is considered innovative not only because of its nonmaterial empowerment focus but also for its crossbred GONGO structure. Why this crossbred form, and why did women’s movement activists, who heretofore had had an uneasy relationship with state agencies, agree to partner with the government on an empowerment initiative?

When I posed this question to activists, some explained their willingness to work with the state as a consequence of the shifting political terrain in the 1980s. Indira Gandhi’s declaration of a state of emergency in 1975, and the resultant suspension of civil rights, led to a deep suspicion of the state and the nurturing of autonomous activist spaces. However, Rajiv Gandhi’s attempts to innovate government in the mid-1980s, and his promise to give greater priority to women’s issues, played an important role in repositioning the state as a possible, if risky, arena for creative activist work.

Feminist involvement in state development projects during the 1980s was also shaped by a realization that NGO efforts and autonomous organizational strategies were limited in their reach and results. “[Our thinking was that] we need to . . . make more impact on mainstream structures. We cannot [work] in isolation. So the question of partnerships, linkages, networks [arose in] . . . the 1980s,” explained Versha Rai, a member of the core MS team. When the opportunity to collaborate with the government on designing and implementing a national-level, women’s empowerment program—Mahila Samakhya—presented itself, some activists saw it as a chance to take their feminist ideas of gender equality, justice, and social change “to scale”—that is, to reach out to large groups of disenfranchised women, to use state resources to facilitate meaningful transformation, to mainstream gender within state institutions, and to perhaps reconfigure these institutions themselves (Jandhyala 2001).

In addition to noting the benefits of the state’s wider reach and greater resources, many of my informants also saw state involvement in grassroots development efforts as its duty toward its most marginalized citizens, which ought not to be privatized. Furthermore, a few felt that the program’s association with the Government of India gave MS authority and legitimacy in bureaucratic circles. “You write ‘Government of India,’ and everybody knows that you are a government program. [It] helps with credibility,” explained Sunita Pathak, a civil servant who worked with MS.

The advantages of state participation in a women’s empowerment initiative, however, were tempered by drawbacks. “The main problem is that a state, given its very nature . . . , says that if program A has three components, program A will have three components forever,” claimed one bureaucrat, as he discussed the rigidity of the typical bureaucratic approach, which discouraged flexibility and innovation. Other disadvantages that my informants brought up included target-driven and top-down development strategies, red tape, political expediency, inefficiency, and corruption.

Some activists I spoke with raised more serious problems associated with government involvement in feminist and grassroots empowerment. “To be able to question issues is not something that the government and the state would like,” explained Kaveri Mani. “It has a class bias. It has an urban bias. It has an elitist mode. So why should it . . . initiate a program which is going to question its own role and interest?” Nina Singh, a civil servant, added: “A government program . . . does not integrate the element of struggle that lies at the heart of empowerment . . . That is the biggest constraint—that struggle is not understood in a government lexicon. [Bureaucrats] reduce everything to a safe thing called ‘development.’” The government, hence, could not be trusted as the sole agent for women’s empowerment given the inequalities it expressed and promoted, and its potential to co-opt and depoliticize struggle.

MS planners therefore desired a quasi-nongovernmental identity for MS. An NGO-like structure, they felt, would mitigate the problems with state involvement and bring in benefits, such as grassroots-level accountability and legitimacy, a bottom-up orientation, participatory and decentralized ways of working, flexibility, and a motivated workforce. In Kaveri Mani’s words, “While women’s groups have the advantages of being small . . . of being close to the people . . . [and] of having a committed staff, the advantage of the state was its outreach . . . and large scale. And so there was this feeling that it is possible to marry the two.”

Mahila Samakhya’s GONGO structure represents this experimental “marriage” or partnership. While the national program office is part of the Department of Education of the Ministry of Human Resource Devel-
opment and is headed by a bureaucrat, at the level of each participating state, MS is implemented through nongovernmental “MS Societies.” The staff at the state, district, and block levels of the program is drawn from the NGO sector, and its advisory bodies are comprised of both ex officio and nongovernmental members, with the latter having at least 51 percent representation.

The MS program’s crossbred structure, thus, was the result of its planners’ desire to combine the positive aspects of state and NGO approaches to women’s development and to preserve partial independence for the program. Because some activists were wary about collaborating with state agencies and concerned about the possible co-optation of feminist agendas of empowerment by the state, they created a semi-autonomous GONGO. But what does this GONGO form mean in practice? How does it manifest itself in the daily work lives of MS staff members, and does it, in fact, afford them relative autonomy from official dictates?

**MS as a Moving Target**

The program’s hybrid organization raised two key conundrums for its workforce. First, they had to define their work identities. As GONGO workers, were they government employees or NGO employees? The latter received less remuneration but had more flexibility in their work, whereas the former earned more but had to work within governmental dictates. Second, MS representatives had to carefully manage their state and nongovernmental identities in front of different audiences with varied expectations of and expectations for state and nongovernmental actors. While the program’s hybrid identity raised these dilemmas for its workforce, it also provided a partial resolution, as I illustrate below. Program employees mobilized resources MS and themselves, using both GO and NGO labels to negotiate the very contradictions that the mixed GONGO form and state involvement form threw in their path, and generated unexpectedly empowering results. I also discuss what these program practices reveal about the discursive nature of the state and about the paradoxical effects of state-sponsored women’s empowerment.

MS personnel rarely, if ever, identified the program as a GONGO in work-related situations, preferring instead to switch between its governmental and nongovernmental labels. Prabha Kishore, a mid-level MS employee, explained that “MS ... wears two hats—one is a governmental hat and the other is a nongovernmental hat. We have made very good use of both these hats.” She told me that she kept two letterheads. “When we write to NGOs, we use the . . . letterhead that states that Mahila Samakhya is a voluntary organization registered under the 1860 Societies Act and gives our registration number. We open [the letter] with ‘Dear Colleague or Dear Friend, Namaste,’” she said in a sweet voice. “[But] when we need to put pressure . . . [we use] the letterhead bearing the words, ‘Ministry of Human Resource Development.’” Kishore enunciated the last phrase slowly, emphasizing each word. “This letterhead evokes the reaction,” she lowered her voice and stated fearfully, “Oh God, this is a government program! We even stamp our seal on these letters and sign them—we write them exactly like government letters are written.”

To express authority, as Kishore described, MS staff members used the style, language, and voice of the state. I observed them don the governmental garb when they needed to garner the support of state administrators who might be hostile toward NGOs and women’s empowerment. They also worked the bureaucratic hierarchy to their advantage by emphasizing to state, district, and block officials that MS was a program of the highest, national-level government body—the Government of India—which therefore needed to be treated with seriousness and respect.

Program representatives also took on governmental personas in front of rural audiences when they wanted to perform authority. For instance, Leela Vati, a fieldworker, used the state tag to intimidate her clients. She ordered participants in some MS villages, from where the program was being phased out, to return the few things (like rugs and water pails) that their village collectives had received from the MS program. She did not have any explicit mandate from her superiors for doing so. MS participants in Bilaspur village told me that Leela Vati had threatened them when they refused to comply—“If you don’t return the things, the government jeep [used by the program] will come tomorrow, forcibly take everything, and dishonor you in front of everyone!” She even took the village collective leader’s signature on a blank sheet of paper. Bilaspur’s women alleged that Leela Vati could easily avoid being implicated in any wrongdoing by writing a note on that piece of paper stating that the village women had voluntarily returned the things. Leela Vati thus effectively used statistic symbols and practices, such as a jeep and written documentation (Gupta and Sharma 2006), to enact “official” authority, and played on the women’s fear of the coercive state-as-taker.

When it was not authority but legitimacy that MS representatives desired or when they needed to justify the program’s lack of resources, they wore the NGO hat. For instance, when introducing MS to potential pro-
gram participants, they often identified themselves as NGO workers who were interested in building meaningful relationships with villagers, clearly distinguishing their unselfish and committed work ethic from that of state employees. NGO identification also helped when potential clients asked what tangible resources they would receive from MS. Program representatives were well aware of the popular image of the state-as-giver among rural subalterns who expected government development programs to provide for their material needs. Positioning MS as a resource-poor NGO in such situations helped staff members to fend off clients’ demands for concrete entitlements. Moreover, it helped explain the temporariness of the program and justify its phase-out. For example, when program participants in Seelampur block, where formal MS structures were being dismantled, charged Danu Bai, an MS fieldworker, with leaving them in the lurch, she responded that MS was a time-bound NGO project that had to end and not a government program “that [would] go on forever.”

MS functionaries’ shifting representation of the program in different contexts and in front of diverse audiences both catered to and shaped their interlocutors’ ideas about the state and NGOs. People’s imaginations of these entities are based on their social locations, on previous interactions with bureaucracies and NGOs, and on public cultural representations (Gupta 1995). For example, the subaltern actors I met often used the term “mai-baap” (mother-father) to describe the state and its functionaries; for them the “ideal” state, like good parents, was supposed to take care of their survival needs. In practice, however, the local officials they encountered tended to be dishonest and uncaring. For rural subalterns, the predominantly authoritative face of the state-as-taker, which took away information, through census practices, and even fertility, compromised the legitimacy attached to the ideal parental state-as-caretaker. MS representatives had to navigate through such sedimented understandings of the state when pitching the program to differently positioned audiences. They played the apparent breach between the “G” and “NG” parts of the program’s GONGO identity, thereby constructing NGOs as legitimate, time-bound entities with no resources, and the state as an authoritative and perpetual entity flush with resources but with questionable legitimacy. Thus, by mobily positioning the program, MS workers discursively entrenched the boundary between state and nonstate spheres.

Even though they wore different hats in different situations as a programmatic strategy, most MS functionaries allied themselves with the just and legitimate NGO world. For example, Seema Batra, an employee, told me that “[many] people who work for MS do not treat it like government service. . . . The salaries [we] get . . . are not enough for survival. So the people who work in MS do so only because they have a certain ‘devotion’ toward their work. You don’t see that in government departments [where] people come only for the sake of their salaries.” Indian public cultural discourses are ripe with condemnations of the “nine to five” mentality, lack of motivation, and low productivity of government workers, and MS employees’ efforts to dissociate themselves from this negativity partook of the widely prevalent critique of the state. Their careful self-positioning as NGO workers reproduced an image of the state as an entity that fosters sloth and apathy, and employs inefficient people who treat their work merely as a job. They implicitly constructed the NGO world as a distinct haven of creativity, meaningful and hard work, enthusiasm, and innovation.

The self-identification of MS personnel with the NGO sector was materially reflected in their earnings: MS employees did not receive the higher compensation and benefits associated with government jobs (Sharma 2008). Yet, like state employees, they were prohibited from leading or participating in antistate demonstrations. Ironically, most issues that MS clients took up in their quest for empowerment, such as basic needs, police matters, laws, land titles, or access to information, involved dealing with and sometimes agitating against specific state bureaucracies. But women working for MS, positioned by the government in such instances as quasi-state “GONGO” employees, were forbidden from taking part in the antistate protests of poor women they had mobilized. Seema Singh, an MS functionary, described this catch-22:

All the issues that we take up are, in some way, connected to the government. So if we come within the ambit of the government and succumb to governmental pressure, we will not be able to take up any issues. For example, the government issues licenses for thekas [liquor shops]. In our district we took up a big fight on this issue. In one village the police beat up women with wooden sticks as they were trying to bust the local theka. Many women had broken bones, but we did not back off and surrender to the government. A few days later, the theka closed down. . . . If we had caved in to governmental pressure, we would have never been able to take up this fight.

Singh told me that the presence of a government-licensed liquor store in the local market had increased incidents of harassment and domestic violence against women and girls, and her office took up this fight. "We got
a written notice [from the government] that we could not participate in any *aandolan* [protest]," she explained. "[But] we devised ways of participating; we strategized. Can’t participate? Hah! We spearheaded a big anti-alcohol campaign and shouted so many slogans against the government. During the protest, when government officials asked us who we were, we simply pretended to be village women!" Singh’s team members filed properly worded leave applications at the *ms* office, took the day off, and protested as ordinary citizens. They circumvented state discipline and violence, and accomplished their empowerment-focused goals by identifying as local residents and carefully following written bureaucratic procedures.

Sunita Mathur, another *ms* staff person, demonstrated a similar subversive use of statist proceduralism. She helped women belonging to the Kol tribe in Ganna village to obtain a section of the village commons for their survival needs. This piece of land was considered prime property because it bordered a canal and a major road. Upper-caste men in the village, upset over losing this valuable land, retaliated by razing Kol huts. When Sunita Mathur heard about this, she trained the Kol women in formal, official grievance methods. She dictated to them the text of a written complaint detailing the incident. They were to bypass the block-level administration and hand in two copies of the complaint directly to the Sub-District Magistrate (*sdm*), a higher, district-level bureaucrat. They also had to ensure that the *sdm* signed and stamped "received" on both copies, and keep one copy for their records. The Kol women, under Mathur’s guidance, used these standard governmental procedures and managed to retain the disputed land.

Despite its successful application in this instance, *ms* functionaries’ use of bureaucratic proceduralism has contradictory implications for women’s empowerment. On the one hand, it governmentaizes women’s everyday lives and multiplies statist languages throughout society. It privileges a formalized mode of appeal that speaks to the state in its own language and requires special knowledge of bureaucratic methods; it can, therefore, delegitimize other idioms and modalities of protest. The use of such techniques can also instate problematic hierarchies between *ms* functionaries and participants, particularly when the former, who have more formal literacy and are better schooled in the ways of the state, use bureaucratic means to demand compliance from the very women they are meant to empower (as in Leela Vati’s example above). These hierarchies can, in turn, work against the equality-oriented empowerment agenda of the *ms* program. On the other hand, however, encountering officials, gaining information about how bureaucracies work, and learning statist methods can also enable subaltern women to demand accountability and entitlements from state agencies. These methods also benefit the program’s field staff, whose daily empowerment work can be dangerous. Their use of proceduralism, paper pushing, and creative positioning of themselves and the program allow them to navigate repression and violence by state and other powerful actors, as I now illustrate.

In the village of Naudia, Sunita Mathur’s team assisted lower-caste women in fighting upper-caste male control over land. With its help, Naudia’s *ms* clients called a meeting of the entire village to discuss land-related problems. At Mathur’s request, Naudia’s headman logged a meeting announcement in the *panchayat* (village council) register and circulated it among the residents. Upper-caste men were incensed by this notice and threatened to attack *ms* staff members and participants for daring to take them on. They also misinformed the local Senior Superintendent of Police, or *ssp*, that *ms* had mobilized a large group of people who were planning to *gherao* (surround or besiege) the police station in protest. On the appointed day, the forces of five police stations encircled the meeting participants. The *sdm* and *ssp* summoned Sunita Mathur to a spot some distance away from the gathering. She, however, was concerned about her safety and refused to meet the officials alone. So some village women accompanied her to the designated spot, acting as chaperones and witnesses to the exchange that ensued. Here is how Mathur described it:

The Circle Officer [a police officer] asked us a lot of questions—as a harassment tactic. He pointed to the *ms* jeep and asked me whose vehicle that was. I just shrugged my shoulders. "Where did you get this vehicle?" he questioned. The jeep had Government of India written on it. I avoided answering the question directly and simply stated that we got it from whoever gave it to us. . . . He asked me for my name. I said, "You can write it down—my name is Sunita and I work for Mahila Samakhya." "Is this a government program?" he asked. "Well, if the board on the jeep says Government of India, then maybe [it is] a government program. I, however, am not from the government," I answered. Then he told me that he . . . had received information that we were going to surround the local police station. "You have put a Government of India board on your vehicle and you dare to work against the Government of India! You are going against the administration!" he accused. "We are not doing anything against the administration," I re-
plied, “and this meeting has not been called by Ms. Here is the meeting announcement written by the village chief.” I showed him the village council register with the recorded announcement. “The issue . . . was put forward by village women. Ms staff members are not involved in this. Just like you are here to provide security, we . . . are here [as] representatives of a women’s group to support the village women’s cause.”

The Circle Officer flaunted his official status to intimidate Ms women. His performance contributed to the construction of the state as a vertically authoritative and masculinist superstructure that secures the existing social order (Mitchell 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Sharma 2008). Police functionaries and bureaucrats were present in Naudia to protect the interests of landowning upper-caste men, to defend state institutions from being challenged by subaltern women, and to secure their own positions as powerful state representatives. Their visceral display of prestige and authority enacted the prerogative dimension of state power, which rests on the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence (Brown 1993). The officials’ use of the language of “security” to threaten Ms women also reveals how violence underwrites governmental concerns of care and protection of society (Dean 2001; Sunder Rajan 2003), and here it was being deployed to secure the welfare of some members of society over others. Sunita Mathur had to avoid getting implicated for instigating what the local administration and police saw as an antigovernment agitation and endangering the social order. Her vagueness about the Ms program’s nature and affiliation, self-identification as an NGO activist, and use of a meeting announcement written by the village headman were some of the tactics she used to circumvent harassment and imminent harm from state functionaries and powerful landowners. “I felt that if I really had been a government representative, then I would not have been able to accomplish anything [or] . . . do anything against the government,” declared Sunita. “You see, the local mafia is supported by the administration. And we have to fight against the mafia because otherwise the issues of land and violence will never get solved and economic self-reliance will never happen. . . . That is why I have strategically decided not to use the government label.”

Sunita Mathur used the word “mania” to describe the powerful nexus between the landowning elite, local government functionaries, and organized corruption and crime. Upper-caste landowners get village commons titled in their own names with the help of local officials. These men routinely threaten low-caste women who dare to challenge them and hire goons to beat or rape them, or tear down their houses. The police and local administrators, who are in cahoots with the landowners, do not prevent land encroachment and violence; nor do they assist low-caste women in bringing cases against upper-caste men.

The Naudia incident vividly illustrates how deeply enmeshed state administrators are in the issues that concern subaltern women. The struggles that Ms women take up in their empowerment efforts are directed at local structures of authority that include, and exceed, the state. This view from the bottom illustrates the difficulty of drawing a clear line between state and nonstate arenas and actors on the ground. The embeddedness of officials in local power dynamics reveals that the state is sometimes understood not so much as a spatially distinct entity but as a critical node in a network of power relations, through which other social inequalities, like those of class, caste, and gender, are channeled and reproduced. In this view, power and authority are messy and not neatly contained within the conventional boundaries of the state. The struggles of Ms participants are not always directed against a clearly demarcated or abstract state, but against locally entrenched webs of power in which state representatives are key players. This blurring gives officials all the more reason to re-create the local state’s distinctness, verticality, and legitimacy as the defender of law and protector of order, when needed, through exhibitions of power and prestige. Subaltern struggles for justice and entitlements thus shed light on both the evanescent “now here, now gone” nature of the boundary between the state and nonstate realms and the pressing need to draw it as a way to maintain the status quo. These mobilizations may also end up producing images of a spatially separate translocal state writ large—a just state consisting of higher up state- or national-level officials who can be called upon to discipline lower-level functionaries and intervene on behalf of the marginalized.

Mathur’s story underscores the serious dilemmas associated with the Ms program’s linkage with the government as part of its gongo form. To work toward their goal of just social change, field-level functionaries need to tackle local gender-, class-, and caste-based mafias that involve state representatives and also navigate official dictates and violence. This is dangerous work, which often requires them to dissociate themselves from the government label. In Seema Singh’s words, “the police belong to the government, the courts belong to the government. . . . When we take up a fight, we have to fight at all these levels. If we start believing that we are
working for a government project and that we are government workers, then how will we fight . . . [other] government people?"

Mathur’s and Singh’s decision to avoid using the state label should not be read as disengagement with state structures; rather, it is an innovative strategy used by MS field employees to confront official agencies and challenge hierarchies without endangering their or their clients’ safety. By consciously distancing themselves from the government, mobilely positioning the program, and using bureaucratic procedures, MS employees are sometimes able to steer clear of state violence and facilitate empowering struggles.

How successful they are at negotiating governmental repression, however, is not a straightforward matter. If anything, the incidents narrated above exemplify the gendered, classist, caste-ist nature of state power described to me by Kaveri Mani and Nina Singh. They show how disciplinary and repressive forms of power work in tandem and how “the state” can operate as a “vehicle of massive domination” (Brown 1995, 174) even in the absence of any singular intention to that effect. They also unravel the illiberal underside of neoliberal governmentality (Dean 2001; Hindess 2004) that helps to reinforce the state’s hypermasculinity (Sharma 2008). The state’s prerogative power is used to uphold social hierarchies, to protect the institution of private property and the interests of property-tied classes, to enact violence upon subaltern women and deny them justice, and, finally, to entrench the superiority and authority of state actors and institutions. MS workers encounter this patriarchal illiberality in their empowerment work with their clients, and this is where the program’s GONGO nature both poses obstacles and also allows maneuverability.

Conclusion

In this essay I used ethnographic vignettes drawn from the Mahila Samakhyta program to analyze how neoliberalism is altering governance and women’s political struggles in India today. The MS program’s organization as a state-NGO partnership, empowerment goal, and paradoxical effects provide a critical peek into the transformations that are underway. My aim was not to position MS as a neoliberal initiative but to examine how it gets entangled in the wider neoliberal project of privatizing the state and governmentalizing society through empowerment, despite its commitment to radical pedagogy and feminist goals.11

My analysis raises the thorny issue of how to think about feminist activism vis-à-vis the state in postliberalization India. If the state, as Mary John (1999, 108) has argued, is the “most constitutive site of contestation” for Indian feminists, how does one make sense of novel forms of collaboration, however uncomfortable, between feminists and state agents at this particular moment? My point in raising this question is neither to unequivocally dismiss these partnerships as bad nor to unreflectively advocate for feminist avoidance of state structures. Indeed, the evidence I have presented illustrates how deeply state projects and actors touch subaltern women’s lives and how these women’s struggles are anything but disentangled with the state. The poverty-inducing and disempowering gendered consequences of liberalization programs in India and elsewhere also caution against a simplistic feminist dismissal of the state (Agnihotri and Mazumdar 1995; Menon-Sen 2001; Nagar and Raji 2003; Sparr 1994). Subaltern women, “caught in the travails of a rapidly changing society,” suggests Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003, 91), “are desperately in need of the services . . . that only the state can provide in the [quantity] and at the cost that can answer to such a massive and as yet unrecognized and unmet demand.” The important concern, then, is not whether feminists should engage the state, but how. In other words, how do Indian feminists sustain their critical engagement with the postcolonial state, honed over many years of activist work, while partnering with it? Indeed, it is with deep skepticism and self-reflexivity that some women’s movements activists choose to participate in the MS program, as I have detailed above. What motivates their work is the desire to explore the possibility of whether, as Meera Srinivasan put it, “a [women’s empowerment] program sponsored by the state [can] sow the seeds of some change . . .” And this requires us to delve into the effects of feminist-state collaborations in alternative projects of social change in the neoliberal age.

My work on the MS program illustrates the paradoxical and dangerous consequences, at once risky and enabling, of innovative partnerships in the field of women’s empowerment. MS faces the threat of a bureaucratic straitjacketing and governmentalization of grassroots empowerment. In addition to its meanings as an alternative tactic for consciousness-raising, a spontaneous mobilization strategy, or a loosely defined blueprint for radical action against oppression, empowerment now exemplifies neoliberal ideals of personal capacity building and self-governance (Sharma 2008). Currently, empowerment is a mainstream, transnational development strategy widely used by NGOs and states alike. This translates into a problematic bureaucratization, hierarchization, and professionalization of empowerment as an expert intervention, which can work against the
very spirit of equality and justice that empowerment is supposed to 
conote.12

The MS program’s institutional structure and practices show how it be-
comes implicated in the spread of bureaucratic power throughout society. 
Even though its carefully worked out GONO structure was an attempt, 
on the part of its designers, to forestall a governmental takeover of MS 
and of a feminist empowerment agenda, in practice, statist procedural-
ism has become a part of the program’s fabric. Staffers use bureaucratic 
techniques as a subversive tactic to circumvent official repression and 
also train program clients in these methods. They occasionally use these 
techniques to discipline program participants as well, thus illustrating the 
dangerous slippage between tactics of resistance and strategies of domina-
tion. Governmental methods are mired in the logic of disciplinary power 
(Brown 1995; Foucault 1995); their proliferation through the program can 
institute hierarchies that might be counterproductive to its goal of em-
powerment.

The mainstreaming of empowerment as a category of governance also 
carries the risk of an official subversion of its radical possibilities. As Anil 
Bordia, the senior civil servant credited with getting MS under way, re-
marked, “the state, by definition, can only be . . . status-quoist. [In] every 
program [like MS], there are seeds of destruction—because the people 
who control the resources, who have all the say, would not . . . easily allow 
these things to happen . . . The problem is [that these programs] are work-
ing in a very simmering or overt manner against a system that is rallied 
totally against [them].” In addition to the hurdles posed by people who 
monopolize state resources and who may not look kindly upon forms of 
empowerment that threaten their own positions of power, the bureaucra-
tization and governmentalization of women’s empowerment also imposes 
limits on its definition and use as an anti-oppression tactic. Quoting Anil 
Bordia again:

By and large it will be true to say that empowered women would almost 
always take up causes which are humane, which are in conformity with 
law, and which are forward-looking. I would not say the same for all 
sections of society because the CPI-ML people and the People’s War 
Group [radical leftist organizations] are also empowered in a sense, 
but they do not always take a stand which is within the framework of 
law. But in the case of women, I . . . know of no case where empowered 
women have . . . taken the law in their own hands or have acted con-
trary to . . . government policy; in fact, that is a good test of what policy 
should be.

Bordia’s distinction between the implicitly illegitimate and violent em-
powerment struggles undertaken by radical leftist groups and the desir-
able activism of subaltern women reveals how state-sponsored empower-
ment initiatives can potentially serve as vehicles for turning women into 
law-abiding, disciplined, and responsibilized citizen-subjects (Cruikshank 
1999) who use available civil-society mechanisms to fight for their rights. 
Marginalized women operate in the relatively unregulated, negotiational 
domain of subaltern political society, which, as Partha Chatterjee (2004) 
suggests, is not constrained by the legal norms of elite civil society. Their 
tutelage under state-initiated empowerment programs can be seen, per-
haps cynically, as an aspect of the state’s modernizing, pedagogic project 
that aims to turn subaltern women into proper denizens of civil society. 
Might this signal a formalization of political society dynamics and a de-
radicalization of its methods and goals? Some scholars have indeed used 
these potentially disempowering effects of governmentalization to argue 
against state participation in grassroots empowerment (Moser 1993) and 
for a careful feminist distancing from state programs (Brown 1995).12 I 
offer a different reading.

My illustration of the blurring of the boundary between state and non-
state spheres under neoliberalism renders problematic easy conclusions 
about whether states should get involved in empowerment and whether 
activists should collaborate with state institutions. The governmentaliza-
tion of empowerment is not simply a reflection of direct state involvement 
but is also an instance of the suffusion of society at large with neoliberal 
practices of self-government. If we are to rethink the state conceptually 
so that we see state and nonstate entities as part of a complex apparatus 
of governance, then we need to examine the workings and effects of em-
powerment programs undertaken by all kinds of institutions, including 
GONGOS and NGOs. NGO-initiated empowerment programs, after all, do 
not operate in a hermetically sealed context that is unaffected by bureau-
cratic practices, state representatives, or international funding-agency 
agendas. Using the lens of governmentality also complicates the feminist 
debate on disentanglement with state structures. Sealing oneself off from 
governmental processes that permeate the entire social field may not be 
possible; rather, it may be more useful for activists to assume tactical posi-
tions within regimes of government.
Another way to approach these issues is to ask what kinds of subjects are being produced by the governmentalization of empowerment. Do women’s “expanding relationships [to state institutions and processes] produce only active political subjects, or do they also produce regulated, subordinated, and disciplined state subjects?” asks Wendy Brown (1995, 173). My analysis of the MS program substantiates Partha Chatterjee’s claim that governmental programs do not just produce bureaucratized and passive state subjects (2004). In postcolonial contexts these programs are generative in that they fashion active, sometimes dissident, political actors and provide the ground for political society mobilizations where marginalized subjects make claims on the state, tussle over entitlements, and contest social and state hierarchies through the very governmental, regulative categories made available to them. Governmentalization does not depoliticize so much as it spawns openings for subaltern political struggles that take novel or dangerous forms and that cannot be subsumed within the rubric of the new form of politics promoted by international development agencies, which centers on enabling civil society actors to make the state function efficiently and transparently.

My ethnography of the MS program demonstrates the interplay between depoliticization and repoliticization under neoliberalism; it points to the surprising forms of empowerment that end up happening despite constraints. MS staff and clients develop a critical awareness of structural inequalities that both implicate and exceed state bodies; they take on local mafias and connect them with gender, class, and caste hierarchies; and they learn statist languages and practices and use them to demand accountability from powerful institutions and people. These processes can be seen as empowering in that they help women formulate tactics for challenging local relations of domination in which state actors are embedded. These tactics allow women to negotiate a broader, if contingent, notion of empowerment that is not so much about changing women’s individual gendered situations, narrowly construed, but about understanding and confronting multiple and overlapping structural inequalities, which shape individual and collective realities. Empowerment here is about taking up fights for issues that extend well beyond the scope of “women’s” rights insofar as they focus on mechanical ideas of equality. Despite the fact that certain officials and local elites may not endorse this kind of women’s empowerment, such processes, once initiated, may not be easily reined in.

Empowerment, thus, is a moving target whose meaning is constantly re-defined through women’s struggles. It has an ambiguous and open-ended quality that manifests itself in multiple and conflicted ways in women’s lives. A governmentalization of empowerment, therefore, may not only imply a potential formalization of subaltern political society. It might also open the door for a fundamental rethinking of civil society and state institutions and norms, and allow for the emergence of new kinds of dissenting citizens. When poor, low-caste, rural women struggle against violence or upper-caste control over land, or when they demand basic needs as entitlements, they try to make the state do what it is supposed to do—that is, guarantee their rights and survival. Subaltern women’s struggles delineate the difference between the corrupted state “as is” and the ideal state “as it ought to be.” The issues that women take up in their fights for justice and survival and how they implicate state officials in these issues should, as Anil Bordia hinted, serve as markers for how official policies, practices, and institutions must be altered if the promises of grassroots empowerment, substantive democracy, and justice are to be realized. How women construct the state, criticize officials and hold them accountable, and demand entitlements-as-rights point to alternative visions of state institutions and responsibilities, and of citizenship (Sharma 2008). Governmental programs, perhaps unintentionally, make it possible for women to recognize that justice-based transformation requires not only challenging social inequalities, but also reimagining the state and their relationship to it.

Empowerment, as a quasi-state-implemented project of governance, when examined through the lens of neoliberal governmentality, is a double-edged sword that is both promising and precarious. Feminist collaborations with state institutions on women’s empowerment programs are clearly opening interesting vistas for challenge and change. But the dangerous underside of such projects, which MS women confront every day, means that one cannot be complacent about their liberatory potential. The context of neoliberalism in which projects like MS operate taints the language of empowerment with risks. Empowerment has layered histories and multiple avatars: a radical strategy for political conscientization, a leftist tactic for class-based politics, a feminist strategy for awareness raising and gender equality, and now a governmental strategy for development. Critical analyses of how these contentious meanings converge and clash in different contexts and how they are entangled with the dominant neoliberal ideology are crucial for scholars and activists alike.
The outcomes of these intersections are neither given nor unproblematic, and they point to the need for exerting constant vigilance when engaging the politics of empowerment.

Notes
1. A block is a subdivision of a district consisting of approximately a hundred villages. It is administered by a Block Development Officer (BDO), head of the local Block Office.
2. I follow local name conventions, omitting last names where none were used. I have changed the names of all my informants except Anil Bordia.
3. Field staff include block- and district-level MS functionaries.
4. Foucault (1991) used the concept of governmentality to explain a shift in the aim and modes of governance to a form of biopower that is centrally concerned with the welfare, care, and security of the population living in a particular territory. He drew attention to the entire ensemble of practices and institutions, including but not limited to state agencies, by which the conduct of a population is directed toward particular ends (Dean 1999). Building on Foucault, the scholarship on neoliberal governmentality examines the practices and institutions of governance under neoliberalism. For example, see Barry, Osborne, and Rose (1996), Burchell 1996, Rose 1996b, Cruikshank 1999, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Hindess 2004, and Sharma 2008.
5. MS operates in nine Indian states.
7. In the original, longer version of this essay, I argued that these discussions about the program's GONGO structure discursively define and engender the state (Sharma 2006). Extending anthropological and feminist analyses of the state, I show how everyday development planning, in conversation with neoliberal ideas, construct the state as a distinct, vertically encompassing, and ambiguously gendered entity. Anthropological analyses of the state include Das and Poole (1994), Gupta (1995), Hansen and Stepputat (2001), Scott (1998), Sharma and Gupta (2006), and Steinmetz (1999); feminist critiques of the state include Alexander (1997), Brown (1995, 166–196), Fraser (1989, 144–60), MacKinnon (1989), Mathur (1999), Menon (1995c), R. Menon and Bhasin (1993), Sharma (2008), and Sunder Rajan (2003).
8. Many local officials I encountered were either unaware of the program's existence or considered it insignificant. My informants explained that this was because MS had a small budget and did not distribute resources to its clients, unlike other large-scale development programs. The relative lack of significance given to a resource-poor, nonredistributive program that targets and employs women speaks to the gendered ideologies that shape state practices.
9. The image of the state-as-giver is the historical result of postindependence popul-