

This bold experiment in feminist praxis has produced a unique document—a once earthy poignant, and biting—about the oppression of caste, gender, and class in women's lives in India.

—*Lila Abu-Lughod, Columbia University*

Seven voices contribute to this rare glimpse of the work being done on the front lines of the fight for social change in India. *Playing with Fire* is written in the collective voice of women employed by a large NGO as activists in their communities and is based on diaries, interviews, and conversations among them. Together, their personal stories reveal a startling picture of how NGOs both nourish and stifle local struggles for solidarity.

The third edition of this book, *Sangtin Yatra*, published in 2004, created controversy that resulted in backlash against the authors by their employer. The publication also drew support for the women and instigated a public dialogue about the issues exposed in the book. Here, Richa Nagar addresses the dispute in the context of the politics of NGOs and feminist theory, articulating how development ideology employed by aid organizations serves to reinforce the domination of those it claims to help.

The Sangtin Writers, Anupamkita, Kamshheela, Reehma Ansari, Richa Singh, Shashibala, Shaadi Yarsi, Supriya, and Vibha Bajpayee, are grassroots activists and members of a south organization called Sangtin in Uttar Pradesh, India. Richa Nagar teaches women's studies at the University of Minnesota.

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

ISBN 0-8166-4770-4



SANGTIN WRITERS / NAGAR
Playing with fire

playing with fire

Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in I

CHAPTER 6

Challenges of NGOization and Dreams of Sangtin

After getting involved with this work, I have opened every tiny box tucked away in my chest. All that I was never able to say before my mother, I have said before this group. Now, my prayer to God is simply this:

O God, just do me this little favor: Make this work bigger than my faith. (from Chaandni's diary)

In the early days of starting work, I noticed that Didi also sat with us on the *dari*. I wondered, "What kind of an officer is she? In every other organization, there is always a separate seat for the officer, but there is no such thing here. In this program, every worker receives equal respect irrespective of the position she holds." . . . But one day, I was forced to think differently. I happened to sit in Didi's seat while writing some notes, and someone immediately asked me to get up. I was worried, "What will happen now? Will Didi scold me?" No such thing happened. But it became clear to me that day that Didi has a special place that workers like myself can never acquire in this structure. . . . In this program, everyone from the top to the bottom has a different position in the hierarchy. Even when we sit among women in the villages [supposedly as equals], we begin to look and act according to our positions. (from Radha's diary)

Hasn't it been only six years since we first learned to ride our bikes and stormed the neighborhoods, streets, and villages of Sitapur? Who among

us had imagined that we would so confidently rebel and march out of the same households that caged us, where our work had met with so much disrespect and disgust?

When we prepared to write this book, we again felt a sense of adventure creeping into our bones. Would this world be able to see us formerly uneducated women as writers? Would it give us the same respect and wisdom that it accords to all its upper-caste and elite scholars and thinkers? Would our readers be able to value the courage and trust with which we have poured out our most cherished and intimate moments, our deepest sorrows and wounds of humiliation, and everything sweet and bitter that we have encountered in our lives?

Another issue that concerned us throughout this period of writing has to do with honesty and confidentiality—the same issue with which we grappled before embarking on our journal writing and decided that we would not hide anything from one another about our personal lives. We knew all too well from working in a women's organization that it is much easier to interrogate the definitions of honor, morality, and justice by giving instances from the lives of others than by applying those critiques to our own clans and families. Even so, we unveiled details about our lives in our diaries and discussions because we believed that we would not be able to advance this struggle if we were to hide things. We suspect that our readers will read with pleasure, and perhaps respect, the details we furnish here about our intimate lives and relationships, our sexuality, our poverty, and the putrid swamps of casteism and communalism that we live in. We wonder, however, whether they will be able to read with equal pleasure or respect our analyses and critiques of women's and development NGOs. But on this issue, too, we were inspired by the belief that if we couldn't muster the courage to say everything even after arriving at this juncture in our journey, then it would be difficult to fight the battles to come.

When we started this work, we had one desire: to find a job and stand on our own feet. After a short time we saw that this job was not just a source of income; it became our integrity, our life's pulse. As we became familiar with women's issues and struggles in our fields and as we deeply connected with them, our vision and horizons continued to expand.

There was a time when our whole lives were imprisoned in our own homes. But our new vision altered our world. As we stepped outside our homes, we started speaking with confidence. We encouraged the women with whom we worked to find the same strength and force inside themselves. But the shocks came when we began to recognize from up close the inequalities of rank and class that were embedded in our organizational structures; sometimes these inequalities were related to us, sometimes to the ordinary village women, and sometimes to the big and small organizations trapped in the complex web of NGOs. At times, these inequalities make us so confused and bitter that we lose the confidence to tread our future paths independently and on our own terms and conditions. Through Sangtin Yatra, we have made a first attempt to systematically analyze the dilemmas and complexities of hierarchization and NGOization, so that this process can guide our vision and thought for the next phase of our journey. In this chapter, we share some fragments of the battles we have had with these difficult questions in our journey thus far.

Mazes of Rank, Hierarchy, and Classism

An educated city woman who teaches in my literacy center knocked on my door this morning. She was surprised to see me looking like an ordinary village woman: “Look at you! Who will say that you are an NGO worker? Why don’t you maintain the same appearance here that you do at work?” I replied, “How can I forget the immediate realities of my home and surroundings?” (from Radha’s diary)

When I first arrived in one of the villages of my field, I met Sunanda. She said: “Come, I will take you to Ishwarlalji’s house. All important people who come to the village visit him first. . . . He is wealthy. He has a government job—that’s why!” (from Sandhya’s diary)

A big campaign against violence toward women was to be inaugurated [in the city]. I was in an inside room when everyone piled into a car and left for the event. Suddenly, someone realized that I was missing and returned to get me. . . . As we sat in an auto-rickshaw to leave, one of the two young

social workers, exclaimed, “Oh, I left my lipstick in the office. How will I appear before everyone now!” Luckily, the other one found a lipstick and the problem was solved. . . . I asked myself: “Are these women really going there to talk about Dalit oppression?” . . . I don’t mind self-decoration, but can such women truly immerse themselves in work on the ground? No doubt, they will continue to impress the media. . . . Can village women like us ever look smart like them? Why would the media ever pay attention to us? (from Pallavi’s diary)

The world of NGOs is becoming a confusing vicious circle for organizational workers like us. On one hand, we find ourselves ever more articulate and refined while participating in discussions about equity and equality. On the other hand, we cannot turn away from the reality that we, and other NGO workers like us, are becoming more and more distant from our rural worlds with respect to our lifestyles and aspirations as we try to become more impressive in the NGO society. We find it easy to say to the village women that we are ordinary women like themselves. But the truth is that a huge gulf has come to separate us from them. Organizational processes and styles force us to emerge among village women in a special way, which causes people in the villages to make several right and wrong assumptions about us and about our associations with government or voluntary structures. If we insist on erasing this distance and remaining rooted in our ground, the affectionate advice we receive from our well-wishers in the NGO sector is: If in today’s world, an organization such as Sangtin wishes to acquire adequate resources to thrive, it is not as necessary for us to worry about how much force there is in our work as it is to think about the amount of clout we carry with the big names in the regional and national NGO networks.

Our initial introduction to this deep contradiction and double standard existing in the foundation of NGO structures was sobering. In the beginning, we could not fathom how our organization gave us so much space and so many resources to talk boldly about equity and equality before rural women and in the village society. But in the very same organizational spaces where our efforts were praised endlessly, our voices were

muffled in the presence of higher officials, and all the slogans and talk of equity and equality were pushed aside. When we deliberately tried to open our mouths in opposition to this, we were informed that the issues we wanted to raise were not meant to be discussed before the officers, even though in the villages, we had always learned to state our opinions openly and impartially and had taught others to do so. We are not claiming that whatever we tried to say in our organizational spaces was always correct. We are pointing out our disappointment at being discouraged from articulating our opinions about class differences in an environment where there was constant talk about equity and equality.

For example, inequalities associated with salaries and food and travel allowances have been a subject of much debate among us. In theory, the NGO worker at the field level is deemed very important, yet an office worker at the lowest rank in the organization often draws a bigger salary than the fieldworker. Some women's organizations refuse to collapse education with formal literacy from the outset and consider ground experience on a par with formal education. But this policy has proved hard to implement when it comes to determining monthly salaries and honoraria in NSY. For example, the teachers who teach adolescent girls and women in the literacy centers receive increments in their honoraria on the basis of formal educational qualifications; that is, a teacher who has completed eighth grade receives less money than the one who has passed Intermediate, even if the one with the eighth grade qualification has to work much harder and longer than the one with the higher educational status. It is easier for workers to express their pride in words, "We are not educated; we are made." But in practice, where is the equal status for the less educated ones? There are many other examples of this kind.

For instance, Sandhya writes: "We raised a small issue that the big officer goes in the air-conditioned train compartment and the small one in the second-class sleeper. All we had to do is utter these words, and the officers started feeling very offended. [Seeing this,] a village woman sitting next to me grabbed my hand and said, 'Don't talk like this. . . .' I thought to myself that raising something as small as this upsets these top officials so much! So when we question patriarchy and men's power in

the villages of our fields, and those men scream back at us that their women are getting out of control, why do we get upset with them?"

The basic issue here is that when, as workers who play the most critical role of giving strength to village women, we mustered the courage to articulate our concerns to our bosses, they did not wish to listen. Perhaps this was because we are field-level workers and receive some monetary compensation that allows our families to survive. But it is not simply those who sit above us who are at fault. We ourselves frequently checked our tongues so that our livelihoods were not placed in jeopardy.

If we look carefully, we find a common scenario. When an organization holds a meeting or event on the public platform, people of all ranks sit with ordinary workers and rural people. But inside the rooms of the offices and buildings, special seats are reserved for all the higher officials. These are the seats that people of lower ranks either hesitate to occupy or never occupy. These reserved seats are symbolic of a structure in which everyone—from the director, the accountant, and the messenger to the women from the remotest villages—has a predetermined place. We believe that those who have created these structures have often allocated these places in the absence of and without any consultation with the rural communities. Thus, a lot of energy was devoted to questions such as, What kind of work should be done in the villages, and what work will be allocated to whom? However, there was no systematic evaluation of the labor of those who were asked to work directly in the villages. Nor were the perceptions of those people for whom we were claiming to work considered critical. As a result, the decision makers who evaluated and measured our work always remained more important than the people with whom we were directly working to bring about social change—literally, the people who were making this work happen. In other words, NGOs enter our rural communities and talk about the equalities among men, women, and other social groups, and they also plan and organize countless trainings and workshops for these communities. However, the very people who excitedly talk about fairness and equality fail to bring themselves to the level of ordinary rural workers and the people who do the work of turning the goals of these organizations into reality.

In an atmosphere where inequalities of class are spread like nets of thorns in every corner and over every doorstep, how possible or appropriate is it for us to wage a war by centering it solely on the men in our homes and villages? For instance, Garima notes in her diary: “Women’s organizations often take rural women on various trips and outings. They believe that these women have not stepped out much; getting out will allow them to see the world, to become wiser and more confident. But is it not important for the poorest men in our villages to gain similar confidence and wisdom?”

In other words, can real equality be achieved in our society if we isolate gender difference from all other differences and base all our strategies and conversations on the gaps between women and men? When we know that the nature and form of gender differences cannot be comprehended in any context without connecting them with caste and class differences, then the inability to raise questions about classism in our own organizations gives our work the shape of an animal who uses one set of teeth to show and another one to chew!

It is also noteworthy that sometimes in the NGO world huge numbers of women join hands on the question of gender, and big groups emerge to address caste politics, but as soon as the question of class arises, the aristocrats of the NGO world dominate in such a way that many things get stuck in our throats before they acquire the status of “issues.”

By classism, we do not simply mean to imply the inequalities of salaries and ranks. Class politics are intimately connected with how much respect and space we receive for our work and backgrounds, when and by whom—and when that respect and those spaces are taken away from us. To give an example, we recall an incident that happened soon after the massacre in Gujarat. A well-known organization invited Pallavi and Sandhya as members of Sangtin to evaluate the work being done by some of its village-level groups. When these two reached the office of that organization, the officials who had invited them were discussing communalism with visitors from Ahmedabad. Pallavi and Sandhya were stopped and asked to wait outside because an important conversation was happening inside. How ironic it was that not only were they prohibited from engaging

in a critical discussion about communal riots, but Pallavi and Sandhya were not even introduced to the activists from Ahmedabad.

This was an example of a nonlocal organization. Sandhya recalls an incident that occurred in our own Mishrikh Block. Pallavi had to participate in a foundational training of women that was taking place in the village of Mohsinpur, but her village was far from the main road, and heavy monsoon downpours prevented her from getting there that day. The punishment for this absence had to be borne by Sandhya. Sandhya writes in her diary: “When the trainer did not see Pallavi, she was furious. She exploded at me and accused me of everything she could think of. The only thing she did not do was call names and hit in the style of our local police officers. I stood like a criminal in front of everyone. Couldn’t the village women around me ask her to stop screaming? But no one said anything. They must have thought: ‘Why mess with her? What if she loses her temper with us too!’”

Recalling a similar incident, Garima writes: “After working for a while in the office, I had learned a few computer skills. One day, a computer file suddenly disappeared. Everyone in the office started saying, ‘Garima must have done it.’ . . . I explained a thousand times that I hadn’t done it, yet they continued to accuse me. Perhaps this is how the powerful bully those who are weaker. No matter how much Didi talks about equality, when the whole structure is created in the form of a ladder, someone has to be higher than someone else. How can there be equality then?”

Sandhya was yelled at for Pallavi’s absence, and Garima was accused of deleting the file because both of them were village-level workers. If a top officer or trainer had failed to reach Mohsinpur that day, or if Sandhya and Garima had themselves occupied higher ranks, would they have been treated this way?

Sometimes all the talk of equality sounds like the hollow beating of distant drums. From up close, one can see that the relationship between a higher official and a field-level worker is the same hierarchical one that exists between an employer and her servant. As the pressures from the funders have increased, so have the threats from our bosses and trainers. Over and over again, we are told that if we cannot show the results that

our funders want, our officers will be forced to use a stick to make us work. Many wealthy members of our society make their domestic servants work by the force of the stick and insist on reminding them of their “right” place. In the same way, there has been quite a trend lately to remind us of our right place. These experiences of class-based discrimination often remind us of the famous lines written by Padhees, a famous Awadhi poet from Sitapur:

Uyi aur aanyi, hum aur aan!

(They are someone else, and we are someone else!)

From the viewpoint of the poorest rural women, the ladderlike structures of our organizations can be seen with even greater clarity. Although the slogan “equal needs of everyone; equal opportunities for everyone” is frequently used, the reality is quite different.

Often, women’s organizations send tours of NGO workers from one state of the country to another so that an exchange of experiences among these women can lead to better work. In these contexts, as we have seen, the higher officials of established women’s organizations generally travel in air-conditioned compartments, while the village-level fieldworkers or ordinary rural women travel second-class. Officers worry that traveling in air-conditioned compartments might spoil the habit of rural women. One might ask: Aren’t all of our habits affected by lifestyles of luxury and material consumption? The biggest irony is that while the national and international treasuries write checks in the names of poor rural women, the bulk of that money does not come close to them or the workers who work with them. Nor is there sufficient transparency in the structures of these organizations for rural women and workers to know how much money arrives in their names in their own organizations and how and on whom it is spent.

We try to get rural women fired up about how it is their right to obtain every piece of information from the government about its development programs, how rights to information are important rights for which they must learn to fight. If we are allowed to preach at them for hours

about people’s right to information and transparency, why do we not have the power to seek and share information in our own organizations about facts such as how much money is coming in and for whom? Unfortunately, the bitter reality is that village-level workers receive very little information about money. However, our least-paid and marginalized status hardly prevents the organizations from expecting us to furnish all those services that degree-holding NGO staff from the cities is never expected to provide.

Garima writes: “Once there was a formal request that the field-level workers be given mopeds to travel to remote villages everyday. The response from the top officer was, ‘If it takes a long time for workers to get to the villages, why don’t they stay overnight in one village, travel next day from there to another village, and then return home?’ I was infuriated, but who could argue? Had she ever stayed away from her home in her own city? Weren’t our children the same as hers? First, we are expected to do trainings and meetings all day and then we are asked to spend the remaining half-nights in other villages!” The issue here is not why it is critical to stay in the villages but that the expectation that they do so often exists for field- and district-level workers without regard to their need and their right to spend time with their families.

The food allowance for the participants in programs at the village level is also significantly lower than the allowance provided at the district and state levels. Garima writes in her diary: “The thinking behind allocating such a small meal budget to the villages must have been simply this: ‘What does the monkey know about the taste of the ginger? Just boiled lentils are sufficient for these poor people.’” We can claim to be honest with our work only when we can have conversations among ourselves about the extent to which our own economic and personal interests are served by these inequalities.

These days, many organizations do work that produces instantly visible results—for example, the work of vaccinating or holding public programs on HIV and AIDS. In organizations that do such work, women are often given a few rupees to participate in the programs. But monetary payment immediately raises a host of questions about how this money

might affect the mentalities of rural women, their attitudes toward grass-roots work, and so on.

In contrast to the work of such organizations, our activist work has focused on mobilizing and changing the thinking of women who have been pushed to the margins of our society. This kind of work often remains invisible for a long time, and its results often appear in qualitative forms that cannot be easily measured or compared. We do not pay anything to the rural women for the hard labor they put into this work; they are content simply with the respect they receive from us. The issue that begs consideration, however, is this: In situations in which a small portion of the grants that come for the empowerment of these women is shared with them, why do organizational officials have the attitude that “if we tempt the villagers with fifty rupees, they will definitely come”? The money, then, is often handed to the women as if the NGOs were doing them a huge favor, even though these women lose wages and labor time on their own farms by participating in our programs. Before the village women receive any symbolic monetary amount for their participation, it is critical for them to see that the money is not given as a favor or a payment for their priceless work; it is a small and symbolic honorarium that ought to be given to them with respect.

The Dreams of Sangtin and Steps Marching Ahead

In the last pages of this book, sewed and woven during the first pause in a long collective journey, we want to give words and voice to dreams that started taking a concrete form for the first time in our conversations. For this, it is necessary for us to return momentarily to some of the same aspects of the politics of name, labor, and knowledge production that we began to raise at the outset of this book. We want to begin our discussion with three incidents that had a profound influence in shaping our group’s thinking on this matter.

About two years ago, a big NGO network organized an event (Jan Sunvaai) in which many women from marginalized backgrounds were invited to present public testimonials about violence against themselves. There was a lot of big talk by the organizers. Many Dalit and tortured

women from the villages were brought before a crowd of two thousand people to narrate, in their own voices, the stories of the rapes, tortures, and abuses they had experienced. We were impressed. We thought: “These organizers are people with great influence, clout, and resources; they will definitely do something concrete and meaningful about the issues that these women are raising. If we narrate our own problems here, maybe our issues will also make it all the way to the hallways of power.” We also decided that after these women’s issues were sorted out, we would similarly share our views and experiences in public. After about a year, we ran into three women who had participated in the public hearing. Their faces reflected a deep disappointment. They were still waiting in the hope that they would soon hear of a just sentence in their own cases. There is no doubt that the event of the public hearing was a smashing success, but the women, who were exhibited in that show as “cases” of victimization and in whose name so many resources and media people were assembled, merely became tools to publicize and popularize the organizers and their establishment.

We had a similar experience recently in our own district of Sitapur. Some young teachers working in a women’s organization were turning the pages of a freshly published magazine. They were horrified when they stumbled on their own names in an article. On reading the article, they discovered that various instances of sexual abuse and harassment that they shared in confidence with the trainer in a workshop for adolescent girls five years ago were documented in the article along with their real names. Not only had the authors failed to seek permission to use their names; they did not even tell these young women that their private stories were about to become material for publication. Today, these women range from eighteen to twenty-two years of age. If their family members encounter the published material, the consequences can harm not only the women’s personal lives but also the organization, which may have to lose these workers forever. The authors and publisher might dismiss the women’s anger by saying that they and their families are not in a position to appreciate the significance of such writing. But the authors and publisher should be disabused of this simplistic thinking and asked whether they would have

written so vividly about their own daughters if they had shared such experiences in confidence. Would they have adopted the same approach then?

We are not saying that issues of sexual abuse should not be raised in writing and made a topic of public discussion. Rather, we ask: If we fail to accord full respect and to maintain our ethical responsibility and accountability to those very people whose lives we worry about and whom we claim to work for, will our work have any real force?

The third incident is directly related to us. A comparative study on education funded by the World Bank involved gathering data from three states of the country. The intellectuals who led this study are well known at the national level in the NGO world. Sitapur District was selected as the representative case study for Uttar Pradesh. Four women from our writers' collective became members of the research team for this study. As a part of this, we carried out numerous surveys and interviews in our district and shared our field experiences and insights in great detail with the researchers. We also were given transport in an airplane and received a monetary compensation several times higher than our monthly salaries. We are not in a position to assess whether we were exploited economically in this process, but without question, in this whole project we were the source of raw materials at the intellectual level. We did not have the opportunity to know or evaluate the facts related to our district in comparison to other places; we received no credit for our thoughts and insights; and after the completion of the project, we were not informed about anything that was written or published on the basis of our work. Months later, we spotted an article about this project in an English-language newspaper and saw that the contribution we had made to this work was not mentioned.

If the story had ended here, it might not have been so necessary to make this commentary. But it didn't. A few months after the newspaper article was published, we were shocked again: The same researchers were invited to present their research in a special meeting at the state level, so that district- and village-level workers, like ourselves, could learn something from their comparative methodology. Thankfully, the organizers and presenters communicated the key points of the presentation to us in ordinary people's language, but we could not understand much about the

claims that were made in English in that long lecture. We were even more surprised when our work on the ground was labeled as inferior and immature in comparison to the work done in other states; this assessment was made on the grounds that kids in the villages we surveyed were dirty or did not go to school. We were asked to recognize how ashamed our foreign funders would be of our work. We could not believe our ears. Not only did it hurt us to hear our work and integrity disgraced like this; it also raised a deeply disturbing question for us: Do these "experts"—who occasionally use terms like *fools* and *idiots* to refer to the people in our villages—really love those villagers' "dirty" kids who do not make it to school? If they do, perhaps they might examine more carefully the social and economic processes that prevent these children from going to school before labeling our work as inferior. And they could have at least informed us, before humiliating us publicly, that the work we were asked to do as research assistants would one day become the basis for measuring and mocking our activist work on a bigger platform. Is it too much to ask that they engage us about the work in a true give and take?

Although different sets of people and organizations are involved in each of the three incidents described above, for us, they form different strands of the same thread. We realize acutely that in today's aggressive world, where everyone is competing to produce ideas and knowledge, it is not just our work, insights, and labor but also our private griefs and sorrows that become tools or toys in the hands of the more prosperous, educated, and established people to advance their own names and reputations. The organizers of the public hearing and the writers and editors who published the article on sexual abuse might convince themselves that listening to the stories of these women and adolescent girls has made their audiences and readers better informed. But the truth is that these women were reduced to objects for exhibition and entertainment. The organizations and people who received credit by using the private stories of these women benefited from this publicity and visibility. But what of the expectations and trust that led those women to expose the most intimate wounds inflicted on their bodies and souls? Didn't the acts of the organizers, writers, and editor mock that trust?

How can we begin to appropriately describe such callous disrespect of ordinary people? On the one hand, as village-level workers we feel that we unknowingly become the medium for these women's exploitation. On the other hand, we also feel exploited ourselves when we see how people above us benefit from our insights, understanding, and work without giving us any credit. There is a saying in Awadhi that captures this phenomenon:

Aan ke dhan pe Lachhmi Narayan

(To be called propertied after forcibly snatching away others' property)

The upper tier of the NGO world undoubtedly has higher education than we have, they have the knowledge of English, and they perhaps have a broader perspective than ours. But when we unhesitatingly share the experiences and ideas we have cultivated and reaped in our "fields" by laboring day and night, why is there not evidence of reciprocity, coparticipation, and coproduction from the other side as well?

Whenever our group sat down to imagine the future of Sangtin, the conversation returned again and again to inequalities of organizational ranks and salaries. Repeatedly, the same question resurfaced: Is it possible for an organization to distribute rank, money, work, labor, and respect equally to all its members? When we introduce the village women to feminist thinking, we say that the labor of a woman who works inside the house must be valued and assessed in the same way as the labor of a salaried person or an educated and employed member of our society. Similarly, why don't we state that the labor of a block-level activist, who, despite her lower educational qualifications, mobilizes and stands up to help women in the least privileged communities, is at least as valuable and meaningful as the labor of a district-level officer, who gathers funding for the organization and coordinates the work being done in various blocks? Why is it not possible to allocate the organizational jobs in such a way that the key responsibilities are evenly distributed among all the members and the question of whose work has greater or lesser significance does not even arise? We feel that in order to wrestle with these questions, we have to

create a different kind of organizational structure. It would prove impossible to eliminate inequality from a structure that is constructed on the basis of stratification. Let us consider an example: Today Richa Singh is the program coordinator of NSY. Tomorrow, if Garima becomes the coordinator, would she refuse to take advantage of the amenities that Richa Singh is enjoying today? Probably not. But if Richa Singh and Garima both had access to equal salaries, facilities, and respect from the outset, the questions of taking advantage of amenities and of fewer or greater benefits and perks would never crop up.

Another big question confronting us has to do with the kind of activities Sangtin should embrace or stay away from in the near future. In our discussions, we have often articulated our deep desire to do work that gives us a livelihood while also allowing us to build a social movement. We have tremendous respect and admiration for those who maintain that it is very difficult for the aims and objectives of an NGO and those of a social movement to merge. In reality, whenever a group becomes dependent on outside grants for its survival, its dependence triggers a series of new inequalities. The issue is the same old one, however: If we don't have the money to gather even the basic resources, how could we build or sustain a movement? After all, no funding agencies give funds to carry out a movement! These days some people work in the villages to earn money and fame, and others work to build and reinforce the grounds for revolutionary change. If we always keep this difference in mind and refuse to compromise our terms, conditions, and requirements, can we not create new possibilities within the framework of NGOs?

To create new possibilities, it is essential that we do not become dependent on outside funding. We must commit ourselves to the kind of social struggles that allow grassroots workers to have a stable livelihood, without undermining their confidence in their ability to acquire adequate resources for their work as necessary. Today, Sangtin has no financial source on the basis of which we can plan anything for the next three to five years. Struggling to stand on its own feet, our small organization receives a range of advice from friends and well-wishers: some ask us to participate in a big project on AIDS, while others suggest a project on human rights.

We are determined to focus on issues that emerge from our own grounds rather than those heaped on us by any funding agency. And it is the people among and with whom we work who will help us determine the standards for measuring our successes and failures. Our experience has taught us that it is impossible to suppress an issue that emerges from the field. And it is only by coalescing around such issues that a movement can advance. If one of our primary goals is to further the issues emerging from our fields, it is also important that we create our organizational structures in accordance with those issue-based realities rather than by imitating organizations located far away from us. We want to learn from, understand, and gain inspiration from the work of stalwart organizations such as Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan, Akal Sangharsh Samiti, and Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, and use their insights as we chart our future goals and directions.

Our third commitment is to transparency. When we look at pictures of rural women like ourselves in all the glossy and colorful magazines from around the globe, we wonder whether the governments and media of the world have no other images to display besides those of our poverty, our ramshackle homes, and our naked, emaciated, and tearful children. Are these the kinds of images on which our governments and organizations rely to fetch money from overseas in the name of the poor? If our homes and poverty are sensationalized in this manner to bring in tens of millions of rupees in the name of our own development and empowerment, why are we the ones who remain completely uninformed about how much money is accumulated in our names and how, when, and on whom it is spent? As we present this critique, however, we are acutely aware that demanding transparency and condemning its absence are very easy in the abstract and implementing it is extremely difficult in reality. To create transparency within the organizational membership is relatively easy, but how do we share the accounts of millions of rupees with the poorest women in the villages? Is this not, though, the same reasoning that makes people sitting above us think we are incapable of understanding the transactions of the thick bundles of money? They seem to worry that we will be so dazed and blinded by the sight of those bundles that we will lose our old perspective forever!

We want to embrace this challenge in such a way that we can always retain transparency in Sangtin's work. This is possible only when our standards of measurement are guided by rules and regulations that constantly push us to respect the common people in the rural public while maintaining complete accountability toward them.

A fourth issue is directly connected to the politics that surround the production of ideas and knowledge. It constitutes a central but invisible element of our work that we also have found to be the most challenging and difficult to grasp. We made a small attempt to grapple more fully with this aspect in the middle phase of this collective journey—that is, after sharing and discussing our diaries and before we began to work on the book.

During five days in August 2003, we tried to place the serious and committed work we had done for the previous seven years in a wider context and to provide a new breadth to our thoughts about international issues. Richa Nagar's involvement allowed us to center our discussions on several socioeconomic questions that we had never had the opportunity to discuss before. For instance, several of us wanted to know how the politics of oil, imperialism, and multinational corporations were connected to one another in the United States' invasion of Iraq. From there, many other complex and difficult issues continued to emerge in our conversations. For example, why does the relationship between Israel and Palestine carry so much significance for U.S. politics? What kinds of issues around race and racism have surfaced over time in U.S. politics and why? When we connected these topics with the issues that had surfaced in discussions of our diaries, our conversations spread in other directions as well: In the global politics of development and capitalism, when did NGOs arrive on the scene, and how has their form changed over time? How are struggles over questions of same-sex sexuality in South Africa and other Third World countries being articulated in relation to battles defined around class, race, and access to resources? And we asked tens of other questions in a similar vein.

When we linked these discussions with our experiences, we felt that the scope of work done by rural-level NGO workers is defined in a rather constrained way in every respect. We are not given many opportunities

that would allow us to link what is happening in our villages to the conditions and struggles going on in other states and countries. Similarly, we are not able to fully connect the violence against Dalit women with other forms of violence or to determine our aims and strategies on the basis of that understanding.

Almost every other day, new workshops are organized to ensure that our documentation is refined and polished in accordance with the wishes of our funders. But our long discussions with Richa Nagar helped us to reflect on how we get very few spaces or resources to grapple with a range of sociopolitical processes that are discussed in academic seminars and make the national and international headlines every day—for example, globalization and the negotiations of the World Trade Organization, the ever-increasing suicides of peasants in our country, and the privatization of water. As a result, we face severe limits in our ability to relate these processes to the kinds of violence that are wreaked regularly on the bodies and minds of women in our villages. And it is precisely our inability to make these connections that allows established experts and other researchers to carry out study projects “on” us. Sadly, we do not even possess an adequate vocabulary to point out the limitations or irresponsible tones that often underlie their analyses.

In Sangtin, we have decided to reflect in depth on how violence that is targeted on women’s bodies is interwoven with other forms of violence and to advance those reflections and understandings collectively with members of our village communities. As part of this effort, we have identified some topics as our starting points. Through discussions, workshops, readings, and films that focus on these themes, Sangtin wants to form a concrete understanding that will inform our struggle for the rights of the Dalit and sociopolitically marginalized communities.

A multitude of issues begin to emerge as we try to advance these new currents of thought. It is not possible to list all of them here. Even if collectively we were to try to give them some kind of coherent order, it would still be hard to decide which issue to address and how. We believe, however, that it is our responsibility to address some key issues that have presently assumed critical significance for us.

Let us begin, for instance, with the processes of globalization and so-called development that are continuously snatching resources away from the hands of the poorest communities. The resources made available to the rural poor can be likened to a cumin seed in the mouth of a camel: they are too small to have an impact. Even the minimal amounts of goods and amenities allocated to people living and dying under these conditions diminish little by little as they make their way through different levels of the system. Similarly, the interrelationships among the processes and politics of globalization, development, and NGOization push us to work actively toward undoing these knotlike puzzles in our own minds. After all, a person breathing in the remotest village is entitled to decide for herself how, why, and for whom the whole globe has become a village and for whom the whole world is still constituted by a village, settlement, or district. What kinds of inequalities and social violence does the existence of these two worlds indicate?

Let us also focus for a moment on the ugly face of violence that has shaken up the soul of our country. If the culmination of a debate over the Babri Mosque and Ram Janmbhoomi acquires the face of a nationwide communal riot after the destruction of a four-hundred-year old mosque-shaped structure, and some ten years later a violent incident in a train compartment transforms itself into a communal slaughter in Gujarat, then developing an awareness and understanding of such tragedy also becomes a critical part of our work and social responsibility. It is only when we place this matter on our agenda that our people will be able to grasp how events such as the Mandir-Masjid debate and the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat shape the communal politics of our own districts and villages. To accomplish this, we will have to develop a historical understanding of communalism. Let us consider the partition of India in 1947 for a moment. At that time, Pakistan was created separately from India, and subsequently Bangladesh was carved out by splitting Pakistan. Without understanding the background and multidimensional histories of these events, how can we begin to grasp the complexities of the Indo-Pak partition and the contemporary communal politics? It is high time that the ordinary women and men of our villages be given the opportunities to develop a clear and

in-depth understanding of these issues. We believe that we must play an important role in shaping such understandings in our own communities.

While reflecting on our personal stories, we also repeatedly felt a need to sharpen our understanding about the history of the caste system and the various movements that have emerged against casteism in independent India. We also believe that if our main aim behind advancing all of these understandings and reflections is to do concrete and meaningful work in the lives of the poorest rural women, then we must also deepen our acquaintance with writings and reflections related to women and feminisms and the various debates and conversations on caste, class, race, and religion that have emerged from time to time in various women's movements. Only then will we be in a position to continue our work on the ground without giving up the courage and confidence to intervene continually in the politics of knowledge production.

And in the End . . .

When in the lukewarm sun of December 2002, the nibs of nine pens started pouring out ink on paper and transforming themselves into this chronicle, our eyes were wet and our hearts were filled with a pain and restlessness. We had never imagined that a journey that started with remembering and understanding the tears, scoldings, and beatings of our Ammas, Babus, and Dadis would one day lead us to distinguish between livelihoods and social movements. But today we know very well that it is only when we juxtaposed the stories of our personal lives and saw them with new lenses that we were able to arrive at a point where it is becoming possible for us to honestly reevaluate the inequalities pervasive in our work field.

In other words, if we could not have built a collective understanding about how Garima's pangs of hunger as a child were different from Radha's, perhaps we would have also failed to see the manner in which the reins of our organization, which professes to work with Dalit and oppressed women, ended up gathered in the hands of the Sawarns. And if we had not grappled with the deep-seated double standards associated with untouchability and *purdah* in our own hearts, where would we have found

the insights and determination to question the double standards in the thoughts and actions of celebrated figures in the worlds of NGOs and academia?

The strong bond that moved us from ink to tears has today brought us all the way from tears to dreams. If there are new hopes along with new shapes and colors in these dreams, we are also aware of the new complications, dangers, and risks that reside there. And we are also aware that at the very least, this collective journey of creation has united us in a closed fist.

We hope that this fist will continue to become stronger and that we will gain the support and strength of many many fists like ours. Only then will we be able to create a world in which small groups like ours have the heart to dream big dreams with ordinary people for their happiness—on our own terms, by the force of our own thoughts, and in our own languages.