‘A new consciousness must come’:

Affectivity and Movement in Tamil Dalit Women’s Activist Engagement with Cosmopolitan Modernity

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To Stella, who may have lost her speech, but not her voice

(1) “I am the daughter of a fisherman, and I am married to a rice trader who is now in Saudi Arabia, working on an oil rig in the ocean. We were a poor family. I have studied up to the SSLC, but more important, I now have **arivu** [consciousness, awareness, knowledge in the widest sense] which dispels fears. I talk freely about periods and menopause since my training and I am now asked to attend births. The girls I teach are initially embarrassed but there is great curiosity afterwards. You should see the difference between me and my **akka** [elder sister]. When I began to have overbleeding in my periods, I went to the doctor, and looked at the scan with her.” [Interview with health guide Jansi in fishing village, Kanyakumari 1991]

(2) “Those exposed to our [health] talks stand out in any crowd. They talk differently to the others. There is great progress [munnetram].” (Interview with Amber, a trained midwife, from agrarian village, employed by a leading non-government organisation in Kanyakumari, 1991)
The voices of women such as Jansi and Amber are heard here as extracts from interviews I conducted in the early ‘90s, part of a wider project on the changing nature of puberty and maternity among rural Tamil women from labouring classes, both fishing communities (Ram 1991) and agricultural castes in Chengalpattu District. But the dimensions of activism I explore in this paper will not do justice to the wide variety of class and caste formations I found in the course of this research. The term ‘Dalit’, used in the title of this paper, is itself shaped by activist discourses rather than the local particularities I uncovered as a researcher. The term Dalit seeks to displace older, more stigmatising and patronising forms of nomenclature (such as ‘untouchables’, ‘Scheduled Castes’, ‘Harijans’) with a militant reference to oppression. Yet this particular experience of caste oppression does not sit very easily with the sociology of fishing communities in Kanyakumari, where caste is more a dimension of community identity – along with belonging to the sea, and Catholicism – than a relationship of direct subordination to upper castes (Ram 1991). By contrast, the accounts given by activist women in the agricultural Hindu castes of Chengalpattu discussed below, draw directly from personal, often bitter, experiences of caste-based ideologies of exclusion and pollution in relations with upper castes.

In the activities and aspirations of activists such as Jansi and Amber, however, these specificities of power and place all but disappear. Even the ordinary lived experience of place – strikingly affirmed and elaborated as central to the constitution of social identity by Tamil discourses of the ur or one’s ‘native place’ (Daniel 1984) - emerges quite transformed. One’s ur now becomes nothing more than a site of oppressive traditions to be superseded through engaging in a wide range of transformative practices. Both Jansi and Amber worked for the Kottar Social Service Society (hereafter KSSS), managed by Belgian Catholic missionaries. During the ‘80s
and ‘90s it ran health clinics in which babies were weighed, pregnant women monitored and medicines dispensed. The organisers gave health talks to pregnant women and mothers about a balanced diet, and advised women to have their first baby in hospitals. None of these activities, in themselves, quite capture the larger significance of what this and similar non-government organisations hope to accomplish. In south India, non-government organisations (hereafter NGOs) often use the English word ‘awareness’ to describe the missing dimension they hope to inculcate in villagers. The direction and character that such ‘awareness’ should take are equally anticipated. ‘Awareness’ involves adopting an essentially modern attitude, one capable of drawing a strong distinction between the self and society, in which society inevitably figures as the source of wrong, irrational or backward beliefs. Of all the categories of women I interviewed about their experiences of life transitions around puberty and maternity (Ram 1998c), it was this group of women whose representations came to the interview, as it were, already sharply thematised by the tropes of conversion and enlightenment:

“I now have arivu [knowledge, awareness] which dispels my previous fears.”

“Amma [mother] would keep a katti [iron knife] in the ashes of the stove to keep the spirits from hearing the cry of the baby. When my baby was small, I was told not to go in front of women who had lost babies before birth – if I did chance on one, I was told I should give them my baby to hold for a little while. There are many muta nampikkai [backward, foolish, irrational beliefs] around. But 75% change their minds after we answer
their questions.”

Such distinctions flow into and help constitute these women’s construction of their own identity, through a sharp opposition between past and present selves. In retrospect, the old self is viewed as hedged about with fears and false beliefs, and the new self is one that may be characterised equally by the English word ‘awareness’ and by the Tamil word ‘arivu’.

On their own, giving talks on health and weighing babies could not have achieved this anticipated transformation of subjectivity. For all the language of consciousness adopted by the NGOs, it was clear that the degree to which they could shape identity and discourse depended a great deal on the temporality and durability of engagement by the women in a varied range of practices. For instance, women who, in addition to hearing talks and attending the clinics, were also organised into ‘Matar Sanghams’ or Mothers’ Organisations, tended to meet with some regularity. The women who spoke ‘most differently to the others’, to use Amber’s phrase, were those who had themselves received prolonged training with the NGO to act as health guides back in the villages. One of the organisers explained the training program in Kanyakumari to me:

Every year we train sixteen to twenty girls. If they are to be health workers, they are given six months training, with some refresher training offered in subsequent years. If they are to be health guides, we offer them a basic training in minor ailments. Girls who are chosen for this training are chosen from those who have already been working in villages as volunteers for us for between one to four years. We began in 1971 and at its peak, we had health centres in one hundred and twenty seven villages in the district, with Colachel as the main centre. Each centre has one
health guide and two health workers. In addition we run the Matar Sankam [mothers’ groups]. (Interview 1992)

Again, the training in itself would have been insufficient to secure the change of consciousness recounted by the women. After their training, however, health guides were expected to move around between different villages, running the mothers’ groups, conducting health talks, and occasionally organising village women for various forms of direct action. Mothers’ groups mobilised over specific issues, such as villages’ lack of water supply or proper distribution of government food rations. This was particularly the case in the ‘80s after communal disturbances between Hindus and Christians in the coastal areas and again, after the recent tsunami.

Maria was a woman in her early thirties in the coastal village of Pallam. She had been involved in the Matar Sangham for the last nine years. In her account she moves without pause from her training in hygiene, to mobilising village women for direct protest action against the district level Collectorate, police and the parish priest:

‘I joined to learn about cuttam [cleanliness, hygiene], about nutrition and care of babies and children. It has been useful – we know now about how to take care of diarrhoea in infants at home, about vaccinations, about the varieties of vegetable types, and about not discarding the water we cook vegetables in. We learn about quarantining food and clothing during infectious diseases such as measles and chicken pox, about not using the same washing water for others, about hygiene for eye infections. We have also taken up issues concerning women – three years ago, we had a campaign opposing alcoholism among men, and now there is no longer alcohol sold in the area. We have become bolder with the police. Two years ago we went to the priest and to the collectorate to change the salt
water we were being supplied with, to good water. Before that we had to travel for a kilometre for a tap, or even two if that one was broken.’

Another organiser makes the same effortless transition in her discourse:

There is great awareness about immunisation and hygiene, and treatment for diarrhoea. Where before no liquid was given, now they give the sugar and salt solution. For vaisuri [small pox], they seek hospital treatment. At the last Mothers’ meetings the women suggested writing to the Block Development Officer over the lack of electricity and water pumps in the village; finally they went there themselves and broke their water pots outside the office.

From the perspective of activists, then, bringing modern reforms to the village and taking direct action against administrative authorities such as church and state, are not two distinct operations but one. Nor is it possible to draw a boundary around the type of activity that might be fostered by such forms of engagement. Being organised into “Mother’s Groups” did not limit activity to the domain of “women’s business”. As with many other ‘mother’s organisations’ around the world such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Chile and other parts of Latin America, the very experience of organising to meet women’s needs and experiences in a collective fashion was capable of generating its own political momentum and public awareness. Indeed, it was a lengthy article about fisherwomen’s protests in the Indian feminist media published in Mumbai that drew me to the coastal villages of Kanyakumari in the first place, as a young feminist ethnographer back in the early 1980s. On closer inspection the women’s protests, which were over the mechanisation of their work of weaving of fishing nets emerged out of an innocuous activity – the collective weaving groups
organised by an activist Catholic nun in the convent at Kanyakumari. Let me give a couple of further examples from among my close circle of acquaintances.

My research assistant during the early eighties was Seraphim, a supremely confident young woman, who had studied up to high school level, and was one of the many bright, educated yet unemployed young women with whom I found ready companionship. On a subsequent trips I found her variously engaged in a diverse set of collective organisational activities - organising the older women fish vendors into a credit union, actively involved in a district wide protest campaign over a rape case. In January 2006 I returned to take part in the memorial services one year after the tsunami – over 200 had died in Seraphim’s village alone, over a hundred of them, children. There were photographs of the dead everywhere, on walls and house exteriors. As I caught up with stories of the disaster, I heard from Seraphim that her activist impulse had erupted even in the midst of her own grief and chaos. Barely had she ascertained that her loved ones were alive after an agonising search among the dead bodies, than she began organising a massive collectively run kitchen erected in makeshift shelters in order to feed vast numbers of men, women and children. As aid organisations came pouring into the coastal villages, she helped mediate between villagers and aid. She even managed to locate and utilise the statistical economic data we had collected together many years earlier, as a baseline for working out the neediest families.

These ‘movements’ between forms of action, between different geo-political spaces are not unproblematic for women activists, particularly insofar as they involve real physical travel out of the village and into the district, state and nation space. Another activist health care organiser and close friend of mine, Stella, who has recently suffered a stroke (and to whom this paper is dedicated), was experiencing in the ‘80s, a strong tension between the life she was expected to lead as a young widowed mother of two children, and her life as a social work organiser, moving constantly around the district, having meetings in her home which included hosting
local male activists, one of whom became a close personal friend of hers. I lived with the family at the time and felt daily the pressures placed on her and the two young children by the unpleasant moral scrutiny of the village gossip and innuendo. In an attempt to alleviate the tension, she moved out of the village and into the district’s main town of Nagercoil and leaped at the chance when I helped find work for her in the late eighties with another activist organisation through an academic activist friend of mine, in the district of Chengalpattu, close to the metropolis of Chennai. She never looked back, eventually founding an NGO of her own, with the title of Rural Education and Animation Centre. The two children have absorbed their mother’s experiences. Her daughter trained to help mentally ill children among the poor, and herself is now struggling to combine that training and aspiration with her role as wife and mother of two young children. Her son learned skills in alternative technology to help the poor build low cost housing, and is now the charismatic leader of an international organisation based in the east coast township of Pondicherry, promoting a holistic environmentally conscious spiritual philosophy that attracts Europeans as residents in the ashram. In her capacity as activist organiser Stella travelled across India to Delhi for an All-India women’s movement conference. Again, it was a trip that generated its own tensions. She told me wry, deprecatory stories about being ‘frozen’ out in Delhi, as a southerner unfamiliar with cold winters, but also blocked by the manoeuvrings of a prominent local Tamil feminist who interposed herself as a broker between the Tamil rural activists and the other delegates.

Organised activism brings with it, for these women, a fluid crossing of boundaries between village, district and nation state. At the same time this fluidity itself generates tensions that illuminate the underlying sexual construction of female embodiment. Language itself alerts us to this feature. ‘Movement’ and ‘ability to work with others’, both valued aspects of politicised identity, become transmogrified into the heavily loaded sexualised language of “looseness” and “availability” when applied to women. Nevertheless, women are not imprisoned by these meanings – the new experiences they have as activists also engender, in them, new capacities.
The experiences I describe are not to be sequestered within a ‘present’ that can be understood in isolation from the past. Shaping today’s NGOs in India there lies a history of women’s mobilisation that has flowed like a river through Indian modernity. That river has been fed by various streams. Kumar (1993) describes two such streams in her illustrated ‘History of Doing’ for the period 1800-1990. One stream includes movements such as the communist-led food campaigns of the 1940s, and the anti-alcohol and anti-price rise movements of the 1970s, which ‘focused on issues which are regarded mainly as “women’s concerns”, because they were ancillary to the role of a housewife: water for the home, fuel for heating and cooking, food, money for food’ (1993:3). This history is to be discerned in the very readiness with which NGOs choose particular issues over which to mobilise, such as opposition to male alcoholism. Even the bodily gestures described by the coastal women, such as breaking water pots in front of the local administrative office are themselves also part of a history of political performance, theatrical gestures that connect one struggle to another.

A second strand of mobilisation is identified by Kumar in movements dominated by men but involving large numbers of women as activists. These include the nationalist movement, but also the peasant movements known as the Tebhaga movement in Bengal and the Telengana movement in south India. Male leadership of these movements did not preclude the capacity of such movements to tackle problems related to male dominance, such as alcoholism, wife-beating and male control over familial resources. In Kumar’s final characterisation, both streams mingle insofar as they exercise very similar effects on the women themselves. In both cases, states Kumar, ‘women learnt to confront capital and the state, to work together in groups or
organisations, and to feel united as women’ (Kumar 1993:3).

**COSMOPOLITANISM, BUT OF WHAT KIND?**

I would suggest therefore that what is released by organised mobilisation is not to be defined by the specific concerns that generated it in the first place, but rather by a set of *skills*, bodily orientations and a fundamental stock of politicised gestures that can be used, in a labile fashion, in varying contexts.¹ Such an approach to understanding women’s activism, based on the acquisition of skills and orientation rather than on specific issues, is particularly apposite to the literature on cosmopolitanism. While the debates often do refer to specific content of consciousness – such as an awareness of rights – what more typically emerges as ‘cosmopolitan’ is an *orientation*, rather than specific *tenets*. Held, for example, describes cosmopolitanism as an ‘ability to stand outside a singular location (the location of one’s birth, land, upbringing, conversion) and to mediate traditions’ (Held 2002:58). As an orientation, this would describe all the diverse situations and activities I have mentioned thus far. Indeed, I began this essay with a reference to ideologies that *demand* that their adherents step outside the ‘location of their birth’, regardless of whether the activist continues to live in the village like Seraphim or has moved out like Stella.

However, there is something about the very resoluteness, the absolute quality of the language used by activists that ought to suggest to us immediately that we are dealing with a very specific kind of cosmopolitanism here. Their discourse does not simply allow them, in a gentle fashion, to ‘mediate traditions’. It requires of them to

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¹ This thesis is amply substantiated by the literature surveying women’s mobilisations around the world. See for example, Basu (1999).
shun and abjure all that comes under the label of tradition, mobilising themselves and others to achieve a particular kind of ‘awareness’ in order to transcend and leave behind these zones of backwardness. This is not the kind of unselfconscious movement between the local and the global that Kwame Appiah celebrates in his father, in an influential article that has been described as ‘perhaps the closest thing to a classic text yet generated by the new cosmopolitanism’ (Hollinger 2002). For his father, according to Appiah, there was simply no contradiction between acknowledgement of one’s roots and belonging as a world citizen (Appiah 1998). The activist discourse taken up by rural Tamil women is in sharp contrast both to this kind of unselfconscious acknowledgement of two planes of belonging, and to the versions of ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’ that celebrate a hybridity associated with diaspora and globalisation. Instead, we are dealing here with something much more sharply and consciously articulated as a political philosophy. The requirements for re-making subjectivity are far more absolute than the requirements for an urban and urbane appreciation of difference. Both kinds may entail a transformation of identity and a broadening of horizons, but there the resemblance ends. The genealogy of these activists lies in social movements whose leadership has been informed by political ideologies that include socialism and feminism – ideologies which, far from being noted for their appreciative stance towards difference, have been notoriously vulnerable to the charge of suppressing differences. And unlike the humanist vision of a rights-based universalism that flows from valuing a shared essence inhering in all human beings, the politics I refer to has fostered an attitude resolutely partisan, aligned with a particular oppressed group (‘the proletariat’, ‘women’).

Yet, there is an undoubted universalism at work here. This is so in two senses. First, the category of ‘the oppressed’ is not limited to one location, but by its very defining characteristics, is understood to suggest certain features of existential plight shared with similarly situated groups around the world. The very determinants of this

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2 See Featherstone 2002 for an overview
plight, are in nature, global. Capital, by its nature, will flee the more organised sectors of the working class and find fresh sources of unorganised labour to exploit. And the global flows of capital in turn provoke, for an adequate response, a resistance that cuts across nation states. Such a logic gives us the rationale for the internationalism of nineteenth and twentieth century socialist, anarchist and communist movements. ‘Second wave’ feminism made its political entry in the 1970s on a similar basis, anticipating a universal ‘sisterhood’ of women based on overwhelming similarities in male domination the world over.

Secondly, these movements have been universalist in the sense that they have held out the promise that if their struggle comes to fruition, they will bring about a new world order that is more truly universal than the ‘sham’ universalism of the bourgeois order they have overthrown. The liberation of the oppressed group has been linked, in this utopian vision, with the overthrow of class society and of patriarchy itself, bringing freedom for the majority rather than the minority.

This kind of partisan universalism is not only very different from the cosmopolitan politics of tolerance and diversity, it has been particularly vulnerable to the charge of positively suppressing difference. The story of second wave feminism can be told as a triumphal resurgence of earlier activism, but it could equally be told as the story of a narrative that has generated continual challenges to its own claims of a universal sisterhood. The claim to a universality of female oppression almost immediately produced challenges from groups of women who could not see their history and location – whether of ‘class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, First World/Third World’ (Sinha, Guy and Woollacott 1999:1) – being reflected in the dominant narrative.

These challenges have in turn made a powerful contribution to the re-appraisal of the meanings of modernity and emancipation that has occurred over the last thirty years. I have taken part in these challenges, and have no desire to rehearse them here. My concern is rather with appraising a shift of discourses that appears to have left these rural activist women stranded in a backwater, their sentiments and language
outmoded, their talk of progress and emancipation rendered anachronistic, and their version of cosmopolitanism out of step with the current debates on cosmopolitanism, which flow out of a different concern – a concern with difference and identity politics rather than with internationalism, social class and the promise of emancipation.

**Re-Appraisals Of Modernity And Cosmopolitanism**

Kumar’s representation of women learning to ‘confront capital and the state’ is itself a register for a more widespread phenomenon, the depth of intellectual engagement in India with a broad Left socialist tradition. The language she uses springs from a faith in modernity’s emancipatory horizons, a tangible sense of the potential it held out as a liberator from the burdens of caste, class and gender oppression. In sharp contrast, prevailing tendencies in postmodern and postcolonial scholarship have urged us to exercise a close and hard scrutiny of progress and emancipation in order to view these discourses themselves as modalities in the workings of power. At its sharpest, the critique takes as its target the universalist aspirations and tenets of an Enlightenment modernity, denouncing them as so many presumptions, as sham universalisms. The debates on cosmopolitanism are in many ways simply an extension of these debates on the nature of modernity itself. The parallels are readily apparent. Is cosmopolitanism really a mask for the privileged existence of a white European minority of ‘high flying cosmocrats’?

There is more than one way of responding to these critiques. The collection entitled *Feminism and Internationalism* (Sinha, Guy and Woollacott 1999) seeks to sustain the critique of a ‘false universalism’ while explicitly rejecting ‘national or cultural feminisms’. The volume seeks to highlight cross-cultural alliances that are adequate to the challenge posed by the global dimensions of a ‘world wide social formation fashioned by imperialism and colonialism’ (1999:2). We note continuities
here with the logic of earlier socialist internationalisms. In India, for the most part, intellectuals have had a similar response, incorporating recent critiques into a deepening and strengthening of an emancipatory politics rather than choosing between the two. It is predominantly in this spirit that social reform movements in India have been re-appraised, in order to bring to light their class and patriarchal limitations. The history of gender and modern social reform is being re-written as the history of a new Indian middle class, formed in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism (Sangari and Vaid 1989, Mani 1998, 1998, Uberoi 1996). Modernity is no longer un-problematically equated with female emancipation, but is increasingly understood in terms of a class relationship. Commenting on the All India Women’s Congress of the 1920s and 1930s, Whitehead captures the flavour of such an analysis:

Since the elevated nutritional, hygienic and educational standards were difficult to achieve by the majority of working-class or peasant women, they became a mark of differentiation within India itself. The ‘new woman’s’ access to education and hygienic knowledge symbolically defined the new boundaries of the ‘respectable community’ within India itself. The metaphor of the mother’s body as nation generated continuing symbolic distinctions between urban middle-class and lower-status women within India, and between coloniser and colonised without, as the motherhood symbol was continually re-negotiated during this period.

(Whitehead 1996:206)

The productive insights of such an approach have entered into and shaped my own work on maternity and midwifery in rural Tamil Nadu. I have tried to illuminate the price that is paid by the poor for the privilege of coming to be regarded as educated modern subjects. The price to pay is an admission of inadequacy, the shame of the
inferiority of their existing knowledge (Ram 1998a and 2001b).

This injunction to re-examine the emancipatory discourses of modernity has been a source of much illumination and insight. But there has been blindness as well. In some cases, modernity is represented in action as little more than a series of exclusions, exercised in the name of progress and emancipation. Chatterjee, for instance, closes his chapter in the influential collection *Recasting Women* (1989) with the sweeping conclusion that the Indian middle class affected a *social closure* through the use of emancipatory ideals:

Ideas of freedom, equality and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies which systematically excluded from the new life of the nation the vast masses of people whom the dominant elite would represent and lead, but who could never be culturally integrated with their leaders. (1989:251)

His critique represents the poor as only ever experiencing modernity as oppressive and external, as remaining forever locked outside the citadel of modernity. Yet Chatterjee is manifestly wrong on at least one count. If such understandings were originally meant to exclude the poor, they have certainly not been successful in doing so. While the style of characterisation seems to sympathetically side with the poor it does not impel one to explore or even anticipate the effects of such understandings once they begin to circulate within the ranks of the poor themselves. Yet there is by now a rich and long history of social interventions designed to bring about a change of subjectivity among the labouring classes. The forerunners of today’s NGOs are to be found not only in peasant and Left social movements, but in the women’s organisations led by the middle class and founded in the context of the nationalist movement. Mahila samitis (women’s associations), village and municipal women’s
groups were set up in Bengal in 1913 in the aftermath of the Swadeshi movement, and later formalised into umbrella organisations such as the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association (Engels 1996).

We now have empirical studies that show how the micro-interventions of conscious modernisers are related, often across social classes, with the macro-politics of colonialism and the nation. But on the consequences of this lengthy history of interventions, aimed precisely at re-shaping the subjectivities of poor women, there is a resounding silence in the literature. The detailed ethnographic and historical work that it takes to write such subaltern experiences becomes readily subsumed, even within ‘subaltern studies’, under the rubric of examining dominant discourses. Conclusions such as Chatterjee’s, that modernity has effected a series of exclusions as far as minorities are concerned, are destined to remain foregone conclusions in the absence of independent enquiry into the lives of minorities. By contrast, the voices of the poor women I spoke to have a distinct ring about them. Disowning or ignorant of the view that they have been excluded by modernity, or even rendered inferior by modernity, they take up a stance as active claimants of modernity.

I wish to examine this staking of claims in closer detail. I met Victoria as an NGO worker in Stella’s new organisation, the Rural Education and Animation Centre, in the 1990s. Her narrative affords us a glimpse of how a familiar, seemingly outmoded discourse can nevertheless be renewed and given fresh significance by a Dalit woman who integrates it into the specificities of her own life.

The Narrative of Self-Transformation: Victoria, a Dalit Non-Government Organisation Worker
My family are Roman Catholic, and we owned a little land. In my village the dominant caste is Reddiar. Before I was born, my family must have worked on their land. We must have had to have give way to them, we must not have worn slippers in front of them, nor walked on the same path as them. Over the last thirty years or so, all that has changed. Maybe five out of every hundred still keep to the same habits and practices [palakkam]. In Porur, we have our own water supplies, pumpsets, handpump and new well. So we don’t have to rely on the upper castes any more. We also know now that we are numerically dominant, and that frightens them a little.

Interruption between castes is still frowned upon. A Reddiar girl eloped with one of our (Dalit) boys, a Hindu, but the girl was brought back. In another village, an unmarried Mudaliar boy has been courting one of our SC [Scheduled Caste] girls, and the community is trying to make her marry one of the same-jati boys. But in this case, the boy might succeed.

My mother’s family had some educated and important members. My mother’s father was a Tehsildar [district administrator] and there was a school headmaster in the family. Her brother works in the railways. My mother was determined to educate her children, even though she was married at fifteen with little education. One of my brothers has finished teachers’ training, another has finished 10th class at school, and I have studied up to 10th class, done a typewriting course in English and Tamil, and completed seven years of social work with the Madras Social Service. We would get food supplies from the U.S of soy bean oil, wheat, and fish powder, which we distributed among villages. We weighed infants
monthly. I did house visits and ran a twenty-day class for mothers, one hour daily. I taught them about hygiene, about infectious diseases, about the importance of weighing children, about eye infections, and about how to manage pregnancy.

In the Mathar Sanghams, which were held at night, we spoke about *penkal nilaimai* [the situation and dilemmas of girls and women], we read literature, made charts. We would encourage them to make small savings with their own credit society, get them a bank book. We held a Mother’s Day one year after opening, showed a film on women’s situation, organised the women into performing a play, a *kummi* [rural women’s dance in Tamil Nadu].

But my upbringing was actually quite sheltered. My elder siblings got married and moved away, and my family brought me up very protected in case I went on to a bad path, or boys developed relations with me. When I was first sent to Bosco School in Madras for a better education, I was very afraid. I had to stay in a school hostel, and thought that I was to be locked up somewhere. I stuck it out for one year, very afraid of all the people. I even ran away. My father and brothers would visit me, and I could go home on weekends. Gradually I got used to everyone and eventually became so fond of my friends I didn’t even wish to go home with my brothers. Eventually, they would just bring me delicacies on feast days.

I was no sooner back from school in my village of Porur, than a sister in the convent called me to do social work. My parents worked for the convent. They carried water, watered their plants, my mother washed their
dishes, my father put up fences for them, did agricultural work. The 
Sisters had always been kind, putting aside any extra food for us. They 
trusted us with money lying around the place. The Mother Superior also 
liked us, and would say to us kids ‘Your mother got you all educated’. My 
father sometimes got fed up with the number of children, and was 
doubtful about getting us educated, but my mother never gave up, because 
her father was educated. So the Sister from the convent called me and 
gave me training in how to speak and dress, simply, so you can 
communicate with the poor. They gave me a cycle to move around in. I 
was only fifteen, so the sisters had to convince the village women that I 
could take responsibility, despite my youth. I was afraid of the big kuttam 
[crowds] and refused to go a couple of times. The Sisters told me about 
their own dedication, the efforts they had to make. They taught us 
morality – not to laugh and mix too freely with men; they said that when 
we go to work we must conduct ourselves olunka [decently] so we could 
be good for marriage. They would read out from newspapers and stories 
for us. I saw others attending meetings, and thought, I should like to be 
like them. So I began to go around on my bike, taking doubles sometimes. 
I got insults from others. If I carried an umbrella, the villagers would say: 
‘Oh, look at her go with a kutai [umbrella], just like some big teacher.’ I 
would ignore them, or retort: ‘So what, have you paid for my umbrella?!’

[I ask about her marriage]

I got married when I was 21 to my atai’s son [father’s sister’s son]. I had 
never met him before marriage. He works as a salesman for the
cooperative society, selling rice and kerosene in the town of Tirumedi. I have got a man such as I prayed for. He is not abusive, does not drink or beat me, like so many women I counsel. We use the rhythm method of contraception advocated by the Sisters – so I watch my discharges, and know my fertile period. I was afraid of men when I first got married. I told my husband quite early that I did not want to be harassed [for sex] when my body is not feeling right, like during my periods. My husband agreed. Now sometimes he says he is tired and not wanting [sex], sometimes I say it. He says, you and I are both not strong, it is not good for us to have too much.

*I ask her about how she manages with her little girl while doing social work with other mothers.*

Doing this work has been difficult since I had the baby. My little girl Sharmi is two years old. I had to leave her with my husband for a ten day training period. My mother-in-law also moved in for the time. He would come home to play with her. Later I learned he had actually stayed at home for five of those days, afraid that I would scold him for not taking care of her properly. I gave him a lot of instructions before I left. I explained to him that infections could come if she was not cleaned properly and fresh clothes changed after having a pee. But since then I have not left her at home alone – she just comes with me everywhere unless I have a night meeting.

I have changed since my mother’s ideas. She brought me up not to be able to speak in front of four people, not to be able to move around. I plan to
give my daughter confidence and will tell her everything she needs to
know about her body and how to live her life.

**Affect, Agency and Activism**

Focusing on activist versions of modernity among poor women can help
restore missing dimensions. Even the most powerful critiques of modernity and
cosmopolitanism sometimes leave us unable to understand how so exclusionary a set
of discourses could succeed in galvanising poor Dalit women. I will argue that certain
missing elements have been overlooked. They perpetuate an inadequate account of the
*affective* power of modernity. In particular, we lack an adequate phenomenology of
the modern activist version of cosmopolitanism. Integrally linked with this missing
element, I will argue, are limitations with the conceptual tools currently available.
These tools do not enable use to describe the heightened sense of agency described by
activist women.

As I only have room to consider only a limited range of models, I have
restricted myself to Foucault, the single most important theorist to prompt a re-
appraisal of what were considered ‘progressive’ aspects of modernity (see Merry
2006 for a recent instance of this legacy). His version of agency, properly applied, is
subtle and sophisticated. Indeed, his famous insistence that we study power, not as a
purely punitive exercise, but as a capacity to exercise productive effects, *relies* on an
understanding of agency within power. The modern institutions of reform he
investigates work not so much by outright punishment but by a process of continual
monitoring, assessment, and refinement of measuring techniques. Their effectiveness
depends on subjects taking hold of the discourse and fashioning themselves as active
agents of the discourse. Our neo-liberal universities are a classic instance of this,
relying on academics fashioning themselves through both external and self-assessment forms of reporting. But so, too, are forms of agency found in Tamil rural villages. As I have described elsewhere (Ram 1998c), ordinary young women in coastal villages had developed a complex relationship to the codes of sexualised morality, creating themselves as responsible adult female subjects in and through these codes of conduct.

Foucault’s later corpus of work explains the genealogy of the ‘modern individual [who] could experience himself as a subject of a “sexuality”. (Foucault 1985: 5-6). Here he studies subject formation and the exercise of agency in a gentler context. Far from the institutional disciplines of prisons and asylums, his concern now is with philosophical texts, manuals of advice meant to help individuals attain their own inherent potential as rational human beings. He seems willing to allow a more substantial agency to the individual. The Greek and Roman formulations and practices discussed by Foucault do not resemble later Christian ‘juridifications’ that regulate sexuality within marriage and procreation. What is proposed by Plutarch, for instance, is ‘not a regulation that would draw a division between permitted and forbidden acts. It is instead a mode of being, a style of relations (Foucault 1986:184). Commenting on the shift in his own work, Foucault (1988) describes a distinction between forms of power ‘which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination’ and those forms ‘which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.’ (1988:18).

Certain elements of this later work – in particular, his description of projects
that entail ‘the affect of change, of rupture with self, past and world’ (Foucault 1988:43), resonate strongly with the voices of the women in this paper. But there are essential continuities of approach between his earlier and later work which make his conception of agency less than adequate for a phenomenology of activism. As his defenders are among the first to point out, ‘The task of studying subjectivity did indeed require a different approach, but [Foucault’s own] previous researches acted more as background material than as mistakes to be corrected.’ (Ransom 1997:56). Foucault himself describes the material he is seeking to explore in *The Care of the Self* in the following terms:

The domain I will be analyzing is made up of texts written for the purpose of offering rules, opinions, and advice on how to behave as one should: “practical” texts, which are themselves the object of a “practice” in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct. These texts thus serve as functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects; in short, their function was “etho-poetic”, to transpose a word found in Plutarch. (1986:13)

The concern that links the earlier and the later work could be described as the investigation of an authoritative framework that becomes the basis for the subjectivity of an agent. The same preoccupation guides Foucault to the feature of Christianity that best fits such a description – the confessional. Foucault again shows his gift for breaking with the ‘repressive hypothesis’ of power: far from simply exercising punitive power, the confession is immensely productive in making desire into a discourse, in prompting the ‘nearly infinite task of telling – telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that... had some affinity with sex.’ (1976:20). This is indeed a formulation that has enabled us to breathe a little more freely than is permitted by the tight embrace of the binary dichotomy we have inherited, that of
determinism and pure freedom. We have been given a powerful formulation that works for a very particular version of agency, one that entails a productive relationship between didactic, authoritative discourses and subjectivity.

The heat generated by the debate over whether there is agency in Foucault’s oeuvre has obscured a question just as important: is his version of agency adequate for describing all situations? Where, for instance, would a Foucauldian subject, shaped by confessionals, locate the emotional reserves a woman such as Victoria draws on, reserves that enable her to endure the taunts she must encounter for moving out of the circumscribed arena allotted to a Dalit woman? The Christian genealogy is certainly not irrelevant to activism among south Indian Dalits. But the Christianity that has bearing in Victoria’s case is not the Christianity of the confessional incitement to talk. It is, rather, that missionary Christianity which galvanises subjects to act and to move out into the world in order to engage with transforming others. The voice of Victoria, which tells us of braving insults for moving around with bicycle and umbrella ‘like some big teacher’, finds an almost uncanny echo in the voice of a nineteenth century low caste ‘Bible Woman’ in Nagercoil, Kanyakumari District narrating her “visits” to a Muslim village:

For six months we walked past the mosques round the streets without getting permission to go to a single house to teach the women, not one of whom could read Tamil. The men were at times angry with us for continuing to come, but at length one day a man took us to his house to teach his wife and then some others began to learn. This made some of the people very angry and they would not allow us to carry an umbrella or a bag and sometimes snatched away our books and tore them. They often threatened to kill us saying that anyone who did so would gain heaven.

(Records of the London Mission Society, 1897, cited Haggis 1999)

These ‘Bible women’, recruited and trained by the British Protestant missions in the nineteenth century from the poor and lower castes such as the Nadars (Haggis 1999), are very much the prototypes of village trainees such as Victoria, Jansi or Amala. Trained by missionaries in Travancore as intermediaries who could enter the citadel of the upper caste ‘zenana ladies’, Bible women had, in the course of their activity, to
make a striking departure from the gender norms of their communities. As women from a low status caste, they had to face hostility for presuming to teach anything to upper castes. Even the details we hear from Victoria about the resentment of villagers at a young girl using an umbrella, recur in the nineteenth century narratives. Long a prerogative of those who need not work bare-headed under the hot sun, the use of the umbrella by a low caste woman draws on a long history of the semiotics of contestation (cf. Guha 1983). These moves by lower castes could well fit Foucault’s description of micro-moments of resistance. What moves them into another sphere of action is their organised nature. Missions, like today’s NGO’s, which have their source in India in the history of the ‘voluntary sector’, consciously aim at producing social change through collective forms of action. It is not at all a matter of infinitesimal moments of resistance, too fine grained to last, let alone to prevail.

Foucault’s formulation is well able to illuminate some aspects of the mission experience but would plunge others into darkness. Armed with his formulation, we can certainly trace the way in which Victoria fashions herself by employing an available discourse which seeks to instil in her the discipline of dressing simply, of conducting herself decently, so that she will be ‘good for marriage’. We can see how this discipline may better equip her for reforming ‘the poor’, from whose ranks she has been plucked for training. But how are we to explain why the reformist activities in which women like her may engage, flow over so readily into collective forms of action aimed at the state?

We are systematically missing some element of emancipatory discourses when we stick too close to the Foucauldian formulation. In what follows, I will seek to identify the missing element in terms of the phenomenology underlying two very different emotional frameworks. In the first, which characterises Foucault’s version of agency, subjects split themselves. They become both the subject and the object of discipline. As he explains in the introduction to The Use of Pleasure, Foucault wishes to

...analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their
attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen. (1985:5)

Not only is the primary emphasis here on the subject’s relationship to the self, a feature which has led some commentators to detect an element of solipsism at work (eg. Werbner 2005), but the emotional tone of this relationship is slow, calculated and deliberate. The reigning verbs are ‘to decipher, to recognise, to acknowledge and to act on that recognition’. This projects bespeaks a certain privileged use of time, which is singularly inapposite for rural poor women.

Activism, by contrast, moves by contagion and releases energy precisely because it allows agents a reprieve, however temporarily, from a relationship to the world that is modelled on the relationship of subject to object. The outward-directedness of the activist project can actually obliterate the self/other distinction. There is an absorption in others which is not a matter of locating empathy within oneself, but of recognising essential aspects of one’s own history in the history of others similarly situated. The feminist activist self rushes ahead of itself to find itself already there, present in the plight of the girl child married off before maturity, or in that of the bride burned for dowry – to name just two of the issues that have mobilised activists in the Indian women’s movement. In the light of my earlier remarks on the problem of blindness to internal differences, I hope not to be misunderstood as romanticising such an endeavour. However, cosmopolitanism may take more than one form. It need not consist only in an appreciation of the difference between self and other. It may, as in the forms of universalism under discussion here, consist rather in a rush of identificatory emotion from self to other, where the self is enlarged by the perception of sameness and shared predicaments, generating the sense of solidarity and collective energy to act and bring change to the world.

I have used the word ‘emotion’ thus far to describe the qualities of activism. Elsewhere I have used Heidegger’s concept of sorge or care to explore the emotional features of feminist projects (Ram 2006). But the specifically bodily energy of such
projects is particularly well captured by the term ‘affect’ as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). For the activist project is precisely a mobile flow of energies and intensities that are outward directed, and social in orientation. It is a flow between bodies, augmenting the body’s capacity to act. Unlike the considered deliberations in the Foucauldian version of agency, affect conveys the sense of collective excitement, the contagious movement of energy that allows us to be affected by others and to affect others (1987:278). For it is this collective effervescence of organised action which allows an individual woman - to again quote Held's definition of cosmopolitanism - to ‘stand outside a singular location (the location of one’s birth, land, upbringing, conversion’). For Dalit women such as Victoria, the strength to stand apart comes not simply from her identification with other women, or from her place within an organisation, but from her sense of the collective energy generated in Dalit communities by a history that includes the ‘Self Respect’ fought for by an earlier anti-Brahmin social movement in Tamil Nadu, the importance of sheer numerical dominance in an electoral democracy, and a sense of greater autonomy.

Caste has not disappeared, it is fiercely policed at the level of inter-caste marriages, but the Dalit communities know that they have the upper castes ‘a little frightened’.

The somewhat hypostatised English term used by non-government organisations in Tamil Nadu now takes on a fresh meaning. NGOs train local women to become, in turn, ‘animators’ of others. Activist projects, with their orientation to movement and intervention in the world, seek to tap into this affective flow between bodies, to energise and quite literally, to ‘animate’ others. Affect has also been described as disruptive, working against our habituated forms of perception ‘through the force of altered, juxtaposed or disordered sensations’ (Paterson 2006:5). This feature is an integral characteristic of activists who do not, characteristically, accept the social world as a ‘given’. Instead they seek to heighten ‘awareness’ and arivu or knowingness about that which hitherto been taken for granted.

**Conclusion.**
Debates over cosmopolitanism have renewed interest in the relationship between universalisms, trans-local flows, and the necessarily em-placed aspects of human identity. Scholars who seek to go beyond the legacies of the Enlightenment re-conceptualise cosmopolitanism as ‘entailing multiple, uneven and non-exclusive affiliations’ (Caglar 2002: 180). I have tried to explore the ways in which one strand of Enlightenment modernity, which I have typified as a partisan universalism on the part of the working classes and of women, continues to ‘animate’ the poor and the marginalised in countries like India. This form of universalism does not reflect the high value recently placed on difference, and on local identities. Quite the opposite. Impatient with differences and local boundaries, it calls on its adherents to move out of the circumscribed spaces allotted to them as women, as Dalits, and as rural poor, and to challenge the power structures of caste, the state, and the church. Its antecedents lie in the missionary structure of conversion and action, rather than in a contemplative confessional Christianity. While it may not concern itself with issues of cultural pluralism and “Otherness”, this partisan, action-oriented universalism has in fact enabled those who have been cast(e) in very role of “Other”, to challenge that circumscribed location. For such women, the question of ‘recognising’ and ‘prizing’ difference is not the urgent one.

I have emphasized the new forms of mobility that embody this challenge – the fluid movement between concerns of very different kinds, and the physical mobility between village, district and nation. But equally, this mobility is present in the very structure of affective involvement which propels the self out into the world, transcending its original location and finding itself in an expanded sphere of agency and identifications that have the capacity to dissolve the boundaries between the local and the global.

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