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AUTONOMY, POLITICAL
LITERACY AND THE
'SOCIAL WOMAN': TOWARDS
A POLITICS OF INCLUSION¹

Sumi Madhok

This essay focuses on certain aspects of public individualism and in particular on autonomy and political rights. It analyses the significance of political rights in conditions of subordination and argues for a non-individualist formulation of moral agency.² By 'public individualism', I refer to the public view of the person that informs the functioning and maintenance of political institutions that defend or guard specific rights of the individual. Political institutions informed by public individualism presuppose the autonomy of individuals or of (public) citizens who are expected to exercise the 'rights' maintained by these institutions and be responsible for the choices that they make. However, this public individualism is often in conflict with social doctrines that sanction private freedoms. There is thus a tension between individualism as a public view of the person informing the rights of persons, and the narrow agreement on social freedoms that characterise the private person.

Feminist theorising has shown the inadequacy of conventional philosophical conceptions of autonomy for both feminist philosophical practice as well as feminist politics, and has offered reconstructed accounts of autonomy. This essay builds on these reconstructed understandings while contributing an additional argument. It asks how we can understand agential capacities of persons within conditions of subordination. It suggests that 'free action' accounts of autonomy, i.e. the accounts of autonomy that privilege an agent's ability to commit free action, constitute the principle obstacle to this exercise. We argue that action does not exist in a social vacuum, and that there are reasons why people act in certain ways which are not always expressive of one's preferred judgements.

It is beyond the ambit of this essay to explore the 'value' of autonomy and its desirability. It is sufficient to say, however, that some notion of autonomy is important for understanding political and moral agency and is also essential for feminist epistemological practice. We need a conceptual language which can adequately capture the attempts of persons to introduce change in their lives. The language of autonomy – suitably modified – can, I believe, usefully serve this purpose.

To begin, I shall first examine the tension between the public and the private view of the person by examining rural Rajasthani women's encounters with political rights. Through their engagement, it is possible to identify the forms as well as the functions assumed by political rights as embodiments of this public individualism. These engagements with political rights take on two different forms that correspond with and reflect two different understandings of the self that are expressed as a result of these engagements. The first acknowledges the self as a possessor of rights; the second reflects a primarily relational, embedded self.³ More often than not these two forms intersect, revealing a complex self, accommodating different moral pressures and demands. The engagements with political rights and the reformulation of meanings that accompanies these are, I shall argue, indicative of their particular capacities, and more specifically, of their moral autonomy.⁴ Finally their articulation of and commitment to political rights, which is not always evident in their action, compels us to look for ways in which we can capture conceptually their capacities and the ensuing particular skills. I shall refer to these skills as 'political literacy'.

In order to illustrate my argument I will examine the moral encounter with the idea and language of rights of a group of rural women known as the *sathins*,⁵ who are involved in a state-sponsored development program for women in the North Western Indian State of Rajasthan. The *sathins* are largely illiterate or semi-literate, and generally belong to the lowest castes. The fieldwork was conducted in the districts of Jaipur and Ajmer over a period of eight months, between September 1998 and April 1999.

The negotiations of the *sathins* with political rights take the form of an interpretative exercise that results in new meanings, both moral and linguistic. Some of these meanings are born out of a desire to weave newly acquired values within an existing moral framework. The linguistic meanings are essentially efforts – both practical and intellectual – to increase the comprehensibility of rights-based ideas within their existing moral framework.

1. Moral Autonomy and the Individual

Questions of moral agency have traditionally involved establishing the responsibility of persons for actions emanating from freely chosen rational principles. The most general formulation of a person considered to be morally autonomous

has been when, and only when, his or her moral principles are entirely his or her own. But what does it mean to be the self-originators of our moral principles? According to Gerald Dworkin, these might mean 'if one is the author of one's moral principles, if one chooses these, if the ultimate source of these principles is our will, if one decided which moral principles one would be constrained by, if one refuses to accept others as moral authorities, etc'.⁶ Moral autonomy is then largely constructed as a capacity that makes for self-regulation. According to this view, morally autonomous persons contain the grounds of morality within themselves and possess the ability to ascertain moral requirements. Increasingly, however, moral theorists have come to accept the social character of these moral principles and to argue that moral autonomy does not always imply that we become the 'self originators' of our moral principles.⁷ This revised position does however insist that we project an affinity with these principles. But what does such identification entail? Can our actions always be explained in terms of reference to our identified beliefs? I regard these to be two separate problems. We identify with our principles if we can provide reasons for these being our principles, our beliefs. Whether we allow these beliefs with which we purport to identify, to motivate our conduct is determined to a large extent by prevailing social and moral compulsions. Not only do we not always express what we truly desire in our actions, we do not always value what we desire.⁸ Therefore our actions cannot always be explained in terms of reference to our beliefs.

Feminist philosophers have unmasked the excessive individualism underlying this conception of moral agency and have consequently presented reconstructions of the concept. These reconfigurations have focused on and drawn upon women's moral experiences as 'caregivers' within the family and community and their 'oppositional agency' in the face of social, economic and political marginalisation.⁹ This paper introduces a further category. It addresses the question of moral agency of persons in circumstances where there exist a number of constraints, both social and moral, on certain kinds of action by considering three factors. The first defines what we mean by 'moral agency', the second establishes its 'starting point' and describes the nature and capacities of 'moral agents' and the third specifies the social conditions within which this agency of persons can be observed. Conventional understandings of moral agency offer explanations for all three. These conclude that moral agency involves responsibility for freely chosen actions and goals by persons who are equal and free from encumbrances and interferences in making these choices, and finally, that these choices cannot be fulfilled in conditions other than those of 'negative' freedom. While feminists have taken the first two of these accepted generalisations to task, there is a general concurrence within feminist scholarship that certain conditions of 'negative' freedom are essential for the exercise of individual autonomy. It is this third contention that forms the focus of this paper. The failure to explore conceptually the moral agency

of women within conditions of subordination has led to two widespread generalisations, especially within the literature on 'the third world woman': a) that these women are passive and lack agency and b) are a construction of a 'victims' discourse in relation to women in the developing world.

This essay aims to recognise the autonomy of persons through a standpoint of interdependence and community.¹⁰ It defines autonomy as a capacity to question aspects of existing morality. The modifications in the language of autonomy that I propose are two-pronged. To understand autonomy in terms of a capacity and to shift the site of its recognition from action to identifying the ideas that lie behind action itself. Speech practices are a possible site for recognising this ability. I suggest that the moral engagements with political rights that I describe are indicative of these women's autonomy. By challenging the inconsistencies that abound in their existing moral frameworks they seek to formulate not only an alternate system of ideas, but also to produce a vocabulary through which this system might be articulated and justified. The paper seeks to examine through these speech practices not only how society shapes its members in moral terms, but also the nature of morality itself.¹¹

The examination of these engagements is intended to develop a case for a wider and a more nuanced conception of autonomy, one which involves recognition of a person's capacity to introduce change, to challenge the moral repetitiveness of their lives, their ability to reorder existing moral priorities and to engage with moral rules and preordained social roles. Autonomy is thus defined as a capacity to imagine alternative moral rules and social roles.¹²

2. Political Rights and 'Recognition Respect'

Why are political rights significant in a moral economy marked by lack of sociological individualism?¹³ In the particular case of the *sathins*, political rights are considered very important. These perform a moral as well as a practical function. The moral function of political rights here is to make accessible the language of 'moral worth' and respect. I am here referring to the respect that accrues to persons on account of being primarily bearers of rights. Since rights are not available either in the form of a moral language or because of institutionalised denial of these rights, the fundamental provision of self-respect in society becomes unavailable.¹⁴ The moral community becomes the domain of the few considered to possess 'moral worth'.

Citizenship is generally held to be distinct from social membership.¹⁵ However, in the case of the *sathins* and many members of their women's group, citizenship rights are used to gain inclusion into the moral membership of the community/village/*panchayat* etc. The language of political rights is employed to secure their inclusion within the community, especially of participation in its

deliberative activities, for example through attendance and participation within the *Gram Panchayat*, or *Jati Panchayat* etc.¹⁶ Political rights, therefore, provide a language of self-respect and a vocabulary in which to claim it. I shall refer to this respect for oneself as ‘recognition respect’.¹⁷ There are different philosophical understandings of what constitutes respect for persons and what is meant by ‘treating persons as persons’. The common assumption underlying these differing understandings is that they all recognise that an important constituent of treating persons as persons is to acknowledge that they are right-bearing individuals and to treat them as such. According respect to persons involves (amongst other things) a focus on a person’s status as a full and equal member of a moral community and as a bearer of certain basic moral rights.¹⁸

The respect due to persons on account of their being rights-bearing agents is but one way of viewing them as self-respecting individuals. Also known as the ‘objectivist’ position on self-respect, it requires respect to be rendered to persons on the basis of certain ‘morally significant features’ considered as objective standards of worthiness. As opposed to ‘objectivist’ positions, ‘subjectivist’ positions on self-respect endorse positive beliefs about, and attitude towards, oneself ‘without reference to any independent standard’.¹⁹ Feminists have voiced a concern over ‘objectivist’ positions on recognition respect, believing them to be informed by an abstract and essentialist conception of person, the ‘neo cartesian model of the moral self, disembodied, autonomous, separate, isolated, indistinguishable from every other self’.²⁰ Staking our claims to personhood on the basis of being essentially right-bearing agents then makes it difficult to envision a connected and relational view of the self. They argue instead for a more connected subjectivist vision of self-respect that values our individual circumstances, in particular the subordinating circumstances of women’s lives.²¹ While there are obvious problems with the androcentric characterisation of ‘recognition respect’, it must be stated that the erasure of differences which recognition respect involves does have an empowering effect in a polity marred by rules of segmentation, where difference is held to be responsible for one’s disenfranchisement from the membership of the ‘moral community’.²²

3. *Sathins* and the Discourse of Rights

Political rights perform not only two important functions but also assume two different forms or interpretations. These interpretations are reflective of the two ways in which the self comes to be understood and defined in the narratives of the *sathins*. The first of these two interpretations uses political rights to claim ‘recognition respect’ on the basis of one’s personhood, defined principally by the possession of individual rights. The second interpretation of the self, as a result of these engagements with political rights, employs a more

relational view of ‘recognition respect’, one which is marked by the creation of the new rules regularising behaviour of the emergent ‘public person’, in this particular case, the newly emerging ‘public woman’. This challenges the linear narrative of rights discourse as one presenting an opportunity to succeed in conventional, male-defined terms.²³ In other words, in the narratives of the *sathins* the ‘public’ is not defined as entirely male.

In the following two sections, I shall seek to show the intersection between the ideas of the self as a right-bearing agent and those which describe the self in relation with others in the speech practices of the *sathins*. The self-authorship that occurs as a result of these engagements is interactive and situated between the categories of the ‘separate self’ and the ‘relational self’. Therefore, while upholding rights as the basic social provision for self-respect, the *sathins* also fashion their self-portraits according to moral and social commitments informed by doctrines other than rights, for example, by the role of certain traditions considered as inalienable.

Before we look at the two forms assumed by political rights and consequently by ‘recognition respect’, let us first look at the process through which the *sathins* acquire and identify with the moral language of rights. The process has within it both a linguistic as well as a moral dimension. The moral process comprises a dynamic ethical reflection, which occurs when they come in contact with rights-based ideas. This leads to attempts not only to rethink many of the moral rules informing their own moral frameworks, but also selectively to absorb many of these ‘new’ ideas in ways which do not clutter their existing moral priorities and commitments.

The linguistic exercise takes place when the moral ideas encountered and selected need justification in a language that is both acceptable and comprehensible. In other words, when the conceptual language of rights comes in contact with the natural language²⁴ (Hindi/ Rajasthani/Urdu in this case), it results in a considerable amount of linguistic dislocation and turmoil. I am not referring here to the problem of translation and linguistic correspondence but to the problem of moral justification of ideas in language. This moral justification involves using a conceptual term of high moral ranking within the vernacular for the new moral idea we want to introduce within our moral repertoire.

An examination of the narratives of the *sathins* revealed a process bearing three clear stages in their thinking on rights over fourteen years of participation within the WDP (women’s development program). Only 2 of the 70 *sathins* interviewed identified sources other than the state as their first point of contact with the discourse of rights.²⁵ The initial contact with rights-based ideas produced in its wake moral dissonance, and led to them being received by the *sathins* with considerable suspicion. This moral dissonance gave way in time to a ‘new-found faith’ in the discourse of rights as upheld by the state. The notion of

rights in the second stage was marked by the legitimisation of the rights discourse in a language that is state-dependent. The final stage in the *sathins'* thinking about rights occurred when they began to weave their own theoretical and practical defence of the idea of rights independent of the state. The state is no longer used to legitimise the upholding of women's rights. The new vocabulary of the *sathins* rests its intellectual defence of rights on the notion of 'truth'. Women's rights now come to be justified in the name of truth.

Here, it would be useful to examine the literal terms used in the vernacular to connote the idea of rights. The idea of possessing rights is denoted by the employment of the Urdu term *haq* and the Hindi *adhikaar*. However, the latter is used in a more formalistic manner and often interchangeably with 'power'.²⁶ The change from state-dependent definitions to a reference to truth may be explained in terms of the intimate connection existing between the terms for 'rights' and 'truth' in the vernacular. Rights in the vernacular usage is denoted by the term *haq*²⁷ whose other meanings include *sach* or truth.²⁸

The architecture of this conception of truth is an intellectual as well as a practical one, drawing upon certain 'ideal' and uncorrupted aspects of social life. While this idea of truth draws upon notions of purity, it is in terms of certain social behaviour that are considered immoral and in violation of this pure ideal that 'truth' or 'truthfulness' as a particular social practice comes to be defined. There are three kinds of practices that come to be upheld as the embodiments of truth: morality in public life seen in terms of non-corrupt dealings while occupying public office, the upholding of equal rights of women, and the espousal of justice.

Recourse to the truth argument becomes essential in altercations with disbelieving and often hostile villagers, who see them as posing a threat to established norms.²⁹ The popular notion that women are not to be believed and that their word is not weighty enough in part explains the appeal to 'truth'.³⁰ It is also employed to ward off those who question their 'moral character',³¹ as well as to support their raising issues which are generally considered best left alone. The injustices cited by the *sathins* are often references to the rights that they believe women possess but are unable to exercise, or in the case of development schemes or relief measures, unable to benefit from. These rights often revolve around women's property rights,³² education, child marriages, the practice of sending women forcibly into *nata*,³³ women's right to vote and to political office, equal wages, the practice of untouchability, and so on.

4. The Evocation of Rights – Case Studies

Let us now bring back into discussion the two forms that political rights assume. The first, as I said earlier, is to claim 'recognition respect' through claiming one's

right-bearing status. Let me give an exceptional example to illustrate this point: not an exceptional case in terms of the language used but in terms of the initiative taken. It is an instance where action can be explained in terms of one's 'preferred preference'. It also serves to highlight the political exclusion of women from public spaces and the context under which rights are espoused. While offering a reading of the near absence of concepts such as rights in the lives of the vast majority of rural women in India, in a way it also reemphasises the potential of rights to make meaningful interventions in people's lives, subject to there being effective support mechanisms, to provide redress of those rights claims.³⁴

Mohan Kanwar of *Dosara Panchayat*³⁵ decided to contest the *panchayat* elections at the behest of some of the villagers. The *panchayat*, comprising eight villages, had a reserved seat for a woman *Sarpanch* under the provisions of the 73rd amendment to the constitution.³⁶ Two groups of influential castes, the *Jats* and the *Gujjars*, got together and proclaimed their opposition to the reservation of seats for women in the *panchayats*. These men had decided that they would boycott the election for the women's seat in the *panchayat*, and one effective way to oppose the election was to make sure that no woman contested. The men openly denounced the reservation of seats for women and wanted to make *Dosara Panchayat* an example of this opposition. They announced that there was going to be no contest. However, about eight days before the voting was to take place, when it had become abundantly clear that elections were in fact going to take place, the *Jats* and the *Gujjars* of *Dosara Panchayat* declared that they had reached a consensus: they had elected a *Sarpanch* unanimously and therefore there was no need for women to go out of their homes and contest the elections. Their consensus candidate was a Jat woman of 65 years, who was publicly garlanded and declared to be the 'consensus *Sarpanch*,³⁷ elected uncontested. Following this, *jaggery* (unrefined sugar) was distributed in all the eight villages of the *panchayat*.

Mohan Kanwar's account of the events is as follows:

This party [referring to the group formed by the *Jats* and the *Gujjars*] wrote a letter to the election commission saying that they did not want an election to take place as they had already elected a consensus candidate without opposition hoping that the election might be called off. Some people opposed to this group of *Jats* and *Gujjars* asked me to stand for elections. I refused in the beginning, as I am very poor and knew that these people might forsake me in the end. Anyway, when I heard that this 'party' had created such a terror around women's reservation and women's seat in the *panchayat*, I decided to contest the elections. Whether I lost or won now ceased to be of much concern to me, even if I only got 4 votes still, I was ready for it. I was contesting. People started offering

me money, 20,000, 40,000 rupees if I withdrew my decision to contest. I refused. I hired a tractor and went into the villages and spoke with the women. The *Jats* and the *Gujjars* issued threats that if any tractor came into the village for the purpose of campaigning for elections, the people in the tractor would be killed. I went to the villages and told the women that it was our right to contest elections and that even they should come forward and contest the seat along with me. I kept saying that it was a woman's seat which had come in our *panchayat* and that we must take full advantage of it and bring women forward to contest the elections. The group of *Jats* and *Gujjars* started campaigning against me and threatening everyone especially the women not to vote for me. For they felt that I was *padhi likhi* [Mohan Kanwar is semi literate, but she regards herself as politically literate and believes that other people regard her as such] and that if I won I would do as I please and upon electing the Old woman they would be able to do as they pleased. I am not upset about losing. I just feel content in knowing that the election did take place. When the votes were counted I polled 765 votes out of a polling list of 1700 voters. Obviously, the women of my *panchayat* voted for me other wise how could I have got 765 votes and lose by only a hundred? However, importantly, an election took place for the women's seat, we did not just give away our right to political office without a contest.'

In the above narrative, Mohan Kanwar makes two points which deserve attention. Her evocation of formal principles of rights is very powerful. She employs these formal principles to articulate her self-descriptions and to describe the denial of rights in the general social treatment of women in her *panchayat*. Her knowledge of these formal principles contributes to and is reflected in her portrayal of herself as *padhi likhi*, or literate. She highlights the indifferent impact of progressive law reform on gendered identities within the popular imagination, particularly in villages where this disregard of women's rights often escapes the focus of the state and its institutions. Both observations bear on broader concerns: the first on the rights debate within feminist theory and the second on the nature of legality and the penetrative capability of the state. The evocation of formal principles of rights has important implications for feminist theorising and feminist politics. It raises the larger question of the importance of rights-based discourse in the lives of women in subordinate circumstances, and the impact of these experiences in informing the debate within feminist theory on the relevance of rights within feminist politics.

The second form that political rights assumes is a relational³⁸ one. By relational I mean that people develop as a result of their embeddedness within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts and that their identities are

formed within the ‘context of social relationships and shaped by an intersection of cultural determinants...’³⁹ Political rights assume a relational form when they are employed in a manner which carefully accommodates their other identities and connections within the family and the community. This careful weave of their new public identities with their pre-existing roles leads – among other things – to the creation of new public and private rules. Rather, the rules which govern the conduct of private persons, by whom I mean persons who do not engage in the ‘public/political’ life of the community/village/*panchayat*, are renegotiated and revised in order to suit the demands of public/political life. There were many examples of this kind of selective absorption that occurred but perhaps one of the most interesting negotiations resulted over the observance of the *purdah*, or veil. Let me illustrate the creation of these new rules by a narrative that runs as follows.

Salma, a ward *panch* in the village of Gegal in Ajmer district, was campaigning for a selective abandonment of the *purdah*. *Purdah* is often used metaphorically to invoke the notion of silence as well as of invisibility.⁴⁰ Observing *purdah* as a mark of respect is considered important; however, its observance in places where the ‘rules’ are different, she suggests, is not necessary. A reservation is expressed in respect of observing *purdah* in the performance of one’s public duties, although its observance within the family is regarded as a mark of respect:

The other ward *panch*⁴¹ who has been elected sits there with her *ghungat*. She used to sit outside the *panchayat* earlier. I had to pull her inside by saying was she holding a meeting outside or inside? Now, slowly I have been able to persuade her to sit inside with everyone. She keeps whispering in my ear *bai ji ek kam kijo ji* (sister, please do me a favor) the hand pump in my village is not working. Will you please tell them that it needs to be repaired, please tell them. She always whispers to me from underneath her *ghungat*. I keep telling her that she must lift her *ghungat* while sitting in the *panchayat*. She however, refuses to remove her *ghungat*. I don’t observe a *Purdah* as I live in my *maika* (natal home). The women still keep the *ghungat* but it is much shorter now. *Ghungat* means *adab*. You are respecting your brother in laws, your father in law. The ward *panch* should not keep *ghungat*, if you observe such a long *ghungat* and keep quiet how will you reach the issues of the village to the proper authorities if you do not talk or ‘speak.’⁴²

Implicit in this narrative is an argument of distinction between the public and the private, wherein a particular social custom needs to be redefined according to the nature of the space or realm in which it is being invoked. (I use private here very cautiously, using it to denote spatial boundaries rather than to any

reference to 'privacy' or individuality.) Abstract principles of rights are imaginatively applied, reflecting both a critical engagement and appreciation of such moral principles, as well as the existing social agreements on 'proper' comportment of women. *Purdah* is discouraged, especially when its accompanying connotations or meanings are employed without discernment of the changed context as well as the new demands/roles. Hence, the observance of *purdah* within the home is not a subject of criticism, as it is a symbol of respect as well as of modesty or *do aakhon ki sharam* (feminine virtue as displayed in modest/downcast eyes).⁴³ However, its observance in public spaces under different obligations – to be silent and not participate openly and unhesitatingly – is something to be denounced.

5. Sathins and Election Problematics

Despite the obvious capacities of the *sathins* for political action and their commitment to women's entry into the public sphere, very few of them contest elections to local government bodies. Although some of the difficulties associated with the failure to contest elections is unique to the *sathins*, their failure to contest elections can be used to find some general reasons why rural women fail to come forward as potential candidates. It also leads us to examine why women who consider themselves to be able candidates shy away from publicly putting themselves forward. *Sathin* Mohini Devi of Nayla village sums up what according to her are the many problems facing women *Sarpanches*:

Very few *sathins* stand for the election of the *Sarpanch*. *Yeh to 'jhagre ki jhopdi hai'*, [It is a house of conflict] there is so much pressure and opposition and all the party politics. [The party politics here refers to the groups that are formed during elections mainly around caste affiliations, not to political organisations such as political parties] Some village people want us to contest, however, that is possible only in the event of there being a reserved seat in the *panchayat*. I am already burdened with work, I have to work at home, look after the children, and work for the women's programme, and I do not have any time to run around the *panchayats*. A *Sarpanch* does not get any salary, we are poor and have to work to feed ourselves, being *sathins* we always stand up for the truth which means we cannot indulge in corrupt activities or even demand money in return for an official favour. Anyway, my household would face a sure ruin if I became a *Sarpanch*. There would be a lot of hostility all around and my family would become targets of people's ill will. Furthermore, if women are illiterate they face a lot of difficulty in doing the work of a *Sarpanch*. Men are also illiterate, however there are ten men around him who are literate'.

The narratives of the *sathins* reveal three kinds of difficulties associated with women contesting political office. I shall categorise these as financial, occupational and moral. The first kind of problems are linked to structural positioning and the general lack of ownership of financial assets, which means that in most cases women do not possess the financial ability to contest elections.⁴⁴ Contributing to and resulting from their structural position is the problem of violence.⁴⁵ Their subordinate circumstances result in the voices of women being seldom heard on political matters. The whole process of nominating persons to contest elections is still controlled by men. The typical manner in which a woman is nominated as a candidate for election is usually through the prior consent of the male elders in her family. One of the *sathins* who stood for elections confessed that she was informed of the impending electoral contest days after she had put her signature on the election form.

The second category of problems is associated with the actual manner of functioning of the *panchayats*. Apart from the threat of or actual violence associated with the work of the *Sarpanch*, the other barriers perceived by rural women are those of illiteracy and corruption. They fear that they would be coerced into approving schemes and loans in favour of the dominant few, either through violence or other forms of intimidation. The discomfort and even fear of being the lone woman in an all-male *panchayat* fills many with apprehension. Being outnumbered by men was linked to the observation that women were not allowed to play any reasonable role within the *panchayat*, especially in its financial deliberations.⁴⁶

The final set of problems is representative of the moral dilemma facing these women in their new public roles. There are moral issues regarding what constitutes 'respect and respectful conduct' and of renegotiating 'proper womanly' behaviour within 'a shared public space'.

6. Political Literacy and the Sathins

After we recognise the capacity of *sathin* women to reflect upon and creatively engage with 'second hand' moral principles⁴⁷ in ways which fit in with their other moral and social commitments and responsibilities, we still are faced with another task. We still have to find a conceptual language that will describe their specific skills. I am here drawing a distinction between capacities and skills. Capacities are to do with particular abilities, physical or cerebral. Skills relate to expertise in any specific area. I am referring to their particular abilities, which include exhibiting political choice and opinion, knowledge of one's rights, knowledge of state institutions, hierarchies and procedures. In other words, knowledge not only of institutions but also of the rules that govern their functioning. These skills I shall collectively refer to as 'political literacy'.

There are two reasons why ‘political literacy’ is an important conceptual tool. It draws attention to the ways in which women in non-literate social contexts describe their social world and their roles within it. When they speak of the dissemination of knowledge and even development of capacities, schooling is given pride of place. It is widely held that formal schooling leads to the development of certain cognitive capacities that can have a bearing on social life.⁴⁸ Schooling is in itself a socially sanctioned good, but educational opportunities are not available to many women. ‘Political literacy’ does not necessarily rest on literacy skills; indeed, it can supplant or even make up for their absence. It refers to particular kinds of knowledge, which need examination, particularly in non-literate social contexts. This makes it imperative for us to go beyond the literacy skills of women in order to recognise their capacities and skills. ‘Political literacy’ becomes an important indicator of autonomy within conditions of subordination.

Second, ‘political literacy’, in weaning attention from an emphasis on literacy, also directs attention to aspects of women’s lives not conventionally considered as ‘women’s activities’. Much of the scholarship on women tends to limit itself to particular activities regarded as ‘women’s activities’. This is particularly true of studies focusing on what are termed as ‘women’s position, roles and status’. The political activities of women, or indeed their political interests, are often sidelined or are only given secondary mention.⁴⁹ While politics here is defined in the broad sense, where the ‘political’ includes all aspects of life that generate debate and conflict, ‘political literacy’ is specific in its scope. In so far as it involves the capacity of persons to fashion responses to conflicts and debates, these debates pertain to the activities and issues surrounding the inclusion and participation of women within the decision-making and deliberation activities of other groups within the village or community. ‘Political literacy’ can be examined through the following: 1) an awareness of the activities and institutions of the village deliberating body, their powers and jurisdiction; 2) an opinion on the deliberative process and outcomes; 3) knowledge of particular plans and policies including government schemes offering benefits to women or the rural poor; 4) participation in the activities of the village council or other informal groups within the village.

‘Political literacy’ has close connections with:

- a) Autonomy through ability, as evidenced in the ability to form a political choice, which involves some degree of engagement and identification with the reasons for endorsing that choice. Autonomy is thus primarily concerned with capacities of self-reflection and the expression of these reflexive capacities in conversation. It lays emphasis not only on actions – or the lack thereof – but also on the process through which persons arrive at the decisions or opinions about issues confronting their lives within the community.

- b) Citizenship concerns and participation. 'Political literacy' is linked to citizenship concerns and even with participation (though the latter does not always follow). Knowing one's rights as well as expressing an opinion on the affairs of the village and the larger political community are important indicators of this skill.
- c) With particular forms of knowledge. While there have been longstanding linkages established, particularly within the philosophy of education, between education and autonomy⁵⁰ and more recently between these and democratic citizenship, the knowledge that I am referring to is different from the education designed for democratic citizenship.⁵¹ There are three differences: 1) it does not have an association with schooling; 2) the autonomy that it seeks to recognise within specific knowledge skills of persons is different from the autonomous citizen that educational environments want to develop; and 3) the attributes of the citizen are different from those of politically literate citizens within conditions of subordination. This difference is articulated on the premise of autonomy, which does not insist that persons act on their beliefs, but that they choose to act in a specific way for particular reasons. The knowledge, or *Jaankari*, described by the *Sathins*, includes information about their political, social and property rights, government rural development policies and income-generating schemes, especially those concerning drought relief and food for work programmes, rural administrative structures and the powers of the local elected councils or panchayats.

'Political literacy' may be of two types: effective and minimal 'political literacy'. Effective 'political literacy', in contrast to minimal 'political literacy', means more than exhibiting awareness of political choice. It displays itself not only in the knowledge of the functioning of the bureaucratic and developmental apparatus but also in terms of voicing expectations, not only from the state but also from the local social environment. It means taking an active interest in the affairs of the *panchayats* and playing an active role in their deliberations and discussions. The *Sathins* are politically literate in an effective sense because of their active involvement and role in raising women's issues (at least in the initial phases of the programme) and the espousing of these issues in various state forums, especially in the offices of collector and BDO (block development officer). They are therefore very skilled in taking up matters with the relevant government officials. The difference between effective and minimal 'political literacy' is thus more than a matter of degree. The difference manifests itself in the kind of practice effected. An example of this 'political literacy' is as follows:⁵²

After becoming a *sathin* I have got so much information, knowledge as well as strength to go to the *panchayat* meetings, talk to the other women and

have even distributed this knowledge to the other villagers [men]. For instance, in the event of rape I tell the women in my group that we must get a report filed with the police. We have to go to a *thana* (police station) and if the woman is illiterate she must dictate her report to the policeman, if she is literate then she must write out the report herself. One must keep the photocopy of the report. We must not wash out the clothes, which we were wearing at the time of rape. If the police station is not giving us a hearing or if some one has paid money to the *thanedaar* (Police constable) we must go to the SP (Superintendent of Police), if he is also not receptive then we must go to the collector and leave him a written application. And if there is no one to hear us out even then we must go to the Chief minister.

‘Political literacy’ is an important analytical tool for recognising the autonomy of women where there exist very narrow agreements on social freedoms, especially when it comes to rules regulating women’s behaviour. These rules of ‘proper behaviour’ might for instance place curbs on girls attending schools, or be manifested in a refusal to enter the names of unmarried girls over the age of 18 into the electoral register, thereby effectively disenfranchising them. Of late, there have been a number of studies, particularly in what has come to be known as the ‘demography of women’, involved in measuring the autonomy of women in the developing world using a number of autonomy ‘indicators’. These are purported to be quantifiable and are measured against certain actions considered *a priori* to be autonomous. Autonomous actions in this literature then typically consist of, among other actions, a control over one’s fertility, which is recognised through small family size or a high marriageable age. While these projections on women’s autonomy, often made on the basis of correlation analysis, may be indicative of a number of findings – for example, with respect to a woman’s fertility – they do not reveal whether the decision to have a small family was the woman’s or her husband’s, or indeed that of the woman’s extended family.

While women’s subordinated circumstances constrain their abilities to exercise autonomy, this does not always imply that they are incapable of formulating preferences. I propose that in order to make conclusive arguments about women’s autonomy we must be able to ascertain their ideal preferences rather than those which they display through their actions. Such an exercise will lead towards recognition of women’s ability to reflect upon their choices and the reasons for their inability to translate these into actions. The low ranking of freedom in these societies presents difficulties in the employment of standard measures of autonomy, but that constraint cannot be used to draw conclusions about the abilities of persons to form preferences. The challenge, therefore, is to find a way in which there is not only a recognition of the social and

moral contexts within which people live their lives, but also of the possibilities and capacities they might possess for self-transformation.

‘Political literacy’, an indicator recognised primarily in speech practices, enables us to locate the reasons underpinning the political choices women might make. It recognises not only the skill involved in forming the choice but also that the reasons for acting are sometimes at odds with the choice formed. This leads us then to go beyond action itself into the reasons for why persons act in the way they do. Let us recollect the case of Mohan Kanwar. Her action stands out spectacularly but it is also important to note that these actions are led by a set of ideas which have a significance of their own. Moreover, the action of the women of her *panchayat* who voted for her despite intimidation also needs to be captured in conceptual terms. These women voted for her, safe in the knowledge that the secret ballot would not expose their actions in ways that might make them the targets of the wrath of their families or others. ‘Political literacy’ captures both the action and the ideas behind Mohan Kanwar’s action as well as the women of her political constituency who voted for her.

The important point that the idea of ‘political literacy’ seeks to make is that evidence of autonomy ought to be made on the basis of an examination of the ideas that lie behind actions. In so doing the language which is used to give form to these ideas becomes important, and not only reveals the kind of ideas which may be considered important, but also certain compulsions which prevent these ideas being expressed in action. However, in order to recognise agency in the absence of congruence between belief and action, we need to be able to accord a theoretical significance to beliefs not always expressed in action.

7. Conclusion

In this essay, I have proposed that we should move away from conceiving autonomy in terms of free action towards an examination of the ideas that lie behind action. The examination of ideas that may not be expressed in action is important in order for us to account for certain capacities, and indeed ideas, which may not be evident in action. Analysis of the moral engagement of the *sathins*, a group of rural women with political rights, reveals a dynamic process of reflection that in turn leads towards not only a creative moral but also a linguistic activity. It has been suggested that the *sathins*’ moral autonomy lies in their ability to engage with and selectively absorb and identify with many of the rights-based ideas with which they come into contact. However, this moral identification with rights, and more specifically with political rights, does not always find expression in action. In the case of the *sathins*, their action was to a large extent circumscribed by prevailing social and moral

compulsions. However, while these compulsions go some way towards explaining sathins' lack of freedom, they cannot entirely account for sathins' lack of autonomy. These narratives also reveal the difficulty that rural women have in coming to terms with the excessive individualism underpinning not only the access to but also participation in political institutions. Creating spaces for women within political institutions through public policies of positive discrimination/ reservation quotas are really the first steps towards the gendering of the public and of the public space. Agreements on important questions of respect, dignity, equality – all constituents of a social principle of freedom and rights – need to evolve and mature before we can bridge the gap between formal and actual access to political institutions.

Sathins Elected to the *panchayat* Institutions in 1995

Name of district	No. of <i>sathins</i>	No. elected to <i>panchayat</i> institutions	Elected post
Jasota, district Dausa	5	1	<i>Sarpanch</i>
District Jodhpur	93	13	<i>Sarpanch</i> : 1 Member of <i>Zilla Parishad</i> : 1 Ward <i>Panch</i> : 10
Banswara	83	7	Member of <i>panchayat Samiti</i> : 3 Ward <i>Panch</i> : 3
Ajmer	80	7	Deputy <i>Sarpanch</i> : 1 Member of <i>panchayat Samiti</i> : 2 Ward <i>Panch</i> : 5
Udaipur	78	9	Ward <i>Panch</i> 6 <i>Sarpanch</i> 2 Member of <i>panchayat samiti</i> 1
Baran	6	Figures unavailable	
Bhilwara	60		
Dungarpur	26		
Jaipur	68		
Jodhpur	93		
Kota	21		
Rajasamand	6		
Sikar	40		
Udaipur	78		
Total no. of <i>sathins</i>	566		

Source: The department of Women and Child and Nutrition, Government of Rajasthan, 1999.

