

Reclaiming Dignity and Justice for Wellbeing

A Case Study on the Accountability Processes of
Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatane – Dalit Women Agricultural Labourers
in Raichur District, Karnataka (India) Challenging Caste-Class and
Patriarchal Systems of Oppression

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Part I: Introduction and Context

Health is increasingly being conceptualized as being socially determined. In the case of marginalized communities, social determinants of health are not confined only to the bio-medical factors that cause disease and morbidity alone. Most fundamentally, such disease and morbidity are themselves a product of the structural barriers that they face. Most often these structural barriers are experienced as discrimination and are referred through the concepts of marginalization and social exclusion. Such processes result in gross disadvantages to health, well-being, dignity and justice of many marginalised groups. The axes of marginalization and discrimination are embedded in the socio-cultural – political structures of society such as gender, caste, patriarchy, ethnicity, disability etc. among others. Multiple axes of marginalization and their intersectionality have compounding effect on the lives, dignity and wellbeing of the marginalized. Social exclusion, in this sense, not an outcome that of marginalization, but the very configuration of unequal power relationships resulting in collective oppression and subordination of the subaltern communities. It shapes the societal structures which determines the quality of life that marginalized groups live and the ‘health’ they enjoy. In this paper we define health as inclusive of the broadest contours of well-being, dignity and justice.

The mobilized and organized subordinated groups have seen health care as part of the systemic oppression that they face. The response of such communities in demanding accountability for health care has included a broader sense of accountability to dismantle the structures that create such inequities and disempowerment. Empowered Dalit communities in India illustrates such a proposition. Even as many oppressed and subaltern groups have begun the process of liberating themselves from the societal shackles and from the exclusion that they faced from the governance of public spaces and services, they have also been able to unpack the various layers or multiple axes of discrimination that keep them further oppressed. The nuances of accountability that they articulate are markedly different from those who see the health care system alone and the understanding of health and health care goes much beyond the confines of bio-medical understanding.

The discrimination experienced by Dalit women is considerably more acute as compared to Dalit men. The complex contours of gender, patriarchy, caste and class intersect in different forms of social distinction for these marginalised women within the oppressed Dalit communities also. The denial of basic human rights they face are both in the private spaces of their households, communities, caste and other identities, in the public and private spaces that overlap/co-exist in their village and rural communities, and in the formal spaces of governance and institutions of public services. Such mobilized and conscientized communities provide a rich experience of the varied contours of the practices of accountability and their institutional manifestations. On the other hand, they also offer the experience of addressing and demanding accountability.

Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatane (JMS) is a case-study of ‘Dalit’, ‘Madiga’ Women who are also agricultural labourers. In a very feudal societal context of Raichur in Karnataka State, the case-study conceptualises Dalit Madiga women as ‘thrice oppressed / discriminated’ in the structures of caste (Dalits), class (agricultural labourers) and patriarchy (women). Dalit woman as ‘thrice oppressed’ was advocated by Ruth Manorama, a prominent Dalit and women’s rights activist. Dalit women are also referred to as ‘Dalits among the Dalits’.

Methodology: This case-study is written based on the qualitative research methodology. The methods of document analysis and in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions with the current and erstwhile group of women leaders are the primary sources of data.

The case study draws on series of historical archived documents of JMS in its existence ever since 1999, various review reports and apart from relying on the extensive external documentation and publication done on the work of JMS. Additionally the JMS case study reflects deliberations of key informants like organisational leaders, facilitators and associates with women’s collectives, service providers and officials in the local public service institutions conducted as interviews and reflections surfacing from in-depth group discussions conducted with the present and past community groups and community women leaders.

Part II

Resistance and Collective Power for Structural Justice

The Story of JMS – Beginnings

Context

Raichur district of Karnataka state, sharing the border with Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states, forms the part of the block of 5 districts known as ‘Hyderabad Karnataka’, as it is part of the feudal legacy of Nizam of Hyderabad for over 300 years. According to the Karnataka Human Development Report (1999) the district of Raichur stands low, lower than the sub-Saharan African countries with very low indicators in health, education and gender disparities. Various studies have confirmed the low human development status of general populations in Karnataka which gave rise to a demand for special status under article 371 of the Constitution of India. Pursuant to Dr. D. M. Nanjundappa Committee Report which also coincided with the demand for separate state, cumulatively paved the path for a parliamentary committee report, paving the path for the approval for special status.

The showcasing of the general backwardness of the region conspicuously hides the inequities within the populations and the plight of Dalits and women, who bore the burden of the feudal legacy of Nizam’s rule. The feudal landlords continued to rule villages. A few landlords owning hundreds of acres of agricultural land and many of the Dalit household still being tenants on the piece of land claimed to be his by the landlord summarises the context of the ‘health’ situation of the Dalit communities by and large. The Untouchability with segregation of wells, water sources, and not so infrequent social boycotts in case of Dalit women becoming cooks for the midday meals, rape or parading nude of Dalit women are indicators of the status of Dalit women. The literacy rate of the District is 35.96 percent (one of the lowest literacy

rates in the state). The literacy rate for SC/STs is 21.25% of which male literacy is 31.87% and for females it is 10.61%. Dalit women form a substantial force in agricultural labour force as agriculture is the mainstay occupation of the vast majority of the districts population with 47.6% of all workers being landless agricultural labourers and 31.6% cultivators. (Registrar General of India, Census 2001)

The socio-cultural oppression of Dalits is embedded in this context of general backwardness of the area. The poverty is linked to structural factors such as inequitable distribution of land and land ownership, complete absence of land reforms, caste hegemonies over natural resources such as land, water, agriculture, local economic and political institutions. While the farming castes (generally the Lingayats followed by a few castes lower to them) owned vast stretches of agricultural lands in each village, the SCs and STs formed a major portion of the landless and readily available daily wage and agricultural labour force. The plight of Dalits in the high caste ridden society of Raichur and varied practices of untouchability and discrimination was vehemently resisted by the Dalit movements in Karnataka which upheld the demand for justice and equality. (Pinto, 1999) Dalit movements in Karnataka put up an organised resistance to the continued atrocities, and fought against Devadasi system, land struggles, untouchability practices and occasionally the issues of women in the case of caste-based violence against women. However, raising of issues of violence against Dalit women was incidental to countering the caste based discrimination, but not intrinsic to Dalit women's rights. Dalit movements did not raise nor address the issue of Dalit women's rights and their autonomy. There were very few voices even from women's rights networks which spoke of the rights of Dalit women.

The understanding and analysis of the triple subordination and oppression of Dalit women as Dalits, agricultural labourers, and as Dalit women laid the

foundation for the evolution of JMS. Challenging the caste-class and patriarchy based structures and their expressions in the social spaces was the process that gave rise and formed JMS as a collective of Dalit women agricultural labourers in the drought prone district of Raichur in North Karnataka. The struggles for their social, political, and economic rights mark the trajectory of JMS and it strives towards being a symbol of empowerment of rural Dalit women through mobilizations for respect, basic rights and dignified existence. Building of a healthy community and 'well-being' of the Dalit Women through struggle for dignity & social justice (sangharsh) and reconstructive efforts for a life with dignity (Navnirman) forms the two pillars of the philosophy behind the work of JMS. It is a collective now owned and managed by Dalit Women. (Claiming Dignity and Justice, 2015)

Whereas agricultural laborers generally faced hardships in obtaining work with paltry wages, dalit agricultural laborers faced untold hardships. This dual discrimination included a third dimension which was that of gender. An agricultural female dalit laborer fell into a category that was 'thrice oppressed' with no recourse to any system of support – social, family, community, education or legal. It was in the context of this gross denial of basic human rights, that JMS was born. The vision of JMS was simple but was a means to an end. The end was empowerment of the dalit female agricultural laborer; the means was educational and occupational strengthening. (Karpagam, JMS review, 2011:5)

Community Organisation: JMS is organized through its basic village units wherein women agricultural labourers belonging to socially and economically under-resourced communities are mobilized in the village as Sanghas. The Sanghas are actively involved in micro credit, ensuring access to facilities from the state, resisting acts of violence within homes and the larger community, and perspective building on issues of significance to their lives. These 50 Sanghas in 50 villages in the Talukas of Sindhanur and Manvi collectively comprise the constituency of JMS. The organisation its decision-making body from 2 representatives from each village who are called *karyakarthis* (mobilisers or activists). The *karyakarthis* meet

monthly and determine collectively on decisions regarding the direction and impletion of the work. Ten women who grew as leaders in the process of capacity building are now in charge of the villages and are working full time as ‘*sanchalakis*’ (conveners). The *sanchalakis* are fully in active in (i) raising awareness of issues regarding wages, caste atrocities, violence against women, etc. (ii) Campaign planning on state accountability for the Public Distribution System (iii) The Food For Work and National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to raise awareness and ensure the enrolment of labourers; (iv) Work on raising levels of confidence and awareness interest and belief in the strength of collection action.

Box 1: Nude parading of a Dalit woman Yerramma

In Vanenur village of the adjoining Bellary district, about 100 kms from Pothnal, in September 2000, the entire non-Dalit community collectively meted out the traditional “feudal justice” to a Dalit woman daily wage labourer. A Dalit boy crossed the traditional norms when he and an upper caste girl developed friendship and they eloped from the village fearing backlash. The villagers, however, made Yerramma, about 40 years of age, the scape goat, blaming her for the elopement saying that they had seen her speaking to the boy. In a pre-mediated move, the villagers led by a few upper caste leaders waited for Yerramma in the evening and pounced upon her unawares on her way back home from her wage work in the twilight. Helpless Yerramma was surrounded by men who were drunk and screening. They stripped her naked and tied her hands and physically beat her and dragged her to the local governance Gram Panchayat office. The men in the crowd tied her to the flag hoisting pole, kicked her beat her up till she bled and fell unconscious.

Though this incident immediately was condemned, due to the influence of the upper castes over the local institutions and law enforcement agencies, criminal complaint was not filed.

Health, Wellbeing, dignity and justice – An intersectional approach of JMS: In this case-study we have kept a broader canvas to locate health. Health, or the conditions of being healthy and wellbeing are socially defined and determined (WHO CSDH & World Health Organization, 2008) It is strongly argued that health

and wellbeing are socially produced and the relations of such social production are embedded in social structures. (Navarro, 1976, 1986) Health care services themselves are an expression of the social and structural inequalities. (Qadeer, 2011) For Dalits and women, the indignity and discrimination experienced in health care facilities is an expression of the overarching systemic oppression that they face in public spaces and institutions.

The word discrimination derives from the Latin term *discriminare*, which means ‘to divide, separate, distinguish’. Conceptualised broadly discrimination refers to a means of expressing and institutionalizing social relationships of dominance and oppression. It is perpetrated by a diverse array of actors which include the state and its institutions, non state institutions and individuals. (Conde & Gorman, 2009; Krieger, 2012)

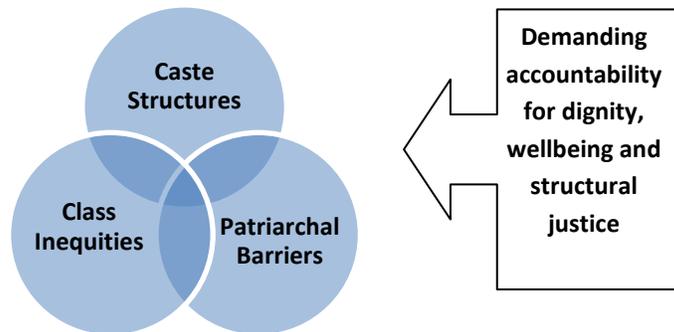
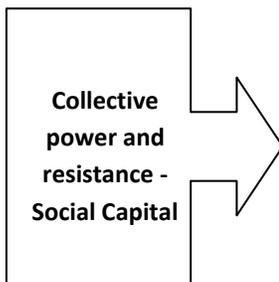
For Dalit women, the concept of health and wellbeing is integral to their concept of dignity and self-respect. Dignity, as Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution of India, himself argued is linked very closely to humanhood and personhood where the equality of being human is the base to ensure basic rights entitled to an equal person by the state as well as in social relations. It encompasses the basic right to live as well as material rights and respect in social relations with one another. (Ambedkar vol 5, ch3). Discrimination, social exclusion, differential treatment and the feeling of being ‘left out’, negligence and denial they face is the violation of human dignity, personhood and social justice.

A research study (Deshpande, 2006) undertaken in the context of Dalit Madiga women of Raichur has conceptualised the concept of dignity with the following components:

- **Work-** availability and under non exploitative non casteist relations and free conditions plus recognition for one’s work
- **Food-** availability and security
- **Land-** availability
- **Health-** a state of being healthy and access to health services
- **Social relations** based on equal recognition of the human person and respect
- **Recognition** as a full person- **humanhood** and humane treatment (eg: rest after child birth)

- **No discrimination** in public spaces
- **Education** for children
- **Respect** for one's work in the family, respect to be accorded by the husband and children
- **Freedom from violence** :Dignity at the level of a community or **collective**

JMS integrated an intersectional approach to confront systemically embedded injustice, primarily in the caste and class relations overwhelmingly reinforced and dominated by patriarchal structures.



Part III

Pathways and Strategies - Multi-layered and Intersectional Accountability Processes

I. Confronting caste structures

The Constitution of India states that untouchability is abolished. (Constitution of India, Article 17). However, discrimination based on caste, especially against the lowest and hitherto considered untouchables, continues in various forms in public services, social and public spaces and in social transactions. Such exclusion and discrimination faced remains a great challenge for the self-respect and dignity of Dalits. The caste discrimination and its expressions intersects very closely with Dalit women's lives, health and wellbeing. Such discrimination and indignity are embedded in social relations and structures. Demanding accountability in this realm meant different things in different point in time. The women leaders also narrated how the caste based discrimination takes violent form in terms of vengeance meted out to Dalits by upper castes, social boycotts on the entire community, assault on the community members etc.

The archival documentation and the discussions with women leaders indicated several ways social accountability was demanded in this realm. Struggle for dignity and engagement with creative livelihood initiatives for life of self-reliance has been the two-pronged approach JMS has adopted towards empowering Dalit Women and Dalit Communities. The spectrum and concept of struggle included resistance to various types of injustices meted out on the basis of caste (on Dalits by the forward castes), class (as agricultural labourers) and gender (as women), campaigns for the right to food, right to education, right to work, right to health etc. and solidarity expressed in various ways with other campaigns and movements (Dalit movement, women's movement, labour movement etc) in Raichur district, Karnataka and even at the national level.

The documentation and analysis of the struggles and campaigns of JMS point to three types of spaces that untouchability and discrimination has been resisted and challenged.

Social relations:

Caste based atrocities on Dalit communities took a routine practice of excluding Dalits from public services, public spaces and public events, and from benefiting from common resources. The subservient and servile attitude of the

Case 1: Nude parade of a Dalit woman: Yerramma was a middle aged woman in Vanenur village of adjoining Bellary district. In September 2001 she was paraded nude by the upper

castes and other non-Dalit members on the pretext of supporting a Dalit boy who had eloped with an upper caste girl. She was stripped of her clothes and was paraded nude for a kilometer on her way back from her daily wage work in the evening. She was tied to the flag-mast pole in front of the Gram Panchayat and was physically kicked and beaten up, till she fell unconscious. (See Box 1)

Case 2: Atrocity on Dalit community at Jawalgere by the land lord: Jawalgere is a village in Sindhanur Taluka (Raichur district) and the landlord of the village is the owner of more than 500 acres of agricultural land, and also has been affiliated to the mainstream political party. As the youth were getting empowered in the village and were defying the traditional caste norms. On the rumour that was being spread that a Dalit boy was teasing an upper caste girl (which the people said that the girl and boy were studying in the same school and were friendly with each other), the landlord personally led the upper caste men, and armed with wooden sticks and batons, swooped on the Dalit colony beating up men, women and going on a rampage in the colony damaging the houses. While the young (men and women) fled, the aged and women got injured.

Case 3: Struggle for burial ground, sanitation and clean environment in villages: The Dalit colonies and settlements in each of the village were located generally in inaccessible, swampy and low lying areas where rain water gathered without having proper drainages. Many villages Dalits faced the problem of burying their dead without having their own burial ground. In all these, the upper castes occupied privileged places, denied entry to Dalits into their fields or public spaces for sanitation.

Case 4: Social boycott on Dalits: Another ingenious and severe way of punishing the entire community, if they transgressed traditional boundaries was social boycott. Social boycott is a term used for complete social ostracisation of Dalits from the life and livelihood sources. As the upper castes had the ownership of all the resources such as transport, local grocery shops, grain threshing local shops, water sources etc, Dalits got ostracized from being employed in the fields, denied groceries from shops, entry into the local transport, water supply was cut off etc. JMS addressed the issues when such social ostracisation was imposed when Dalit women were engaged as cooks in the midday meals, when Dalits resisted the traditional untouchability practices such as barring entry into local hotels. One prominent example that women gave from the recent incident was of social boycott in Tadakal village, where on the pretext of building a sub-health centre, the housing plots of Dalits was confiscated. It was being shifted from an allotted location to housing plots on the main road, under the influence of upper castes, who influenced changing gram panchayat resolutions on account of it being a bit far from the village. The ostracisation continued for over a month.

Box 2: Space, health and rights

In Muddanagudi village, for example, behind the Dalit settlement was a pond where the water flowing from the other colonies flowed into it. As the black cotton soil is an impermeable soil, without having an outlet, it became a pool with stench and where all the dirt was thrown. This sent bad stench into the houses of Dalits and also gave rise to illnesses in the colony. A passage for the to let out the water through the colony of the other castes would have easily solved the problem. However, the usual water passage was blocked by a Lingayat (Upper caste) household and he put up a stiff resistance. Though this had continued for several years, the Dalit women, now organised as JMS, took up the issue with the local panchayat, forced the taluka administration to visit the village, medical personnel to certify, delegations to the local legislator on the situation, photographs of the rotting pool was flashed in the local newspapers. After two years of relentless naming and shaming, the legislator agreed to fill the pond with soil. It took over 15 days of dumping over 300 loads of soil which closed the stinking pond, thus relieving the Dalits of the stench and filth of the upper castes that was thrown into that pond.

Accountability strategies: JMS mobilised larger Dalit movements, women from the villages. The governance and law & order systems

Most of these intertwined with the issues of gender relations and the power inequity of the Dalit communities. In many of these instances of atrocities, which are unconstitutional and unlawful, because of the nexus of upper castes with other authorities, resistant to take any legal action such as filing FIRs. JMS used the pathways of mobilizing public opinion with village meetings, used pamphlets, submitted memoranda and organised protests, sit-in and blocking road (as in the case of parading nude of Yerramma, a Dalit woman) to build pressure on the authorities and to demand their accountability.

Claiming Women’s spaces in Public spaces and institutions :

- Local self-governance institutions: Gram Panchayats: One of the key public institutions that operated as the space of power and hegemonised by the landed castes and men, that deprived Dalits and women of their rightful place, was the Gram Panchayats. Karnataka state was the first state in the country to bring in Panchayat Raj Act which also provided classified reservation to SCs, STs and women. However, even among Dalits, the men represented the elected women in the GPs. The Dalit and women in general had not gone to GPs. The Gram Sabha, the local assembly of people, were never being announced. Though mandated by law, they were held secretly and in the temples or on the front yard of the landlord, thus excluding participation of the vulnerable. During 2002-2004, JMS launched a two year long campaign by name ‘nodi nimma panchayat’ (See your

panchayat) that included taking groups of Dalit women from every village to their respective GPS, facilitating discussions with the GP members and the secretary, and getting educated on the schemes and programmes of GPs. Simultaneously, in each village women demanded that they be informed of the gram sabhas in advance, protested against the ones held without their participation, made the officials reconvene gram sabhas, placed their demands in the gram sabhas.

- ***Right to Health and Health Care:*** The JMS's analysis of their experience of accessing health care during the years 2000-2001 provided substantial insights into the barriers and discrimination they faced in accessing health care services. In 2000, JMS participated in the campaign before the People's Health Assembly 1 (held in Kolkotta) and did an observational study on access to PHCS. Dalit communities and women illustrated several ways of practice of discrimination against the Dalit community. (Chauramma, Premdas & Mita, Report 2000). The systemic discrimination they faced was played in different ways – the ANMs who largely hailed from non-Dalit communities not visiting Dalit hamlets and households due to which Dalit women were deprived of ante-natal care and services, and the Dalit women experienced rude behaviour from the nurse and health personnel in the local PHC. In addition, the corruption, absenteeism, unauthorised prescriptions to private drug store affected Dalit women. The campaign for claiming spaces and demand accountability was triggered by an unusual incident on certifying for social security schemes by the medical officer. (see box) Pursuant to this incident in 2002, JMS organised an year long campaign in the 50 villages coming under 4 PHCs which was named as 'nodi nimma arogya kendra' (see your PHC). It included Dalit women from villages visiting PHCs and interacting with MO and other health providers, knowing of the various services available in the PHC and introducing women leaders to the health personnel. At the village level JMS organised women's meetings with the front-line health personnel in each of the villages. This not only built rapport and familiarity with the health personnel, but also reduced the hesitations of women and enhanced their self-esteem. In a way, the Dalit women's community monitoring of health systems began here, much before the NRHM was launched in 2005. JMS' engagement with PHC system continued intensively during the NRHM period as they took part in the community monitoring of health services of 5 PHCs and 30 villages. JMS worked in alliance and solidarity with several campaign for Right to Primary Health Care spearheaded by People's Health Movement,

engaging with local PHCs against corruption and for optimal treatment, Community Monitoring of health services.

“Doctors never used to touch us. They treat rich and poor differently. They used to take bribes. Before community monitoring, patients used to wait for a long time. We had a meeting with them, asked them why they behaved this way and explained to things to them. Now things are better. They give medicines, conduct deliveries, the infrastructure is better. There are some ASHA who are dalit but some non dalits have been selected by the Anganwadi teacher.’ Karyakartha, JMS (Karpagam, JMS Participatory Review, p.21)

The community have perceived the changes in the primary health care system over the years.

‘The PHCs are now clean. Government doctors are good. We still have to buy some medicines from outside. There are cases of denial of health care. Earlier, we used to go to the private hospital for delivery. The public hospitals had neither doctors nor nurses. Now there are not many deaths of mothers and children. ‘ The doctors tell us – you do not know how to read and write, still how do you know so much?’ Sanchaliki, JMS (Karpagam, Review, p.22)

- **Right to food and nutrition:** The PDS and ICDS programmes formed the backbone of key food security programmes in the country, along with the food-for-work’ seasonal programme that government of India undertook when the state declared the district as ‘drought affected’ in any particular season when the rain failed. The PDS and ICDS were spaces dominated and occupied by non-Dalit and primarily the upper caste people. A rapid assessment (study) done by JMS in 2000 revealed the severe psychological and structural barriers and discrimination Dalit children faced in accessing ICDS facilities, due to which most of the children continued to live in unhygienic conditions when parents went on daily wage labour and were deprived of supplementary food served at the ICDS centre which were located in the non-Dalit and upper caste lanes. Dalit children being not actively included in the ICDS services as they felt psychologically excluded by the ICDS worker who belonged to non-Dalit community. The PDS shops used to be completely irregular, the food grains and kerosene (used by the poor for the kitchen stoves) being siphoned-off by the dominant community members. Dalit women who run the households regularly were deprived of the food grains. In several villages, the PDS cards themselves were with the PDS shop owner. In the village survey JMS did during the severe drought years in Raichur (2002-2005), it was found out that many households had run short of grains and people had started migrating. JMS’s filed mass petitions to the officers on the pathetic conditions of PDS shops. JMS took initiative to translate into Kannada, the

orders in the right to food case (PUCL v. union of India 374/2002) which came in 2004, and launched a campaign in 100 villages, on these orders. JMS factfinding reports were filed with the district administration along with the copy of the orders. This paved the path for a continuous monitoring of PDS shops and ICDS centres by JMS, which became core work of JMS. Post-2005, RTI applications, surveys and filing petitions with the right to food commissioners, providing information to the RTF campaign continued vigorously.

- ***Social security:*** Widow pension, old age pension, disability pension, scholarships for SC/ST children were the key constituents of the social security schemes. Though it was a very small amount (Rs.200/- per month), it instilled some hope of survival for the most vulnerable women, when the wages was Rs.20/- and Rs.15/- for able bodied men and women, respectively. A systematic documentation of Dalit households had revealed that only a few women (widows, aged) and PwDs, especially who had some linkages with people in the system. Several Dalit leaders acted as conduits and social workers who were paid money to obtain these services. Most of the vulnerable had paid money to different so called 'social workers' without getting their applications processed. JMS initiated a process of filing applications of 450 such persons by bring the Tehashildar face to face with them. Though it was a tedious process which took over a year, annually it brought a revenue of over INR 10,08,000/- (excluding the scholarships).
- ***Education:*** Raichur district was listed as one of the districts with highest number of child labour, which also indicated to the malfunctioning of the primary education system. The analysis of JMS identified several Dalit drop out children in each village, who were either working as daily wage labourers, and several of them as pledged (bonded) labour in the houses of upper caste landlords and non-Dalit landed households to repay the loans incurred by parents. The primary schools were managed by single teacher, who were also known for their absenteeism. The strategy of JMS accountability included campaign for universal enrollment, proper functioning of primary schools, and rehabilitation of child labourers. JMS conducted community surveys to identify child labourers and submitted them to the district administration. Children also gave testimonies of their plight in a public hearing organised in Raichur. While the campaign continued to seek accountability from the district education system/department, it also took the shape of a community initiative through Chilipili Child Labour School for the education and rehabilitation of child labourers, which was initially a mobile school which moved annually from one village to the next, and later on

as a residential school, supported by the National Child Labour Programme (NCLP). About 800 children in pledged and child labour were mainstreamed through this school over a decade.

'Our children used to drop out of the school and take care of animals. Children of other castes were getting educated. Our survey showed that almost 350 dalit children were not receiving education. People of the upper castes, used to call the panchayat for a meeting and demand that our children should not be allowed to attend schools. Even if they did attend, they had to sit at the back or outside the classroom' Sanchaliki, JMS (Karpagam, Participatory Review of JMS 2000-2010, p.14)

II. Class relations and collective enforcement of social responsibility

JMS is a women agricultural labourer's collective. The caste-class configuration in Indian society have been extensively researched upon. The lowest castes largely are the largest constituents of the unorganised and informal sector of workers. The Dalits, who are landless agricultural or manual labourers, considered untouchables in India, have been the serfs in the Indian society, attached (bonded) to the lands of the higher classes and farm owning castes. (Omvedt and Patankar xxx). Within this, JMS alludes clearly to the understanding of the feminisation of labour. Dalit women who are predominantly the farm labourers and are unpaid or underpaid. Raichur district which is considered the 'rice bowl' of Karnataka, was known for its agricultural products due to the irrigation facilitated by Tungabhadra canal. However, as the upper castes, primarily, the farming caste of Lingayats, had occupied enormous stretches of lands in each village, the Dalits primarily served as the unpaid labourers. Traditionally, a set of families were attached to a household of landlords, and were given some grains, clothes etc annually. In the agricultural season when they went for work, they had to collect their wages, through a leader (mestri) after a few months. However, as JMS leaders narrated, very often they were not paid, or each time they went, they were paid only partially. As they had to go to several landlords repeatedly, they lost the momentum. Secondly, apart from the three months of peak season of work, where they would take contract work, other months were lean months of which over five months there would not be any work. In the remaining three to four months, which they called lean season, the wages were Rs.20/- and Rs.15/- for men and women respectively. (Documented during 1998-2002). Ref. Pinto 1999) The struggles and campaigns of JMS, as the archival

documents indicate, included primarily demanding work, unpaid wages and higher and sometimes equal wages. A research done in the JMS field with Dalit women strongly indicated that work and wages (livelihood) is inextricably linked to the sense of dignity and wellbeing of Dalit women. (Deshpande 2010)

The key milestone struggles include the following:

- **Demanding payment of wages (2000 – 2002):** JMS collective documented in three villages of Kharabdinni, Amareshwara camp and Pothnal the wages of women which were kept pending by the landlords (farmers) and had a series of negotiating done. When some of them did not relent or agree to pay the pending wages, sit-in (dharnas) were organised in front of his house as a measure to publicly shame the farmer. In all these cases, the unpaid wages of over three years were collected.
- Struggle to get work under ‘food for work’: During the severe drought years (2002-2005) labourers en masse migrated to cities for work. JMS during this time, held rallies and dharnas (sit-in) demanding work under drought mitigation programme. This resulted in getting work labourers in different villages for a fixed period of time. For example, about 300 people of Muddanagudi and Pothanal villages got work for a week (2002). JMS also demanded equal wages for men and women irrespective of their age. This was also the first time men and women were paid equal wages under a government programme.
- 2002-2005: Struggle against the mechanized harvesting: The mechanized harvesters employed in harvesting paddy reduced the days of work for agricultural labourers.

[Box story: The agricultural labourers had to bargain hard for Rs.600/- per acre for harvesting and threshing the paddy. With the harvesting machines, the rate per acreage was decreasing. JMS carried on the campaign against the mechanized harvesting for three years. The campaign included awareness in the villages, petitions to Tehashildars and the District administration. In the year 2004, as a result of the campaign, the district administration banned the entry of the harvesting machines in the entire district. The people then got wages worth Rs.1500 per acre and more number of days in the entire district.]

- ***Campaign and struggle for Dalits accessing MNREGA:*** The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was piloted as a scheme (NREGS) during 2005-2007 and Raichur was one of the districts where the NREGS was piloted. JMS actively campaigned and mobilized communities along with undertaking the process of filing applications for work. As the corruption ridden gram panchayats dominated by the upper and landed castes who saw opportunity for siphoning off money, it was simultaneously a struggle for transparency and accountability. JMS intensively involved itself in this process since 2007, by occupying spaces for demanding accountability and also to strengthen the process. JMS was part of the “Joint Action Committee” a forum of people’s platform in Raichur district, facilitated Social Audit of NREGA, conducted training and capacity building in villages, spearheaded collective action at the Panchayat level for implementation, facilitated dialogue with the Zilla Panchayat for implementation of NREGA and also led collective action at the district. The intensive phase of such engagement was during 2010 – 2012. JMS intensively campaigned for getting 100 days of work of 1000 households (5000 labourers) which resulted in collectively getting revenue (income) of 6 crore rupees to the Dalit households. (JMS, NREGA report 2008-12)

III. Challenging Patriarchy in Caste and Domestic Relations

Patriarchal structures intersect the caste and class structures. As highlighted in the section, gender relations (boys-girls, men and women) were at the centre of caste conflicts. The caste atrocities on Dalits often started with an incident where the Dalit boys defied the caste norms or the upper castes concocted such stories to target the Dalit women and communities. Similarly, the vengeful acts or ‘showing the place to Dalits’ by the upper castes took the form of assault, sexual assault or heinous violence such as parading nude of women, sexual assault on women with impunity, social boycotts on the community, building a conflicting situation that justifies attack by spreading rumour about the love relationships and so on... Devadasi system was another example for operation of caste and patriarchy. Young adolescent girls from vulnerable Dalit households, often headed by single women, widows, Devadasis, or the last girl from the households without male children or girl with disabilities fell victim to this system in a very mysterious way. Such girl is dedicated herself to ‘yellamma’ or other subaltern deities (goddesses) and considered ‘god Hanumantha’ as their husband. However, in practice it meant that much before the dedication process began, an upper caste man has developed sexual relationship with the girl or has struck a deal with the woman of the house.

Paatriarchal hegemonies and masculinities in class relations was exhibited in varied ways. While the landowners were men, invariably negotiating for wages and then pleading that the

wages be paid involved the unequal patriarchal relations. The labour groups of women formed were headed primarily by men and some women who had to accept what is settled as the wages for the agricultural work. Similarly when the 'food for work' was declared in the drought seasons or in the implementation of MNREGA the corrupt systems, misappropriations and obstacles were the men against whom militant agitations were to be waged.

However, JMS delved beyond this into understanding patriarchy, primarily into their own private spaces of households and couple relationships. Women narrated the series of 'social analysis' that was held with groups of women in each of the villages to analyse the caste-class-patriarchy. It was followed by film screenings and in-depth discussions. As an outcome, Dalit women of JMS started discussing for the first time in the collective, the violence within their own households and caste, a factor that the Dalit movements in the district or state, had never raised.

The issues that JMS facilitated or supported the following:

- Smt. Y, one of the senior women sanchalakis, with the empowerment she experienced went and complained to the police station on her husband who was harassing and beating her up. This led to a public apology by the husband, never to assault her again.
- In several villages, women as a group invited the man to the meeting and *publicly confronted men* who were abusing women members or obstructing their participation in the sangha meetings.
- An upper caste (Marwari household) woman who was beaten to death and was burnt, was identified by JMS leaders, and a complaint was given to the police to investigate.
- JMS decided to act on serious cases of violence on Dalit women, though it was not in the area of JMS' area of work. The law enforcement, forensic, and judicial mechanisms were used, some times with fair degree of success and in majority of the cases without yielding any tangible results from the courts. However, opening up the discourse did happen through these processes, and JMS' identity as a women's rights organisation and such a recognition was given. (See box)
- Case of a suspected dowry harassment death in Kotnekal village, where the woman consumed poison. JMS was invited by the taluka administration to be witness at the 'panchanama' (forensic examination of the body). The criminal case on behalf of the parents of the deceased on dowry death was pursued till the last step in the district sessions court through the legal assistance by JMS. After three years of court battle, the case was did not get a favourable order.

Box 3: Case of domestic Violence death

A dalit woman who was pregnant died under suspicious circumstances and was hurriedly buried. The family members had planned to cremate the body without informing the family of the deceased woman, though generally burial is the custom among Dalits. However, due to the protest by the family of the deceased woman, she was buried. One of the female relative of the deceased argued that it was a domestic violence death. This news came after about 10 days. JMS while putting various hearsay evidence together confirmed that it was a death due to torture by the husband and mother-in-law. She was brutally kicked on her stomach due to which she died on the way to a private nursing home. The police did not show much interest in the case. Neighbours refused to divulge any information and were not ready to testify either. JMS finding a higher police officer (Circle Inspector of Police) who was sympathetic to the cause, managed to get an forensic inquest ordered in this case.

Under the criminal procedure code section 176, the inquest was ordered. JMS was asked to be witness to the procedure. The burial place was in a deserted land without any access. The government machinery including the Tehashildar, CIP, Taluka Surgeon and a forensic expert had to walk in the scorching sun for about two kilometres. The vital organs were taken for forensic test as evidence.

Culturally however, digging out a dead body after 14 days was a thing that was unheard of in the village, and created quite an uproar and fear among the villagers. It was reported that for about two weeks the villagers kept awake in the night, which also spread the news around the villages about JMS and its vigilance.

There outcome of this incident in the court of law and the forensic evidence was not impactful. However, such a procedure put the police machinery on alert on the activism of JMS. In two incidents of deaths of women which followed in the next two weeks under suspicious circumstances, JMS was duly informed by the government machinery to be witnesses when the *panchnama*¹ of the body was done.

IV. Strategies Employed for Bolstering Accountability Processes

Struggle for dignity and engagement with creative livelihood initiatives for life of self-reliance has been the two-pronged approach JMS has adopted towards empowering Dalit Women and Dalit Communities. The spectrum and concept of struggle included resistance to various types of injustices meted out on the basis of caste (on Dalits by the forward castes), class (as agricultural labourers) and gender (as women), campaigns for the right to food, right to education, right to work, right to health etc. and solidarity expressed in various ways with other campaigns and movements (Dalit movement, women's movement, labour movement etc) in Raichur district, Karnataka and even at the national level. JMS conceptualised and embedded such struggles and collective actions for accountability at the

¹ Panchnama - *Panchanama* is a Sanskrit word 'Panch' means respectable person; 'nama' means a written thing. A written account of some transaction, which had taken place in the presence of respectable persons (two or more than two). The same can be used for refreshing their memory and it can also be used as evidence in a court .

local level, in the larger vision of political and social accountability. This included using opportunities with for electoral candidates, using judicial and investigation/law and order (police) systems, building solidarity with other social campaigns and movements and using strategies of right to information act for change and accountability.

- ***Electoral accountability:*** During the state assembly elections of 2004 and the Gram Panchayat elections of 2002, 2007 and 2012 JMS actively mobilised communities for voting the appropriate candidate. A public face to face dialogue was organised in Pothnal Village between the legislative assembly candidates and women in 2004, where women placed their demands through a manifesto before the candidates of all leading parties. Similarly, in the Gram Panchayat elections of 2002 and 2007, discussions were held with communities on the character of the candidate with a resolve not to yield to any incentive such as money or alcohol and not to vote for the candidate known to be corrupt. In the GP elections of 2012, an effort was made to support specific candidates who were nominated by JMS and other solidarity movements. The outcomes of such a process, in terms of electoral results, were not always as women expected. However, it provided a space for Dalit women to question the contesting candidates and to elicit their responsibility publicly.

- ***Judicial-legal mechanisms:*** The structural injustice that the Dalit communities and women experienced aggravated and denial of justice was reinforced due to the apathy of the police and judiciary. This has been evident in several cases of mass atrocities on Dalits in India where atrocities have been committed in connivance with or with the apathy of the police, where police have remained bystanders. In the aftermath, the police also have weakened the case due to their shoddy investigation, resulting in acquittals of the accused. Such apathy was experienced by JMS in its initial years as it was addressing caste based violence on women. In a first instance, in 2002, some non-Dalit men abused and assaulted Dalit women in Hirekotnekal village, on their way back from daily wage work. The women who had stronger sense of solidarity now, collectively took a historical decision to lodge the police complaint. However, it took a series of delegations by women, three times sit-ins in front of the police station at the block level and a delegation then to the superintendent of police at the district level. Only after such pressure, the culprits were arrested. The women were under tremendous pressure to withdraw the complaint during the time of filing chargesheet in the court. However, they decided to continue with the trial in the court. The cases of domestic violence (Yeddaladinni village), caste based atrocities of various kinds such as refusal burial ground (Kharabdinni village), assaulting community members on frivolous grounds (Dumthi village), addressing rape on a nomadic woman collecting women's hair in exchange for hair-pins (known as hair-pin selling woman) in Udbal-Markamdinni village. In all these cases women waged strong public protests, burning effigy,

taking oath not to tolerate violence, marching with sickles (agricultural harvesting knife/tool), *rasta-roko* (road blockade) etc. Such collective actions moulded and mobilised women in the rights of Dalit women, at the same time, challenged the police inaction.

- **Solidarity with other campaigns:** The vision of a greater social change and social accountability led JMS to forge solidarity with various other social movements such as Dalit movements, environment movements, labour movements, right to food campaign, people's health movement. JMS closely associated with the Madiga Reservation Horata Samiti (MRHS), a campaign which demanded an internal population based reservation to various castes within scheduled castes. Association with various alliances such as National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), Narmada Bacho Andolan (NBA), Pension Parishad, Right to Food Campaign, Right to Primary Health Care Campaign have broadened the understanding of JMS core members to other issues of structural injustices.
- **Strategic use of legal provisions:** JMS strategically engaged legal and policy provisions to boost up the process of accountability. The usage of Right to Information Act (RTI) was very extensive and included filing petitions for information on Project Implementation Plans of Gram panchayats, NRHM departments, various government departments, functioning of the PDS in villages and to obtain work under NREGA. Four GP secretaries were hauled by the State Information Commission for not providing information and one was levied a fine of Rs.25,000/-. Other legislations strategically used were SC/ST atrocities Act, Domestic Violence Act, Child Labour Regulation Act. Building solidarity with the local legal community and judiciary also strengthened such a process.

Box 4: Prominent struggles and campaigns spearheaded by JMS

1. Pothnal Bundh and Rasta Roko protesting against the nude parading of Yerramma, a Dalit woman at Vanenur village in Bellary District
2. Protest against atrocity on Dalit community at Jawalgere by the land lord and other forward castes
3. Campaign for food for work and equal wages during drought (2003)
4. Campaign for the right to health and primary health care (2003 onwards)
5. Campaign for reaching government schemes to Dalit communities
6. Year long campaign for Dalit women's participation in the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats
7. Struggle for burial ground, sanitation and clean environment in villages
8. Struggle for proper functioning of the PDS shops
9. A three year long campaign against the paddy harvesting machines (2002-05)
10. Campaign and struggle against violence on Dalit women (within their own households and in the society at large)
11. Campaign for the right to (receive) wages after work from the

employers/landlords

12. Campaign for education for all without discrimination
13. Campaign for adequate compensation and rehabilitation during floods
14. Various solidarity struggles (to support Dalit movement, right to work/food etc)
15. The campaign and struggle for right to work with a specific focus on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) included women leaders going on hunger strike for 6 days in Raichur.

Part IV

Grounded Theory of Change – JMS social accountability model

At the turn of the millennium (1999-2000) JMS began as a collective challenging caste-class-patriarchal hegemonies which were the key barriers for the realization of their dignity and justice. With the perspectives of human rights and dignity at the core of its work, it has emerged as a grounded grassroots movement by the most marginalized sections of society – viz. Dalit Madiga women who are daily wage and agricultural labourers. This analytical case study and the accountability model followed by JMS along with an analysis of its strategies and pathways for nearly two decades, lends itself to formulate a grounded theory of social accountability.

Grounded theory of social accountability:

The marginalization and barriers to health and well-being, as experienced by Dalit women are embedded in the societal structures. The social-political-economic and cultural structures form a web within which the humanhood of Dalit women is denied. The two decades of JMS and the pathways of struggle and reconstruction for dignity and justice through an creative blend of resistance the oppressive structures.

Key actors:

- Dalit women leaders of each village who formed themselves as the group of karyakarthas and the core group of women conveners (Sanchalakis) were the key actors of this process.
- Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatan, as an organisation brought the organisational power, identity and organisational space.

Mechanisms:

- Organising Dalit women at the community level. Each village group is the building block of JMS where fundamental discussions are held and decisions are taken.
- Building collective leadership: For the ownership of Dalit women over the community organisation, building multi-level leadership was the key. This was accomplished through perspective building, taking individual cases of atrocities and violence and addressing it always with the potential group of women leaders.

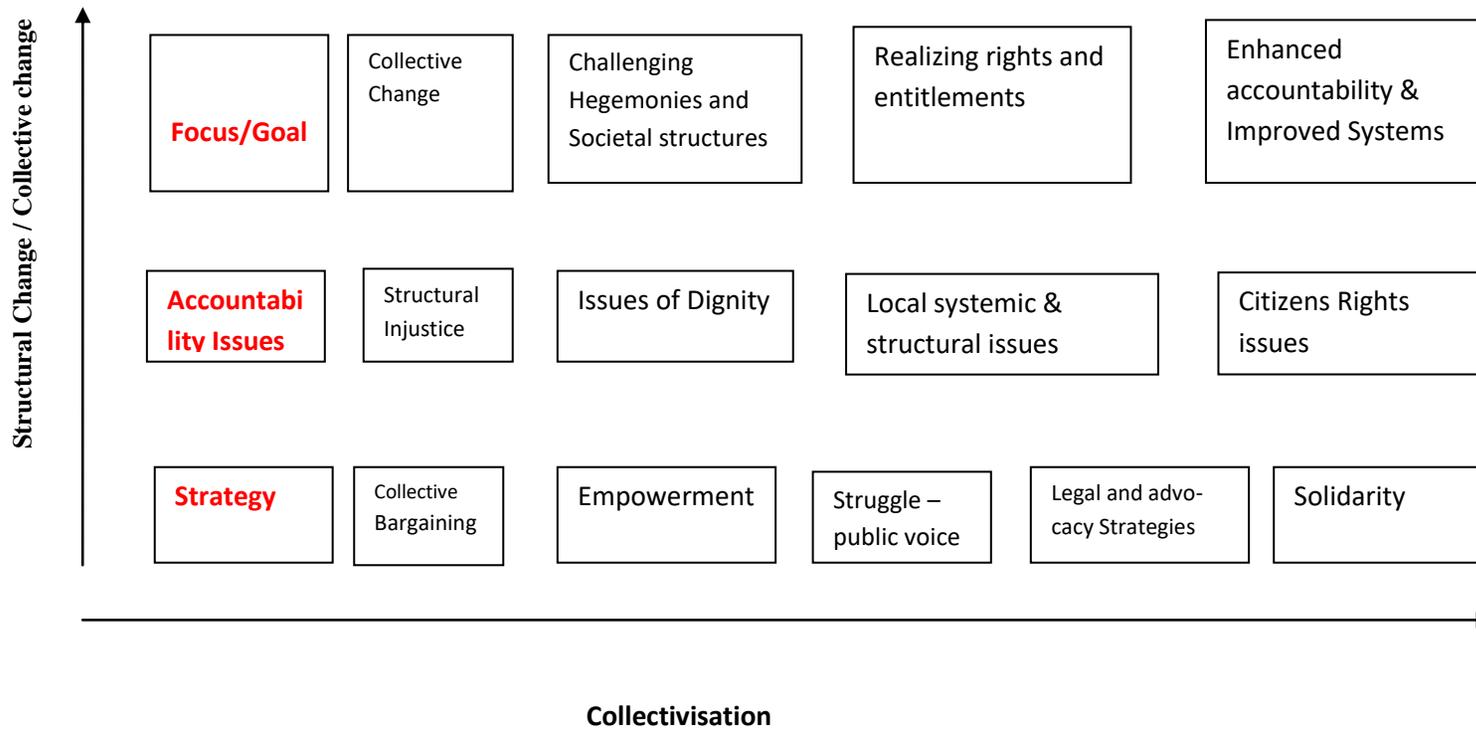
- **Building Solidarity:** Collective power is enhanced by strategic solidarity with various social movements, especially the Dalit movements at the local level and other social movements at the state and national levels.

Processes:

- **Struggle and resistance to overt expressions of discrimination, indignity and violence**
- **Campaigns:** Campaigns against violence against women, social security rights, sustained campaign for rural employment were instrumental in building a power and rights discourse in the region.
- **Strategic Interventions and Advocacies:** At different intervals, JMS took up long terms strategic interventions and campaigns of intensive nature, which touched the nerve of systemic deficiencies. for example, the struggle against harvesting machines, campaign against child and bonded labour, community monitoring of primary health care services in four PHCs, intensive campaign for rural employment for over two years increased systemic engagement.

Figure 1

Grounded theory of social accountability



JMS Accountability model: The theory of change derived from the two decades of practice, the patterns of strategies, consistency of approach provides a cogent model for an inter-sectional approach. (spiral) It is not linear nor positivistic.



- Empowerment – Community ownership & leadership, Rights consciousness and conscientisation
- Struggle – localised (village level) or broadbased
- Campaigns for building momentum and rights consciousness among the cadre
- Solidarity – Local (JMS units, other organisations), district (other networks, social movements), State (State level networks, social movements and state units of national campaigns) & National Level (participation in Pension Parishad)

Rights Claimants: In this model the rights claimants are the Dalit women. They are not limited not only to the villages where JMS is active, but Dalit women as a deprived constituency. With a broadbased perspective of the rural wage workers and labourers as rights holders, JMS has also extended solidarity with other labour unions and campaigns.

Duty bearers: In challenging the caste-class-patriarchal systems, accountability is demanded from caste and class hegemonies who perpetuate and perpetrate oppression on Dalit women. The challenging of patriarchal structures has permeated to the household spaces and public spaces where the power of men took violent and oppressive forms.

Demanding accountability, hence is not limited only to the governance structures but extended also to societal structures. A mixed model of horizontal and vertical accountability which strategically takes intersectoral and systemic approach is seen in JMS model.

Part V

Changing Socio-Political Eco-System and Challenges

The two decade long journey of JMS has seen waxing and waning of energy within and around JMS. The socio-political eco-system has changed over the twenty years within the time period of a generation. Various social collectives have witnessed fragmentation and various resistance movements have fizzled out. Meanwhile, children who were born during this period to the sanghatan women, who are now in their youth, carry a very different aspiration of social mobility.

Sanghatan has very consciously and effectively addressed caste based violence, and the mechanism and ability to address such incidents if they occur. Migration of labourers during this period to cities, education of children, outmigration of youth for work, relative increase in wages has broadened the exposure and opportunities for Dalit communities as a whole. On the other hand, the pace with which the other forward communities have progressed during the same period, points to the factor of increased inequities. Apparently, the vulnerabilities are less visible comparatively. However, as the social service systems have become during the same period, thus forcing the communities to purchase food, health care and education from private institutions which has rendered them resourceless. As the the social protection is depleted, their vulnerabilities too have become unpredicted and alarming.

JMS also faces the challenges of predatory elements and competition in the social struggle arena. New social configurations that have been built over the strength of JMS, for example Rural Wager Workers Union, has encroached the constituency of JMS and has also siphoned off some of its cadre. Similarly, other financing institutions who have formed the self-help groups of women in villages who dole out money in the form of loans easily, question JMS on the material benefits that they have been able to give to people.

Occasionally, the caste-class-patriarchal structures tend to render heavy backlash to the communities. Though the periodicity of social boycotts and assaults on community have reduced, one hears of such incidents all of a sudden. A sharp rise in domestic violence is observed by JMS as several women bring their cases to JMS asking for support. This is a potential area needing a lot of attention.

At one level, JMS has provided dignity, identity and space for Dalit women, the dilemmas of survival vs. struggles for identity and dignity continue in an unresolved manner. Both dignity and dignified existence (livelihood) is important for them. The material benefits that JMS has been able to obtain to the sanghatan members has been less and inadequate. This is required to address the livelihood and survival struggles of women.

JMS leaders have identified several areas where nurturing is required as they semi-literate and have limitations. Challenges of fostering and nurturing community spaces is an important issue that JMS needs to consider. The need for soft skills of financial management, resource mobilization, finding newer leadership and yet continue to work as a non-elite and grassroots collective place a continuous demand for nurturing leadership in varied ways. Life and spirit in JMS is infused by the ownership, commitment and strength of the core leadership and the community level cadre. Sustaining and nurturing this and simultaneously addressing the systemic issues of accountability and balancing the both is one of the key challenges that JMS faces at the moment. This is equally linked to making JMS relevant to contemporary needs and aspirations of young Dalit women, who may not find untouchability related discrimination as the foremost problems. JMS needs to continuously re-invent itself in the changing socio-political-cultural situations to strengthen, sustain and make itself relevant.

Conclusion

The case-study unfolds the process of conscientisation, resistance and liberation that this subaltern group ushered in rural societal and governance institutions of two blocks in the district of Raichur, viz. Manvi and Sindhanur. It covers the life-span of JMS from 1999-2016. The JMS is still active though the contours of its work and processes have undergone modification.

JMS demanded accountability both from the households, societal structures and the public governance system. The analysis is located in their three-fold experience of caste (as Dalits and Madigas, the lowest sub-caste among Dalits), class (as agricultural labourers) and patriarchy (as women). The case-study describes the various forms of systemic discrimination and social exclusion faced by the Dalit women in socio-cultural, economic and political spheres which in terms of health care result in poor health outcomes. Discriminatory and exclusionary practices in health care can be in several forms like negligence or denial in admission to medical treatment, poor quality medical treatment, neglect by service providers, being uncared for or not included in the processes of health programmes or not being examined on account of social identity of the citizen (patient) seeking health care. These result in serious denial of health entitlements and violations of health rights. The discrimination also takes the form of extreme targeted caste and gender based violence in form of sexual exploitation, domestic violence, social boycott, unpaid work and alienation from public and social spaces of the Dalit women.

The process of accountability is located in the collective power that Dalit women exhibited to break the culture of silence. The lived experiences of Dalit women reveal that their vulnerability and disadvantages are enhanced and perpetuated by the 'culture of silence'. It describes the evolution of the marginalised women into active citizens starting from the nondescript village of Pothnal in Manvi taluk of Raichur district in Karnataka. The collective identity of women took shape as the collective of Dalit women agricultural labourers through various strategies.

The principal focus of work of JMS has been the social-economic and cultural empowerment of Dalit women agricultural laborers in Hyderabad-Karnataka region through the

Community Based People's organization known as JagruthaMahilaSanghatan (JMS). It began as a collective voice against the ubiquitous nature of caste violence that woman in the community faced and spreading of empowered Dalit women units across to more than 50 villages of Raichur district. Gradually its identity grew as a collective engaged in the protection and promotion of human rights of Dalit Women through socio-economic-cultural empowerment of Dalit women and Dalit communities in Karnataka.

The case study explores how JMS, which translates to 'a collective of arising women' over a period of 16 years has straddled the terrain of being an 'unorganized Dalit Madiga women's group' to a collective claiming dignity and well-being; and being visible by shunning the "culture of silence." the demand for accountability and th strategies forged are on the twin principles of *sangharsh* (struggle for rights and dignity) and *navnirman* (reconstruction). These con-jointly harness their collective strength to address caste, class and patriarchy-based oppression and violence to demand greater accountability and responsiveness both from the community and from the State.

Key Contributions:

Expanded dimension of health: This case study expands the scope of health and accountability in the context of the most marginalized and locates it in the larger dimension of health as well-being, dignity, a human right and fundamentally an issue of social justice.

Enhanced understanding of accountability: The accountability is conceptualized as a process whereby it is community based, begins and continues with the ownership of Dalit women. It is not a demand for a few services or some incremental change in some piecemeal programmes that are announced by the government. The processes of accountability is a continuous process of restoring dignity and a quest for social justice. Health care system and its barriers are integral part of and the manifestations of the systemic barriers that Dalit women face. Hence, to make health system accessible to Dalit women, overcoming barriers of discrimination and oppression has to be process that goes hand-in-hand.

Collective power as part of the process of accountability: In contrast to the techno-centric tools of accountability, the systemic oppression banks upon the social power and social

capital of collective power. The process of demanding accountability is intrinsic to building autonomy, ownership and control over their own collective decision making. This case story narrates how Madiga women have battled an uphill struggle for justice, equality and dignity with their fair share of gains, challenges, and part roadblocks in the process of social mobilisation and collectivisation, in interrogation of the structures of oppression and usage of organised power to confront head on violence related to caste and gender.

Inter-sectoral and multi-pronged strategies: The alteration of fundamental power equations require differently conceived strategies. JMS has used the strategies of ‘resistance’ of oppression and violence as an important tool to re-imagine accountability in the public consciousness of people and officials. The strategies have taken the form of public demonstrations, picketing, confronting officials and leaders, demanding action and reforms in various institutions of governance and justice such as gram panchayats, primary health care centres, police stations and the like. Strategic alliances and forging of social solidarity with larger struggles of labour movement and various state and national level networks also is a key strategy used for sustaining the movement.

Making health system responsive and community –centric and rendering primary health care system responsive and sensitive to Dalit women involved public health dialogues and public demonstrations in PHCs on the one hand and also building a cadre of local traditional healers and validating their traditional health knowledge. The mass support also was garnered by touching the lives of people by healing their suffering through local remedies. Similarly, process of conscientizing communities about systemic oppression was taken up through the issue of child and bonded labour that was prevalent. Education for liberation was undertaken by making a bridge school for Dalit children working as child labourers and providing them alternative, creative and safe learning space.

Sustained processes for accountability: Unaccountability towards the poor, embedded in the discrimination and societal inequity, needs sustained process of resistance and confrontation. The behaviour of public institutions including that of health care is reinforced socially and culturally over a period of time. The impunity of the systems of public governance is reinforced over a period of time where the privileged (from upper classes, castes and men) collude and the oppressed feel too powerless to question oppression. Through the organized

power and solidarity, the process of accountability begins with breaking the culture of silence at every instance of violation and in each and every space, both private and public. JMS case-study alludes to such a sustained process and its impact on changing the mind-sets in local governance institutions such as Panchayats or public service delivery institutions such as PDS shops or PHCs. The strategies to such a process cannot be formulaic but are locally formulated and decided.

Reinventing citizenship as part of the accountability process: The marginalization is a process of excluding citizens from the participatory governance process and more fundamentally is a process of rendering them ‘non-citizens’. In an expanded understanding of health, dignity, wellbeing and accountability, the JMS reinforces the idea of reinventing citizenship through empowerment as part of the accountability process. The results of accountability process are not certain tools or events but a sense of dignity and affirmation that the disempowered community feels. Such process cannot be episodic event or a linear process. It is a spiral process of dialectics of continuous struggles, experiencing setbacks and retreats at time and continuously sustaining the process of resistance and claiming rights.

Conclusion:

JMS which began at the turn of the millennium (1999) has continued to show its collective power over sixteen years. It has also seen rapid changes in the societal, economic and political spheres. The case-study also describes its challenges and the primary ‘struggle to survive’ as a collective due to various predatory elements. The challenges of fostering such community spaces suffer due to the lack of financial resources to non-elite and subaltern groups and to issues where there are no sensational and spectacular results. As there is configuration of solidarity among the oppressed, there is also a re-configuration of oppressive forces of caste, class and patriarchy which is bolstered by the dominant political and economical eco-system. The Dalit women have faced backlashes. The case-study as it describes and analyses the journey, it also points to the need for community based collectives such as JMS to reinvent itself continuously to respond to the changing external and internal eco-system both of empowerment and disempowerment.

Appendices

Documents referred:

1. 10 year review of JMS
2. Labour union application form
3. Claiming Dignity and Justice – A photostory of 16 years of JMS
4. Film 1: hejjevalu
5. Film 2: SIRD film on women
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