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Research paper



Breaking the monolith: working through planes of difference

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Abstract

The idea of women empowerment is closely associated with the discourse of development. The neoliberal state not only prophesize empowerment as the inevitable route for the women to become developed but also defines this empowerment in its own specific terms. The state's version of empowerment that it perpetuates through different institutions is problematic as it essentially push all the women in one direction that is to become a confident, independent, modern subject irrespective of their context, experiences, histories, capabilities. Through my MPhil action research work with the women of a village called Palwadi in Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh, we are trying to break the homogeneity of empowerment and understand what does empowerment means to us? This paper discusses the rigidity of empowerment which takes women as a homogeneous lot and imposes on them a certain kind of becoming. Next it discusses why is it important to introduce the idea of difference in our understanding as well as methods of engaging with women and women groups. After this, it delves into a possibility of shifting the axis from 'who is a woman' to 'what is a woman' that is from biological woman to woman as embodied, historic, political beings at the same time relating this to the work I have been doing in Palwadi with women Self Help Groups.

Keywords: *Empowerment; Gender; Group; Subjectivity.*

1. Introduction

Globalization and formation of political and developmental organizations at the international level especially after World War 2, has reshaped the question of development and welfare in terms of a movement towards human rights and equality. The process of development and policy making in this sense can only be understood through a nexus of the institutions that work at the international, national as well as the local level. In order to understand the idea of empowerment, it then becomes necessary to trace it genealogically through the developmental discourse that is shaped by such institutions. This first section of the paper illustrates how development has associated with the question of women and gender. It discusses three stages of this association, namely, Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD). The purpose is to chart out the orientation of these discourses and the process of subjectivisation that they engender.

2. Wid wad gad

The WID approach is based on equality and inclusion of the women in the decision-making processes whether related to economy or policy making. With United Nations bringing out policies and recommendations for women and their role in development, women came to be seen as not just a passive recipient of benefits but as agents of development who can perhaps increase the scope and scale of development [1]. United Nations also declared the decade 1976-85 as the decade for Women. It came to be realized that women constitute a major part of population and are an important part of labor, targeting which can contribute in an increased pace of progress. Women's efficiency and productivity became an important aspect of economic growth. Scholars like Ester Boserup [2], in her study of Women's role in Economic Development argued for the acknowledgement of women's work and productive contribution in the economy. Thus, productivity of women became the lens from which women came to be associated with development. The WID did recognize the need to place women on an equal footing with the men, it did not account for the inherent inequality and bias that exist against the women. The WAD criticizes the structural inequalities that work against the women within family as well as the economy. In such a case a mere inclusion does not solve the problem of discrimination against women as the spaces where they are included into are already skewed in favour of men. The WAD approach argued for a better understanding of what we call 'work' especially when it comes to domestic household work or reproductive labor [1]. It tried to bring to the forefront a host of 'work' done within the household for subsistence as well as surplus generation that were not taken to be a part of the value chain. WAD re-articulated the role of women in the economy showing that women's work cannot just be seen through the lens of productivity.

The GAD approach, takes the WAD one step ahead by arguing that being a woman is not just a matter of biological differentiation but is also related to other experiences in the society. It proposes a move from 'women' which is based on birth as the identical category to 'gender' which is socially constructed. GAD argues to look more closely into women's experiences as that is where the everyday struggles and negotiations take place. It works towards understanding women's experiences as an agglomeration of race class gender caste, each effecting the other in myriad ways.

To forward the agenda of development, for WID it became important to focus on women's access to health and education, so that the women's productive labour can be utilized for the economic growth. The drive behind raising the question of equality for women in a way was generated so that women can be used as instruments in the developmental agenda. The promise of equality also sounds hollow without entailing discussions on space and access. The axis of equality also becomes problematic as it takes women as a homogeneous lot as if whose process of becoming

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equal can be same. In the following approaches one does find the questions of bias in different spaces for women and a skewed access to resources. GAD does counter the homogeneity presumed among women but the idea of development within GAD still remains tied to the modernized westernized notion of development which is mostly capital centric[1]. The question here then is that what is it to decenter the development itself. What does it mean to make the development feminine instead of making the feminine developed.

3. Reflections from the field

Keeping the trajectory of thought on women and gender in mind one then needs to ask, how then to engage with the questions on/around women. What methodological tools or what manner of enquiry can help in bypassing the problematics of our given understanding of women and also lead to development of a new theory. In an attempt of one such engagement, I tried in Palwadi to understand the question of women and gender through their everyday lives and the subject positions that they come to occupy.

Palwadi is situated in Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh. The village has 71 households [3]. In these 71 households, there are 66 households of ST (Gond Adivasis), 4 belonging to OBCs (3 Yadavs and 1 Lohar) and 1 SC (Kotwal) household [4]. According to Census of India 2011, the total population of the village is 319 comprising of 157 males and 162 females. The village is dominated by Gond (a scheduled tribe) and there is a Gond Samaj which is social governing body of the Gonds. The Gond Samaj conducts meetings where social matters are discussed. In one such meeting of Gond Samaj, there was a discussion on organization of an event for the occasion of Shivratri in the village. These meetings generally take place in night when most people can attend them. These meetings are conducted in Rangmanch . One part of the Rangmanch was occupied by the Siyans of the village sitting in an arc facing towards other people. Men were sitting on one side and women were sitting on the other two sides of this formation (this is also because there were more women present than men). The meeting discussed, what women should do on the occasion of Shivratri. This meant that apart from doing the regular tasks of cooking food, women should also perform Chhattisgarhi traditional songs. To this there was a silence in the meeting where all women were looking at each other or talking in hushed tones among two or threes. One among them said that they really don't know those traditional songs. On this the response in the meeting was that this idea of her is 'ghatiya'. These women were seen as who are more deeply engaged with the Self Help Group (SHG) work and space than any other thing. That is, they are more interested in things that involve SHG work, they move out travel in cars for SHG work but they do not know their own festivals and traditions. The Siyans of the village attributed this aspect of women who don't know their own culture properly as 'ghatiya' as the understanding around being a good woman is one who knows her culture well. This meeting brought out the cracks in the narrative of Palwadi which is presented as a model village comprising or sangathit sashakt (organized and empowered) women.

In another instance the women in the village shared that when the Collector of the area comes to visit the village (most probably to see what has been results of the various schemes and programs in the area) women are asked to narrate the rules and guidelines of their Self Help Groups (which have now come under the purview of BIHAN, because of this the women should know all the guidelines that comes with it). They were also asked what do they need and when they said that they need 'support', this support was wrongly interpreted as financial support in that meeting and they were reprimanded as to why they should be given financial support when so much is already done for them in various schemes and they don't even remember the prescribed guidelines. It is exactly in this sense that the women are made a part of development. Through my engagement with different women in the village who are also a part of SHGs, I got a sense of a certain image of a woman that is expected to be inculcated by everyone. It is as if, there is a goal fixed for women to become a certain kind of woman. This idea partially comes from various institutions (like the Gond Samaj and the SHG itself) and how women have been portrayed in these. For instance, in the SHG space women who are vocal and articulate, who can read and write are seen as superior. However, this image of how a woman should be is not very tangible or something which exists out there but it can be seen playing out in different situations. This portrayal of women and even inclusion for that matter is dependent primarily on what and how these institutions require women for their purposes. This is not to say that these institutions are not for the advantage of women, instead they are an important part of everyday of women's lives. The point that I want to mark here is that, institutions such as Gond Samaj, SHGs are important part of women's lives in Palwadi but at the same time they cultivate and impose certain rationality, which does nor correspond with the women's realities.

In a conversation regarding what happened in the Samajik meeting, one women said that they are required to do various things. At their home they have to perform the tasks of cooking and cleaning. Apart from them they also have to do a lot of SHG related work. In doing all these there is a standard they have to meet, a standard of expectation of doing certain things in a certain manner. And if they do not do it that way, then they have to face humiliation. It is in this compulsion to be certain way lays the struggle of everyday for these women, which also amounts to functioning in a perception of lack.

In a conversation with another woman, she said that she is called Rand Randi by her father-in-law. She says I have done nothing to be called such but since he calls me such names whenever he wishes there must be something wrong in the way I look. The self-blame was very evident in her words as she repeatedly asked that what do I think when I look at her. Implicit in her asking this question was how do I become a respectable woman, what do I do to become this woman who is not called names and who is not at the behest of others.

At this stage it is important to ask that what we really mean by empowerment. Is empowerment just an illusion of an ideal women or does it actually imbue power within women. Can empowerment operate in isolation where women are seen as empowered by but are suppressed within the society and family. In Palwadi, there are seven women groups whose existence is seen as a testament to the empowerment of women in Palwadi. But women are seen juggling with the expectations of different planes in their lives. Some women who are close to the standard idea of empowerment become leaders in the hierarchy that is created and who do not fit into the set are relegated as under-developed or non-empowered.

Taking this argument forward, the next section propose that perhaps sexual difference can help us in breaking the hegemony of empowerment as well as can show a possibility of a non-hierarchical relating

4. The IM-possibility of relationship

Dhar [5] in his paper, 'Sexual Difference: Encore yet again' quotes Derrida

For Lacan all sticks are under water; all sticks are 'bent' in myriad ways. All sticks have to them an Imaginary, a Symbolic and a Real face(t). All sticks are marked by conscious commitments and unconscious dispositions; all sticks remain menaced by the two layered-ness of the Mystic Writing Pad – two layeredness marked by a perceptually available innocence and legibility on the surface layer and an infinite resource of intricate and uncanny traces on the deeper layer (Derrida, 1978: 226)

The intricate and uncanny that Lacan talks about is completely overlooked in the development thought and it is presumed that women will have to follow what the state and society has decided for them to be the righteous path. The ideal that is created for women works as the Imaginary straight stick against which all women are measured.

The imposition does not only come from outside but it is also internalized where one keeps a check on oneself as well as others. This effects the relationship among these women creating the feelings of

envy, inferiority, guilt, antagonism. In a way, these relationships become the carrier of the burden of maintaining the image of women. These relationships create a matrix into which the women are embedded and determine the being as well as becoming of a woman. However, there is a break in this (presumed)woman when one does things that do not fit in this given. There are everyday negotiations that one makes with this, when one does not follow what is expected out of them. It is in these breaks where the desire of the women can be seen.

"Freud argues that there is no libido other than the masculine. Meaning what? other than that a whole field, which is hardly negligible, is thereby ignored. This is the field of all those beings who take on the status of the woman – if, indeed, this being takes on anything whatsoever of her fate. … By her being in the sexual relation radically Other, in relation to what can be said of the unconscious, the woman is that which relates to the Other. … The woman relates to the signifier of this Other, in so far as, being Other, it can only remain always Other." (Lacan, 2001: 321-322; 1985) [5]

In this Othering of women where then is the possibility to relate with the other. Does this relating require to rethink the dominant idea of groups, to rethink the way the Self Help Groups work? Can we imagine a way where we do not define the standards for women, and understand what do these different women want when they come together in a group? What does it mean to have a group of women where there differences are not mopped over by a standard discourse of empowerment and where they are aliens to their own self and others.

5. Possibility of a 'group'

The first step in the movement discussed above is to do away with the rigidity that clouds over our understanding of empowerment as well as groups. It is imperative to un-learn the standardised notion of women as modern independent agents of development. In this regard, an indepth understanding of the subject positions that women occupy can be the entry point that can perhaps show us a path towards a nuanced understanding of what does empowerment actually mean to different women. If em-powerment is the power within oneself then how can it be reduced to some policies encouraging and providing grants for the betterment of women's education and health. If women feel empowered in caring for her family, then how does development respond to that.

The next step then is to base any sort of coming together of women on this acknowledgement of difference between the women, it is to counter the singular teleology of 'becoming' of women and to foreground that a group or being in a group does not mean sameness. Deleuze in the introduction of Felix Guattari's book Psychoanalysis and Transversality [6] discusses two kinds of subjectivity (Guattari's analysis). Guattari makes a distinction between subjugated groups and group subjects. Subjugated groups are subjugated by the leaders that the group assigns themselves and which work through a given structure, totalization and unification. The apparent unification is brought about by "the assemblage of stereotypical utterances cut off from both the real and from subjectivity" [6]. This can be seen in the way SHGs and women groups function. For the SHG space comes with a specific orientation of development thought. On the other hand are the Group Subjects, which are defined by coefficient of transversality that moves away from hierarchies and homogenised totalities. "They are agents of enunciation, environments of desire, elements of institutional creation." Working through non-hierarchies in this sense can perhaps create a possibility for the cracks and ruptures to appear, the ruptures which appear nonsensical in subjugated groups (SHGs) can here present a moment of transformation.

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