

Voice Against Barriers: Towards a Threshold of predictable Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

The objective of women's empowerment refers to social justice as an integral part of human welfare. World Bank recognizes gender equality as a means to promote economic growth and better governance is supported by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). India exhibited a sign of such empowerment is buttressed by constitutional mandates. It encircles three elements: Overlapping of disempowered marginalized groups; keeping household and marriage in the central locus of disempowerment; and empowerment under the illusion of patriarchal hegemony. Empowerment of women is argued for as an end in itself, is gravitated to be heard as a 'zero-sum' game with politically weak winners and powerful losers. The very idea of women's empowerment epitomizes policy maker's unjustified interference of metaphysical notions into the practical world of development policy, measuring empowerment, which appears to put forward the concept on objectively verifiable grounds. The present article contextualises empowerment in the theoretical perspective of choice, resources, agency and power, and achievements. The article concludes, with reference to Giele's (1977) six fold framework of dimensions of women's status to facilitate the policy makers to rebuild more equal, inclusive and resilient societies with an intentional focus on the lives and futures of women to drive better and more sustainable development outcomes to eventually achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Key Words: Empowerment, gender, choice, resources, agency, power, achievements

Introduction:

Dalits (erstwhile untouchables) are stigmatized under the category of 'social exclusion' – are virtually outskirts from the communities. Social exclusion restricts access involuntarily to social life to impede the actualization 'of normatively prescribed social roles' (Silver 2015) is exacerbated by the globalization. Conceived by René Lenoir the then Secretary of State for Social Action, Government of France, 1974 – adopted by the UK Government in 1977 – became contextualized for elucidating the development per se; was prioritised in the World Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995 – adopted as 'a

multidimensional framework' by the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Beall and Piron 2005) – serves for extended poverty analysis focusing both the causes and its impact on the socially disadvantaged group – for instance Dalit Women of India as a case.

The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) brings voice of Dalit women's movement to the nation in August 1995. This before long, the UN Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing took place in September 1995. Subsequently, the modality of this movement took its shape as transnational organizational form across the globe

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for claiming recognition of identity and human rights as citizens. Since then, Dalit women began to become increasingly active at the transnational level and was relevant in UN sponsored World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban in September 2001, and the International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women held at the Hague in November 2006.

The transnational context however, facilitates Dalit women to address citizenship rights is supported by the gender perspective of intersectional analysis attributed to 'an intersectional caste-gender-class analysis' (Smith 2008) to assess the different power dimension - used oppressing Dalit women, particularly in Global South. With the intervention of NFDW in mid 90's in concert with Indian Women's movement (IWM), the movement has brought to the transnational level.

Though untouchability is formally banned when Indian constitution came into effect on January 26, 1950 with the support of host of laws, yet its impact sporadically remains in rural areas. Dalit per se including women, represents one-fifth of the Indian population is relegated to the denial of access to land, education (Smith 2008), health care under the wrap of poverty, verbal abuse and physical violence (Aloysius et al., 2006) results into an acute social exclusion along with the occurrence of conversion to other religion (Thorat et al., 2005) as an alternative. On the contrary, It is of much concern has been exhibited through the assertiveness of Government of India (GoI) for legitimizing access to education, employment, and health care. Moreover, political representation of Dalit women (Smith 2008) began with 1.56% reserved MP (Member of Parliament) seats in 1971, was increased to 13% in 1996, remained same in 2004 parliamentary election in 2004 (Thorat et al., 2005).

Dalit women by and large earn their livelihood as unorganized labourers, are low paid and highly exposed to occupational injuries and health

problems (Manorama 2005). Instead of increasing the seat reservation in the parliamentary politics, there should have a common vision of political equality in the context of GoI's economics and social inclusive programmes; are applicable to these marginalized groups apropos to these women, are subject to have long term effect through solidarity movement of Dalit women (Manorama 2006a) - insulated by the justice for all as legitimate claim. Notion of patriarchal hegemony is deeply rooted in the elusive institutional caste regulatory (Rao 2005) 'authority' often deliberately legitimizes social sanctions of ostracism, ignoring, humiliation on Dalit women – become culturally marooned despite GoI's assertiveness.

Conceptual Framework:

Empowering Dalit women as against the traditional 'ostracism, ignorance and humiliation' are supposed to be the political urgency reflected in the assertiveness of GoI's policy.

Empowerment - Choice:

The urgency of empowering Dalit women comes in the limelight after series of transnational movement, facilitates these marginalized women become politically relevant, albeit in low key. It virtually accumulates power for making choices (Weber 1946) in the domain of livelihood. Since empowerment is tantamount to reducing the poverty is subject to a systematic process of change and upliftment. Power juxtaposes the empowerment has been implicated in linearly connected between context-specific choices for instance health care workers eventually transforms into possible action for instance participating in decision making and outcome in the form of establishing reproductive and political rights in the society (Buvinic and King 2007) was denied to women in the past (Kabeer 1999).

Empowerment - Resources:

Potentiality to exercise to such context-specific choices used to provide access to three inter-related elements of resources as an integral

part of 'structure' (Giddens 1984) are recursively embroiled in social reproduction and institutionalized features of social systems. These are 'allocative' (ability to disburse the heard earned money for household and miscellaneous expenditure) and 'authoritative' (potential decision maker) resources under the pretext of pre-conditions, important for women who can exercise choice. Further, agency under the pretext of the process of decision-making, permits women to set their goals in order to act upon them for instance to make decisions about own life, thereby enabling women towards accomplishing mission with the support of resources (transnational activities and GoI's legislation) and agency (Kabeer 1999). In the wider sense, resources stabilize social relationships are duly conducted in different institutional domains such as GoI, NFDW, ILO, UN Human Rights Commission in order to make up Dalit woman as an integral part of society.

Empowerment - Agency and Power

Besides making decisions, agency empowers women (Dalit women as a case) to thwart violence or any unforeseen situation. Agency involves Dalit women to raise voice against ostracism through systematic solidarity movement, negotiating with state, civil society to evolve politically strong decision making regarding choices of freedom (Manorama 2005). The second element of power that relates to agency encompasses 'the power within' is tantamount to the meaning, motivation, purpose which individuals bring to their own activity. Agency has the positive sense of the 'power to' and negative sense of the 'power over'. The former refers to the ability to define life-choices in spite of facing opposition and the latter refers to override the agency through the use of coercion, threat and violence (Rowlands 1997).

Empowerment - Achievements

The third element of 'achievements' in the measurement of empowerment, that relate with resources and agency. For example, if there is a

prevalence of gender difference in nourishment, good health and shelter as basic functioning achievements, these can be considered as evidence of inequalities.

Measuring Empowerment

Beijing Platform for Action (UN 1996) is concerned with women's empowerment enriched with the educational attainment, political participation, and economic resources, voice against violence has helped to develop a global consensus and legitimacy on women's rights is defined as a multi-dimensional process of civil, political, social and economic participation but is still difficult to measure.

Beyond "gender inequality"

Giele's (1977) six fold framework has been used to see dimensions of women's status, which is consistent with the spirit of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Political expression: Despite the seat reservation at parliament and at local level, Gender Development Index (GDI) is by and large not up to the mark in Jharkhand (Chatterjee and Ghosh 2001). Women are under consistent pressure from their spouses from household affairs to the proxy role of their husband. It puts a hindrance before smooth decision-making thus results into a suppressed political expression. Work and mobility: It is a tight rope work for women both in the community level and in household chore that may interrupt 'freedom of movement'.

Family: formation, duration, and size: There is a tendency of marriage at more early age to the extent of 12 years is present in this state. This trend keeps them away from 'freedom of movement' in conjugal life.

Education: Almost all Dalit members of Jharkhand district belong either to K-12 or Higher education category seems to be the one side of the coin, the other side is the hindrance to go to regular schooling due to early marriage,

discouragement from family, burden of economy and deep involvement in domestic chores.

Health and sexual control: Dalit women hardly involve in joint reproductive decision-making, on the contrary, they face public and domestic abuse in rural areas (CADAM 2013).

Cultural expression: Women used to attend cultural programmes in local areas, familial events and marriage party. It seems plausible to me that they enjoy freedom as a family member in different capacity of wife, mother, or even daughter-in-law rather as legitimate person.

Measuring women's empowerment: participation and rights

Framework of Giele 1977 is consistent with Sustainable Development Goals, attributed to human and social development that helps to measure empowerment across key domains of participation (household activity), rights (panchayat presence), and capabilities (Sen 1985). It is compatible and consistent with the spirit and overall objectives of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Theoretical Triangulation and linearity: Resources, Agency, Achievements

Evaluation of 'Resources'

The 'resource' dimension of women empowerment is often represented as 'access to resources' for instance, women's 'access to land' is referred to the kind of land rights. (Dyson and Moore 1983). Since measuring women's access of land is an indicator of empowerment, which translates into agency and achievement is a matter of conjecture in Jharkhand.

Evaluation of 'Agency'

Measurement of agency acts as indicators, which focus on positive agency, includes women's participation in the public domain of NDFW and negative agency includes domestic abuse. However, the form of positive agency attempts to conceptualize

power is women's emancipation is inscribed in CSWI 1974 (The Committee on Status of Women in India) epitomizes their legal presence in three-tier Panchayat based local government.

Evaluation of Achievements

Measurement of achievement could be assessed from three categories measuring women empowerment (Hishor 1997), such as evidence based empowerment - addressing domestic violence, participation in household income that facilitates egalitarian decision-making; genesis of empowerment - referring female participation in education, facilitates involving in future course of decision-making in household; and household indicators - addressing about the space in family structure – amenable to household and economic empowerment.

Conclusions:

The foregone conclusion echoes the post Beijing conceptual shift from disempowerment to empowerment with the support of Dalit women movement and GOI's legal constitutional support. Women's empowerment per se has been elucidated as a multi-dimensional process focusing basic 'capabilities', rights and participation in social, political, economic domains with the help of measuring indicators. While dealing with such highly fluid subject, I am sincerely concerned that mere gender comparisons cannot measure inequalities. I therefore take theoretical support to thoroughly defend certain indicators such as abuse of Dalit women, women legislators, and like. The present paper may allow better assessments in tune with the broad policy objectives of the Beijing platform for Action to eventually achieve women's empowerment across diverse domains in the globe.

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