

Empowerment of women through organisational power
- an alternative development paradigm

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By
Dr. Jimmy Dabhi

Indian Social Institute
10 Institutional Area
Lodhi Road
New Delhi 110003

Email:
jimmydabhi@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is on agenda of various groups, government and voluntary sector organisations. Human development report extensively speaks of empowerment of women. Recent Population Census Report brings out one cruel fact of some of our states especially among a few northern states where female foetus is done away with, with the desire for a male child. Empowerment of women therefore appears to be a distant dream but not impossible. Understanding of women's empowerment has changed over the years and along with it various approaches have been subscribed and implemented with varying success and failures.

This paper attempts to throw light on an alternative taken to create a new development paradigm in the face of massive impoverishment in India. The paper begins by briefly outlining the traditional understanding of women's emancipation and development, then goes on to examine the new understanding of women's development and the option that a voluntary organisation, the Behavioural Science Centre has taken in facilitating dalit women's empowerment in Gujarat. The paper concludes by highlighting the lessons learnt in the process of empowerment of women and draws attention to a few possible pitfalls in the process. The important lesson learned is that in the Indian context, class, caste and gender discriminations work side by side and efforts to create new development paradigm in response to fight massive impoverishment has to take all three dimensions into account. The Paper also argues that development strategy has to be inclusive of both women and men; given the emotional bonds the individual shares with the family and caste groups.

Empowerment of women through organisational power - an alternative development paradigm

Introduction

Empowerment of women is on agenda of various groups and organisations. Human development report extensively speaks of empowerment of women. The recent Population Census Report was very much politicised (NDTV programme 'Big Fight' of 11th September, 2004) by some groups and missed the underpinning message that women among poor communities are far from empowered and in rich communities women are still discriminated and done away with. The report brings out a cruel fact of some of the Indian states especially the 'bimaru (hindi word for sick) states' like Punjab, Hariyana, UP as the known demographer calls them, where female foetus is done away with in preference to a male child. The patriarchal and male dominated thinking, beliefs and practices still rule the psyche and minds of millions in India – the rich and literate are the worst because they know what they do. Empowerment of women therefore is a distant dream but people who are committed to it must not lose hope because the processes of empowerment are always challenging and a march up stream. There are various approaches subscribed and implemented for empowerment of women over the years with varying success and failures.

This paper attempts to throw light on an alternative taken to create a new development paradigm in the face of massive impoverishment in India. The paper begins by briefly outlining the traditional understanding of women's emancipation and development, then goes on to examine the new understanding of women's development and the option that the Behavioural Science Centre, a voluntary organisation based in Ahmedabad has taken in facilitating dalit women's empowerment in Gujarat. The paper concludes by highlighting the lessons learnt in the process of empowerment of women and draws attention to a few possible pitfalls in the process.

The traditional understanding and practice of development:

We are aware that women are an oppressed group (whether urban or rural) and especially poor women. It is not my aim to elaborate on the situation of women here; rather I would like to highlight some of the practices and assumptions governing developmental actions taken by various agencies in the past, perhaps even now.

Policy approaches to women's development have evolved over the years. In the following sections we shall highlight the approaches, the purpose and the critique of each of the approaches.

1. Welfare approach:

Purpose:

To bring women into the ambit of development but as better mothers: sees

women's role primarily as that of a mother and it perceived as most important.

Critique:

- 1.1) This approach sees women primary as a child-bearer,
- 1.2) In this approach woman is seen as beneficiary (passive) of development and empowerment processes, not a partner (active) in development and empowerment processes;
- 1.3) This approach is Status-quoist, namely it is assumed here that the social order and power equation in society and family are okay and they need not be questioned leave alone changed.

2. Anti-Poverty approach:

Purpose:

To ensure that poor women increase their economic productivity - as poverty is seen as the root of underdevelopment and misery of women.

Critique:

- 2.1) This approach sees women in terms of their productive (the income they bring in the family) role only;
- 2.2) This approach isolates poor women as a separate category and does not see women in a larger context;
- 2.3) The approach does not recognise the multiple discriminations that women face, namely class, caste and gender.

3. Efficiency approach:

Purpose:

To make projects more efficient/effective - it recognises that development will not occur without the participation of women.

Critique:

- 3.1) The approach sees women entirely in terms of their delivery capacity. Approach assumes that women's participation will help carry out the development programme effectively.
- 3.2) The approach does not recognise the multiple discriminations that women face as we just indicated above.

4. Equity/Autonomy approach:

Purpose:

To empower women by making them autonomous subjects ultimately to move towards gender equality.

Critique:

- 4.1) The approach sees gender discrimination as a structural phenomenon; that is society and its various components are structured, designed (they are not there just by default) in such a way that women have no

control, access and ownership of resources and position of power (mainly decision making power and resource to carry it out) [see Franco and Sarvar, 1989].

- 4.2) This approach challenges the status quo in society and challenges the power imbalance in society and in various subunits of society like family, organisation; institutions, etc (see Dabhi, 2004).
- 4.3) The approach is very threatening for women as well as men and community at large as it demands dialogue, and transformation. Women may experience fear of freedom and men may experience lose of power and control.

The traditional approaches could be classified as the reform or community development approach which accepts the existing socio-economic and political structure as appropriate and sees no need for any alternative order; it does not question the gender ideology (see appendix 1).

It equated emancipation of women with lightening her burden and improving her efficiency as a child bearer and house-keeper. The development interventions therefore consisted of training in - cooking, housekeeping, decoration, child care: child rearing and hygiene, stitching, embroidery.

The community approach saw women's emancipation in terms of increasing her economic productivity. Therefore it brought in economic development interventions in terms of - Papad, Pickle and Agarbati making. To some extent even the some of the self help group activities tend to see women in the same manner.

This approach is also a top-down approach which instead of empowering women to become the agents of their own development process reinforces the stereotype of the passive woman for whom the development process is defined by others, to be more specific men. Women are therefore perceived as objects and receivers of development benefits and not as subject and actors in the process of development.

In this traditional understanding of development gender discrimination is not perceived, questioned or simply ignored. As against the other approaches mentioned above the **Equity/Autonomy approach** throws light on the new understanding, which is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The new understanding of development and assumption about women:

This approach begins to perceive women as subjects and actors and not mere recipients and beneficiaries in the process of development and empowerment of themselves as well community and society at large. Class, caste and gender discriminations are considered important dynamics affecting the lives of women and men within and without the household and community. The new understanding and practice looks at these forces not in isolation but as intrinsic components of Indian socio-cultural, political and economic reality. Their adverse effect on women's development and empowerment is acknowledged and examined.

The new understanding looks at gender discrimination as a structural phenomenon which requires transformation of social structures and institutions. So the important underlying assumption in the new understanding is that women are part of the society and have equal right in defining, designing and implementing the development of society. It assumes that women have rights over their bodies, their lives and their space of living and must have the freedom to decide for themselves.

This approach therefore looks at the overall development and empowerment of women - not only in the personal and family life but also economic, cultural and political life of a community and society at large (also see Dabhi, 1999).

The facilitators of change are cautious that interventions made the projects and programmes designed and implemented, not only have equal participation of women but that these actions do not endorse the old stereotypes (also see Anker, 1998) about women but challenge them. Steps are taken that development actions do not add to women's daily chores but lighten it and challenge and motivate men to partake in what was so far considered as only women's role.

Some of the interventions undertaken here may appear traditional, like pickle making, 'agarbati' making but the approach emphasises economic and organisational empowerment of women and not just supplementing family income in order to support the male bread winner.

Further this new approach would take up Projects that challenge stereotypes of women. Therefore women might be encouraged to engage in enterprises traditionally considered as the domain of men alone, e.g. setting up business enterprises like co-operatives, consumer stores, monitoring and evaluating bodies, company etc. In other words, it envisages organisational power for women whereby women own, run and manage their organisations and interact with other organisations, private and public.

This approach also envisages women's partnership in society and politics and motivates them to stand for election, take up public roles and responsibilities.

BSC's intervention strategy - contribution to a new development paradigm:

Drawing on the above understanding the Behavioural Science Centre (BSC) and located in the Premises of St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad, began working with women in the Bhal area of Anand District of Gujarat from 1988 then spread to Ahmedabad and Banaskantha Districts of Gujarat. The initial study by the Centre revealed the following:

- Women of the Dalit communities are victims of multiple discriminations (class, caste and gender). The psycho-socio and economic impacts of discrimination are manifested in their behaviour and attitudes - fear, little or no self-confidence, self-hatred, insecurity, suppressed anger leading to strong, mistimed and misplaced reactions, submissiveness to unjust and irrational beliefs and practices.
- On the other hand, we also observed that these women are strong

willed, hardworking, sensitive to others pain and hardships, perceptive, curious, willing to learn, articulate and intelligent.

- We also observed that they are overworked - household responsibility, child-care and wage labour meant working for almost 12-15 hours a day. This meant lack of time and energy for self, for critical thinking and new learning.
- We also noticed that the stereotype roles and responsibilities in the family prevented these women from coming together as a strong group within the village and community at large.
- The caste and gender discourse had taught scheduled caste women to look up to the men of so called higher castes as worthy persons. They felt privileged if they were admired or desired by those men.
- Like elsewhere the unpaid work of women was not valued or recognised as productive.

The first task the Centre took up was to build a rapport with the women. The task was easy to a great extent because the Centre had worked and enjoyed the trust of the men of the community for several years. The staff of the Centre had credibility among men to initiate work with women.

The Centre's strategy to fight injustice to human beings is through creating people's organisations which are not only viable but run, managed and owned by them. The Centre strongly believes that exploitation is organised and structural and therefore to fight against such exploitation the poor have to create a counter culture with a strong organisational base and structure where the poor have the decisive position.

Driven by the Centre's mission and strategy the Centre wanted to organise women around a need of the community. The felt need of the community seemed to be health and therefore the Centre took up health as a focal point for mobilising the women with the hope of empowering them as well as the community.

It was assumed that the community health programme would integrate development and women's empowerment by:

- a) mobilising women around their health, meaning that good health is recognised as a need and women learn to work for it collectively;
- b) creating a scientific outlook and demystifying professional medical jargon by communicating new concepts of health, disease and treatment, thus starting a process of education in the community;
- c) providing effective and inexpensive curative services at people's doorsteps, thus reducing the level of expenditure on health by the community;
- d) creating a demand system which would then force the

government to improve its system;

- e) changing relationships: i.e., enabling the community to accept one of its own members as a skilled health worker; enabling men to accept women as health workers and as a resource group; enabling other village communities to come to the dalits for health services;
- f) training and organising women: changing the traditional role and image of a women by providing the women with new skills.

The health programme was a failure to the extent that it failed to create health awareness in the community and motivate people to contribute towards their own health.

The reasons for the failure of this programme can be understood in terms of the following:

- It fell short of empowering women because the health programme got bogged down in matters of remuneration and people's contribution to make it their programme.
- In spite of efforts made the men did not get involved as much as women wanted and the men were not exposed to intensive gender sensitivity training.

However, it did produce some good women health workers. It also broke some caste and gender barriers in terms of women being called upon by men to treat them and the so called high caste women and men coming to the dalit women in the dalit locality for treatment and advice.

The Centre, then, along with women and with the help of the local organisation, went into an economic activity - silk worm breeding. The venture once again met with a failure due to lack of technical and managerial skills. It was a drawback for women's development. The lessons learnt from it however, were that any activity taken up with women should focus on the skills and the time available with the women. Therefore it should not be time consuming. Secondly, highly technical activities should be taken up only after intensive training and with proper follow-up.

The technical and managerial limitations reflected on women's ability and in some quarters of the community it confirmed the old belief that women are not capable and they should not take up such activities which are not their domain. Neither the women, nor the local organisation (Federation of Co-operatives) nor the Centre gave in to the frustration felt. The failure was acknowledged, reviewed and new alternatives were sought.

The new strategy focused on two aspects:

1. Participation of women in the already ongoing development-related activities of the Federation;
2. Initiating the empowerment of women around their own activity and their own organisation at the area level.

The Centre took the lead from a village saving scheme initiated by women and moved in to create an area level savings and credit co-operative of Dalit women. The reasons for taking up this programme were;

- a) the suggestion came from the women themselves: therefore it was an activity which was perceived as a need by the women;
- b) it was an activity they were good at;
- c) it had potential for women's unity, economic and social empowerment;
- d) it would necessitate a structure which would create and enhance women's organisational power;
- e) it would serve as a platform for learning, transformation and leadership for social management and development.

The Savings and Credit Co-operative Society was started with three Dalit communities with the view to break caste barriers and develop a feeling of unity and enable the women to come together as an oppressed group. It was set up at the area level and not at the village level since it would be difficult to fight internal family ties at the village level; however this problem would not arise at the area level. With the success of the organisation in one area, the same model was replicated in the other two areas where the Centre has its interventions. The main reasons why saving was taken up as an activity are:

- It would not substantially increase the workload of the women;
- It would make a direct attack on one main area of gender discrimination viz. economic dependence.

Let me summarise here what the women of BSC had to say "Women's empowerment has remained on the Centre's agenda consistently since the early 1980s. The savings and credit activity was the concrete translation of this concern into an achievable target; it offered immense scope for immediate gains as well as a powerful symbolic tool of transformation in gender relations. The MSFI function earlier restricted and circumscribed within a geographical boundary has been extended as an activity for mass mobilisation of women for social empowerment. In the following report we describe the efforts of the Centre to give the activity a broad base and movement orientation".

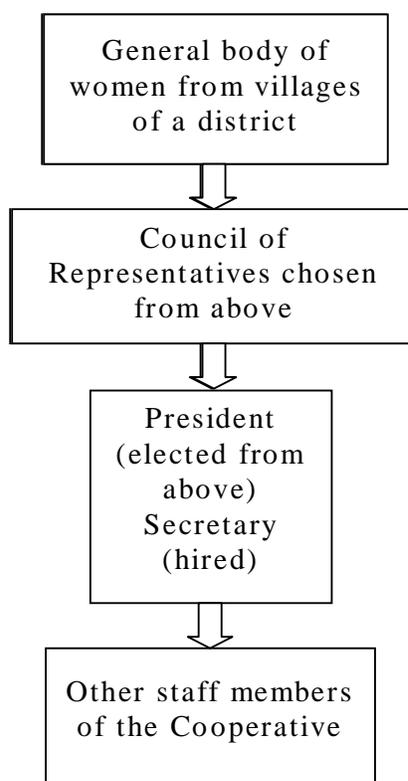
The Micro Finance activity has been operational in 4 geographical areas of BSC's intervention viz. Cambay taluka of Anand district, Dhandhuka taluka of Ahmedabad district, Danta, Tharad, Vav, Dhanera, Vadgam and Palanpur talukas of Banaskantha district and Rapar and Bhachau taluka of Kutch district. The main thrust in this work period has been to consolidate and develop work in Banaskantha and promote new cooperatives in Kutch. The Centre's work has amalgamated as a process of forming a network of women credit co-operatives in the State to spearhead a movement for social change (BSC, 2003). The data cited here is that of the Banakantha District of Gujarat.

Let me briefly give the structure and organigram of the Savings and Credit

Co-operative Society of women (registered under the Co-operative, Act). Both have a Governing Body of nine members. There is a President and a paid executive Secretary who looks after the day to day management of the Co-operative.

The women have equal share of Rs.100/- in the Co-operative and minimum saving of Rs.60/- a year. Each share holder is entitled to a dividend but only the regular savers are entitled to loans from the co-operatives.

The area level Women's Savings and Credit Co-operative structure:



The above diagram shows that women members at the village level send their representatives and these representatives are the one who then elect 9 members to the Governing Body (GB). The representatives act as an advisory body to the GB as well as an area level women's committee to take up social issues affecting women. The following diagram shows the current status. Except one, the other cooperatives have decided not to give credit for a couple of years to ensure adequate savings.

The following table shows the current status of the Credit Cooperatives

Status of Scheduled castes Women's Credit Cooperatives as of 31st March 2004

Cooperative	Year of registration	Coverage			Total share capital In Rs.	Total savings In Rs.	Total credit In Rs.	Rate of interest p.a.		Total no. of loans
		Villages	Talukas	Members				Savings	Credit	
Shri Vadgam Vibhag Dalit Mahila Credit Coop Society	2000	57	1	1,422	1,37,225	9,25,338	3,74,950	4.5	15	475
Shri Palanpur Vibhag Dalit Mahila Credit Coop Society	2001	40	1	918	89,750	5,63,149	--	4.5	--	--
Shri Vav Vibhag Dalit Mahila Credit Coop Society	2001	47	1	1,017	10175	4,20,523	--	4.5	--	--
Shri Tharad Vibhag Dalit Mahila Credit Coop Society	2001	44	1	720	71,350	2,39,440	--	4.5	--	--
Shri Dhanera Vibhag Dalit Mahila Credit Coop Society	2001	40	1	576	57,500	1,09,229	--	4.5	--	--
Shree Rapar Vibhag Vanchit Mahila Credit Cooperative Society	2003	17	1	314	Not available	Not available	--	4.5	--	--
Shree Bhachau Vibhag Vanchit Mahila Credit Cooperative Society	Not registered	08	1	227	Not available	Not available	--	4.5	--	--
Total		253	5	5,194	3,66,000	22,57,679	3,74,950	--	--	475

The repayment of loan is 95% in the cooperative where loan is given. The dialogue and persuasion from guarantors and community members pay a big role in reducing loan defaulters. Not only the economic benefit but the social benefits sustain the cooperatives.

The social issues taken up by these women:

- 1) Influencing the Caste council (consisting of men) in favour of women and challenging some of the negative aspects of the caste legislation going against women's equality;
- 2) Providing family counsel to women in distress;
- 3) Provide legal action for women harassed by their husbands or their families even after dialogue and negotiations;
- 4) Mobilising women and challenging government officials to implement government schemes for women;
- 5) Negotiating and confronting caste and community leaders to provide adequate compensation for divorced women;
- 6) Advising and taking up legal action against police atrocities on women;
- 7) Taking up legal action for women's deaths under suspicious circumstances,
- 8) Initiating legal action against men of other castes for damaging the crops of dalit community farmers;
- 9) Motivating women to take part in Panchayati Raj,
- 10) Supporting women's issues outside the area by sending representatives in protest march, workshop and seminars and meetings.

Challenge to the market driven economy and massive impoverishment:

It is a known fact that one of the outcomes of the solely, market driven economy was massive impoverishment of the rural and urban poor especially the marginalised communities as HDR observes "economic and social progress often also bypasses ethnic and racial minorities, even majorities – especially girls and women, who suffer gender bias in access to schooling, public services, employment opportunities and private property" (HDR 2003:16). The Structural Adjustment Programmes (cut in subsidies, health and education programme) hits the poor communities and there is therefore a need to take care of the negative impacts of the new economic policies of the Government (also see Avadhuta, 1997). Talking of the new development paradigm it emphasised that this paradigm must be of and for the poor. In the same meeting it highlighted a few crucial elements of the new paradigm. They were,

1. justice: this implies both equality and equity,
2. people's participation,
3. sustainability,

4. value of sharing,
5. non-consumerism,
6. egalitarianism.

i would like to examine the intervention made by BSC in women's development from the above perspective. The Savings and Credit Co-operative not only helps women to share their collective income but also provides a forum to share their collective and organisational power. The claimed rural banks to help the rural poor have failed to meet the needs of the poor. Conversely the micro credit systems set up by this co-operative has provided short terms loans to these women without much bureaucratic hassles. The women have been able to save their land from being mortgaged and also redeem mortgaged land and thus maintain their income generating assets.

The surplus (profit) is not utilised for luxury goods to create mere consumer culture but the surplus is ploughed into the organisation either to increase the loan of women or to meet the household, educational, health and agricultural needs of the members. In that aspect though the co-operative run on a profit motive it is not governed by the profit motive alone rather profit for the betterment of women and thus the community.

The legal and social structure of the Co-operative has asserted women's ownership over its finances and assets. The organisational management systems have provided them with managerial skills which otherwise are only available to the professionals and rural and urban middle classes.

The organisation has made a dent in caste relationships. The Dalit and Other Backward Caste women have come under the same umbrella of this co-operative and brought about certain amount of functional unity among themselves. A dalit woman in a caste dominated village challenged the men in the Panchayat council and asserted her rights as a Panchayat Committee member, as a woman and as a so called untouchable.

Due to economic viability and large membership, the co-operative provides women with a bargaining power with other organisations in the area to safeguard and enhance women's interests in a male dominated society.

The organisation through its training has cultivated various kinds of leadership among women at the village level as well as area level. The women are able to look ahead, plan, negotiate, resolve conflicts, decide, confront, implement and critique programmes. It has brought in administrative and managerial skills among women which formerly were dominated by men, and so called high castes. It has begun to change the self image of women for themselves as well as the others.

In the face of corrupt bureaucratic practices in various organisations the women have been able to bring in values like clean administration, respect for poor, gender and caste equality and economy.

Drawbacks and learning:

The important lesson the Centre has learnt is that gender, caste and class

discrimination are interlinked and one cannot be fought in isolation and at the cost of the other. We may choose to focus on one but cannot afford to ignore the others. Therefore attacking one kind of discrimination must necessarily mean rejecting other kinds of discrimination - e.g. gender equality is not possible in a society where caste ideology still holds good. It is important to note here that agencies and groups working with all the women of a village/area without special focus and effort to empower the SC/ST women are in danger of creating serious lacunae in facilitating the process of empowerment. The Centre has made a conscious decision not to work with the entire village (if it is a caste village) but intensively work with the SC/ST and OBC communities of the area.

The second lesson the Centre has learnt is that if care is not taken an economic intervention/enterprise aimed at empowerment has a danger of negating the very objective for which it was started in the first place. Administration, profit and organisational goals may become so important that taking up social issues like premature death of women, child-marriage, sexual exploitation of women, anti-poor schemes, and environmental degradation may become secondary or peripheral. Our experience has run into this difficulty and we have to take necessary corrective measures in terms of education and structures with regards to the co-operative and women's programmes.

Third, gender justice by definition implies participation of both women and men towards achieving that goal. Therefore the task of transforming gender unjust structures cannot be solely the responsibility of women; an equal participation of men is imperative.

Gender discrimination is not easy to fight because women-men relationships have emotional ties which are not easy to ignore in the struggle for justice. At the micro level gender discrimination operates at two levels, in the family and in the caste group. In the rural area caste groupings are strong and binding and therefore often taking a stand against gender discrimination implies taking a stand against the family and the caste group, which is far from easy. Unless men at various levels begin to participate in the process the movement becomes difficult and makes for frustration, anger and hopelessness. We have, in practice, overlooked this aspect to a great extent, at a cost.

Conclusion:

“We cannot boast that we have the answer to massive impoverishment but we have made an effort and the effort is paying” says the group. The alternative discussed above highlights some important issues to keep in mind in our development intervention. In the face of massive impoverishment one needs to constantly search for viable interventions and implement them with and through people and not for them. I feel that creating economically and socially viable grassroots organisations of the poor owned and managed by them are important to empower the poor and specially women and thus fight massive impoverishment. It seems to me that in the Indian context the class, caste and gender discriminations work side by side and our efforts to create new development paradigm in response to fight massive impoverishment has to take all three dimensions into account. Finally I have also argued that development

strategy has to be inclusive of both women and men, given the emotional bonds the individual shares with the family and caste groups.

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Appendix 1:

The gender ideology defines a woman in terms of certain characteristics and attributes and gives her a social role. The woman is supposed to be meek and mild, emotional, gentle and tender, as against the dominant, practical and rational man. Correspondingly, the ideology defines the social role of the woman as wife and mother, housekeeper and home-maker, and being intellectually and physically inferior, at the service of man who is considered the bread winner. This situation is considered God given and therefore is never challenged.

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