Women-gov
A South-South project on making local governance work for women

To break down doors or to unlock them? Intermediation as a strategy for political action

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"Never has my heart shuddered harder than when I placed my hand in the gap of that door – that door, which was thought to be impregnable, stronger than an iron fortress.... a bit of pride and irrepressible optimism were all that I had..... However, what had actually been gained by simply breaking down just this door? How many doors would we have to break down in order to reach that world of security and love that we longed for?"

-Lalithambika Antharjanam[1], leading writer from the Indian state of Kerala, reflecting on the trials of upper caste Keralite women against entrenched patriarchal barriers, during the early 20th century.

Introduction

Though the idea that empowerment is 'a journey without maps' is oft repeated in the context of women empowerment projects, what remains unsaid is the expectation that at some point in time, a particular milestone has to be reached, as a part of this journey – that milestone being the woman's emergence as a fully-formed political subject. Of course, the idea of the fully-formed political

1 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lalithambika_Antharjanam for more details. Retrieved 29 December 2012. This particular quote has been taken from the translation by J.Devika in Nilayamgode, D (2011), 'Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman, Oxford University Press

subject in this imagination is that of the ideal citizen of a democratic polity. Therefore, the journey towards empowerment is equated with the journey to full citizenship – and all impediments or barriers on the way have to be overcome by the subject undertaking this journey, the individual woman. The role of the development practitioner or change-agent is considered to be the provision of support and encouragement to the women undertaking this journey, enabling them to build collective solidarity.

Overcoming the barriers that relegate women to the confines of the private sphere is just the first step in this vision of empowerment. For, there are many other barriers outside the private realm that prevent women's emergence as fully-formed political subjects, striving to reach what Lalithambika has poetically termed "[their] world of security and love". Often, the imagery that is used to depict the overcoming of these barriers is that of doors being broken down by women through the exercise of their associational power in isolated or contiguous acts of collective action. However, from our experiences in the field, we think that more often than not, individual women are more interested in locating the keys to unlock doors rather than bringing down doors. This is not a quibble over the choice of metaphor, it is a comment on the way we understand the everyday negotiations of individual women we work with, in the context of empowerment projects.

When we initiated the India component of the Women-gov action research project, our aim was to develop a contextually appropriate model for harnessing the potential of digital technologies in order to enhance the informational, associational and communicative power of the women that our field centre *Prakriye* has been working with, over the past seven years – the women who are members of the *Mahila Samakhya*[2] *sanghas*[3].

Therefore, right from the start of the project, our intervention strategy has focussed on enhancing *sangha* women's participation in local governance institutions and public forums, through deepening and strengthening our existing three-pronged ICT strategy comprising of community radio, community video and village information centres. In specific, over the two-year project period, we plan to take up the following areas of work:

- Capacity building of *sangha* women to enable them to engage with local governance institutions and influence the discourses in the local public sphere effectively.
- Reductions of community level power blocks that prevent women's political participation in the local community and prevent their access to community resources.
- Increasing the associational power of the *sanghas* at the village level, at the community

2 This is a pan Indian programme of the Government of India that aims at mobilising and collectivising rural women belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, with the aim of "education for empowerment".

3 *Sangha* (which literally means group) is commonly used to refer to Self Help Groups (mainly of women) that have become widespread in rural India, in the last two decades. In this context, they refer to the Self Help Groups formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India.

level, and enabling women to become conscious of the power of the collective.

- Building the linkages of the *sanghas* with local government institutions, other organisations and government departments at the block level; as well as networking with other *sanghas*.
- Strengthening the local information ecology by enhancing the information, learning and knowledge processes at the community level.

However, nine months into the project implementation, our field experiences have made us raise some questions that are vital to the intervention design. What are the strategies that *sangha* women use in their everyday life context to access resources and open up appropriate channels in key areas of their lives – finance, health, allotments and/or subsidies under government schemes? Which strategies do they find more effective? Does their membership in the *Mahila Samakhya sangha* enable the women to develop more effective strategies for accessing resources? And finally, do the *sangha* women consider collective action as a promising strategy for overcoming these power-blocks (in other words, do they contemplate breaking down the doors that currently hinder their full participation in the life of their communities)?

Our conversations with *sangha* women, including two semi-structured Focus Group Discussions with *Mahila Samakhya sangha* women from Byrasandra and Hosahalli[4] villages that house our village information centres at present, have prised open new ways of reflecting upon these questions, which we discuss in greater detail in the subsequent sections of this note.

Intermediation as a key strategy

Our conversations with *sangha* women reveal that for financial needs, health needs and access to entitlements, women consider approaching intermediaries to be the most effective strategy. Women are very conscious of the trade-offs involved while selecting an intermediary. As one woman from Byrasandra candidly shared with us, in the context of discussing intermediation as a key strategy for meeting her financial needs:

“ Recently, there are many small micro-finance groups that approach us. They tell us that they can give us any amount of money as loan, on the condition that we agree to a weekly repayment plan. Many of the neighbouring villages have signed up. But we haven't. For unlike the neighbouring villages, we don't have dairies or any other business that fetches us a guaranteed weekly income. So, though the offer seemed useful, we did not sign up as we cannot afford that.”

Another *sangha* woman, while speaking about health needs, shared an interesting insight on the factors that influence the decision to approach an intermediary:

“ We all go to the neighbouring government hospital. There, the doctors will treat you, but you have

4 In order to protect project participants, the names of villages have been changed.

to wait patiently in the queue, and await your turn. If you are very ill, and cannot risk the wait, it is better to approach a private doctor. If you are not that ill, but you can't stand the wait, you will have to pay the nurse/the attendant some money to jump the queue. Those of us who don't mind the wait – we don't approach anyone, we stay in the queue."

A more important reason guiding an individual's decision to approach an intermediary was feeling dis-empowered by their lack of informational or communicative skills in dealing with a situation. For example, one *sangha* woman explained why, even among the *sangha* members, some women need help from intermediaries in approaching local government officials while others didn't.

" There are only some women who can go to the *panchayat*[5] and negotiate with officials. For they know how to talk intelligently about a scheme, and ask the right questions. Other women.. they get so scared that they will stand in a corner and say nothing. This behaviour irritates officials and they do not respond well. So if these women want some work done, they will have to take other smart women from the *sangha*, along with them."

This ability to communicate 'right' and talk 'smart', emerged as being critical, even in addressing other needs. As another woman explained,

" Even when we go to a government hospital, we must know how to talk right and persuade them. Recently, I had taken my 16 year old neighbour for her delivery. The doctor started shouting at me saying 'Don't you people have any sense? What were you thinking when you got this child married off?'. Without losing my composure, I explained that I was not the girls' relative, and that I was only her neighbour. The girl had been married off early as her mother was dead – but at this moment, she needed medical attention and he should help. He calmed down a bit then."

Once the prevalence of intermediation as a strategy that women used to meet their needs across various areas of life was established, we proceeded to the logical next step: Who exactly are these intermediaries?

Who exactly are these intermediaries?

Intermediaries are not just limited to low-ranking officials of government, 'agents' or 'middlemen', or traditional power-elite in the communities – more often than not, these intermediaries are other *sangha* women who have acquired significant social capital through their participation in a host of

5 This is the lowest tier of governance and administration in the quasi-federal Indian system, which is situated at the village level. Tremendous fiscal and administrative powers were devolved from the State Governments to the *panchayats* by the Central Government of India, through the enactment of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992. However, in practice, the devolution of powers to *Gram Panchayat*s has been broached with reluctance by State Governments.

sangha and community level activities, which have helped them build extensive networks with local government officials, elected representatives and other power-elite. For instance, in the case of financial needs, the intermediary that was usually identified by the *sangha* women was not the village-level moneylender; on the other hand, it was often the *sangha*. As one *sangha* woman shared with us:

" Maybe 20-25 years ago, many people would go to the rich men or the landowners in the village who would charge exorbitant rates of interest. But now, after the *sanghas* have come, things have changed. All *sanghas* have bank accounts. The bank manager knows us. It is easy to take loans as a *sangha*. Of course, for some purposes, we cannot get a *sangha* loan. Then, we mortgage lands and take a loan... But even then we seek the advice of other women in the *sangha* who know where the rate of interest is lower."

Sangha women also recognise how requesting the mediation of the other members of the sangha is different from approaching a traditional intermediary such as the village money-lender. In fact, women clearly acknowledge how *sangha* membership brings them greater power in everyday negotiations, such as negotiations for financial needs. One woman from Byrasandra clearly articulated how membership in the *sangha* provided women greater power to address their financial needs, when compared to those who neither had property nor *sangha* membership:

" Even now, for those without lands or house, or *sangha* membership, they have to borrow from rich people in the village. The rates of interest will be very steep. But when you are in that situation, that is all you can do..."

Further conversations with *sangha* women have revealed that intermediaries appear to fall into two categories:

a. Gatekeepers of channels to resources and/or entitlements

E.g. : Low ranking officials in government departments at the block[6] level, elected representatives and officials at the *panchayat* level in charge of beneficiary selection, agents of micro-finance companies, junior staff at government hospitals and so on.

b. Individuals from the community who possess the wherewithal to get past the gatekeepers of channels to resources and/or entitlements

E.g.: *Sakhis*[7] of the information centres, *sangha* women acknowledged as informal leaders in their

6 A sub-district level unit of administration in India

7 *Sakhi* (which literally means friend) is the term used for the adoloscent girls who operate the village information centres run by the women of the *Mahila Samakhya* self help groups.

sanghas and in their communities, school-teachers, relatives in government employment and so on.

It was acknowledged that 'b.' category intermediaries could be just about anyone, as long as they possessed the power to open up access to resources and/or entitlements. However,there is an important question that we cannot afford to leave unanswered: How can individuals acquire the power to act as effective intermediaries? On the surface, it would seem that individuals such as the *sakhis*, school-teachers or the relatively more empowered women within a *sangha* become effective intermediaries as they wield greater informational and communicative power when compared to other members within within their communities.
We must not downplay the associational power that all women belonging to the *sangha* derive from their *sangha* membership, in effective intermediation. It is well acknowledged that at the local level, the state is both decentralised and dispersed and functions more as a localised network of individual actors who have taken on various functions of the state. To put it more simply, at the village level, individuals experience the state at an everyday level in their multifarious interactions with the local *anganwadi*[8] teacher, the *panchayat* member, the ASHA[9] worker and/or the bill collector[10]. Of course, they also encounter the state when/if they protest for entitlements at the offices of the local government or challenge government functionaries. Often, we have noticed that in everyday interactions, membership in a *sangh*a allows individuals to draw weight and power from the multiple linkages that membership in a *sangha* brings them – in other words, their associational power – to challenge the dispersed 'state' at the local level, in a manner that is quite different from concerted collective action such as campaigns. How do we understand such intermediation by a *sangha*? – Is it merely yet another instance of a new institution facilitating the operations of older forms of patronage? Or can the involvement in such intermediation, by the members of the *sangha*, be interpreted as an exercise of their political subjectivity?

This is where our imaginaries of what it means to be a political subject, need further nuance. Every journey towards the realisation of political subjectivity need not be within the frame of citizenship – as Ranabir Samaddar points out, in his 2010 book 'On the Emergence of the Political Subject':
"At one level the political subject is the citizen-militant fighting at the barricades, raising manifestos, assembling crowds, organising parties, writing and speaking on behalf of collectives, joining all these, voting with fervour or with feet, marching on to parliaments with petitions, organising peasant demonstrations, refusing to pay rent and other taxes, leading attacks on landlords or hunger marches, and declaring millenarian rule... However, this is more a 19th and an early 20th-century figure in the genealogy of the political subject, which lasted till the 1960s of the

8 *Anganwadi* (courtyard shelter) : is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care centre in India. It caters to children in the 0-6 age group.

9 Accredited Social Health activist. The term refers to community health workers instituted by the Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as part of the National Rural Health Mission. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accredited_Social_Health_Activist for more details.

10 A minor government official.

last century. At another level, the political subject is less of a citizen because s/he has either opted out, or s/he has not been taken in as a legitimate member of the political society. Refugees, dismissed workers, fleeing peasants, persecuted minorities, or groups or collectives demanding self-determination, or women claiming autonomy and agency in politics to frame politics show how citizenship is an inadequate expression of the figure. At the third level, we can see how the political subject is 'subject' to given politics, but aware of the subjection wants to subject politics to its own visions, that is authoring politics. At yet another, the fourth level, this figure does not indicate an individual militant but indicates a collective phenomenon in politics. Some say, this is the phenomenon of 'multitude'. Finally and here is the fifth level, the political subject is the product of democracy—democracy not in the sense of formal institutions, but in the sense of mass politics[11]*."*

However, the *sangha* women we spoke to did acknowledge the need to exercise their political subjectivity in ways beyond acts of intermediation. For instance, women considered areas such as directly breaking down the barriers to women's participation in the public sphere, even if they offered no immediate, tangible benefits. As one *sangha* woman told us,

" Women rarely go to the *gram sabha*[12]. The few who go, such as Janakamma[13], are the ones who pay no heed to the taunts of their neighbours. When she goes, the men sit on their porch and call out "Hey, there goes Indira Gandhi[14]" , "There goes that woman who is more like a man".... but she does not care. Not all women are that brave. So they stay at home. Sometimes even other women taunt the women who go..."

Women also recognised how the power-elite of the village sabotaged any attempt to challenge existing barriers to women's participations in public forums. We recount below one such story:

"There was a meeting in the school and the village leaders did not want the women to come for they knew we would ask them questions. So, they got the men drunk. When we *sangha* women went, there was no interaction, or any fruitful discussion – there were just some fights and mayhem. The meeting was a flop."

Thus, the acts of exercising political subjectivity that fall under the conventional citizenship

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11 Samaddar,R. (2010), *Emergence of the Political Subject,* New Delhi: Sage Publications

12 Gram Sabha, which means "Village Council", refers to the village level electorate – in other words, the body consisting of all registered voters in a village. Indian law ,policy and the resolutions adopted by an Inter-State Ministerial Conference on *Gram Panchayats* in May 1998 require the elected representatives of the *Gram Panchayat* to convene a meeting of the *gram sabha* on a single pre-determined day, at least every quarter, and the approval of the *gram sabha* must be taken before implementing any village level development works that would affect the local population.

13 Name changed to protect identity.

14 Former Prime Minister of India, also India's sole woman Prime Minister so far.

framework such as breaking down barriers to women's public participation were acknowledged by women as desirable, but not considered an urgent imperative.

Conclusion: To break down doors or to unlock them?

We would like to highlight here that in an empowerment project, there cannot be an either-or question on 'Should we break down doors or unlock them'? At certain conjectures, women may choose not to openly challenge existing power-structures and resort to non-threatening negotiations. At others, women may subvert power-structures adopting strategies such as intermediation. Yet another time, women may openly confront and challenge existing patriarchal barriers. One mode of enacting political subjectivity cannot be privileged over the other.

Thus, in the India intervention under the Women-Gov project, we need to be cognisant that political empowerment cannot be limited to a road-map of the various milestones that women have to cover, on their journey to full citizenship. For, political subjectivity at times is enacted within the frame of citizenship, and at other times outside the frame. Any act by a subject who recognises that she is *"subject' to (a) given politics, but aware of the subjection wants to subject politics to (her) own vision, that is authoring politics.*[15]" is an exercise of political subjectivity.

15 Samaddar,R. (2010), *op.cit.*