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Igniting the Idea of Citizenship and Claim making amongst a small group of community members in Madhya Pradesh, India

¹Pranamika Doimary

¹Research Scholar

ABSTRACT

India is a democratic country where fair elections are conducted and citizens exercise their right to vote. They elect their representatives in the hope that their votes will not go waste and their elected representatives will fulfill the promises that they made during their election rallies. The citizens hope that they will be able to reap the benefits of development for the greater good. But do people actually reap the fruits of development equally? The unequal distribution thwarted by the vicious cycles of caste, class, race, gender grips in every society that builds up and the Indian society is no such exception. What happens when community members realize gradually that rather than being passive beneficiaries of the government schemes being provided to them, they can make a claim over it. This work is an attempt to thrust the community towards becoming active claim makers rather than just being passive beneficiaries. The members of the community work together, in order to achieve one common agenda, which has not been addressed for a long time. This work draws upon my experiences, working in Mohgoan Ryt, an Adivasi inhabited village in the district of Dindori, Madhya Pradesh. The discussions, in the beginning, tried to move me towards an infrastructural issue within the village- the road that connected three hamlets. This particular road, which was demanded to be repaired and built into a concrete cement road, fell into deaf years. Gradually, this issue started to reflect the true nature of the problem. It shifted me towards discovering the various policy mechanisms of the government, the functioning of schemes within the community, and the receiving of it. It also pointed towards the patterns of exclusion and discrimination within the very dynamics of the village.

Keywords- Citizenship, Development, policy mechanisms, patterns of exclusion, Community Participation

INTRODUCTION

In order to build a thick understanding of the village, action research includes (rural)¹ immersion² as one of the major processes to begin with. The period of the (rural) immersion is the time when our imagination and conception of the village, starts to take shape. This is also the time period when the very difficulties and problems of the community are discovered through continuous and in depth interaction with the people over a period of time. This period opens up opportunities to closely look at the situation with empathy. It also moves the community towards becoming a part of the journey undertaken by the researcher. These actions thus takes shape and makes an attempt at understanding the dynamics of a village, Mohgoan located in the Karanjia block of the Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh, India. The study was conducted over a time period of 9 months. The main intent through the process of immersion, was to build a better understanding of the community and to recognise the complications, their understandings of their daily lives. It was one of the toughest tide that

¹ Rural area or the countryside is a geographical area that is located outside the cities or towns.

² Immersion is considered as a state where the individual or the being is completely said to be involved into something deeply.

narrowly seemed impossible to cross given that the beneficiary mode of receiving things has been imbibed and practiced for years and years and to move towards a much active citizen mode of claim making generating within the community. Even though the question of the road remained right from the beginning of the first immersion it gradually died down when it came towards making a claim over it. When we look into facilitating our rights and agencies over a particular object, gradually igniting the mode of active inclusive citizenship, we tend to forget that, however, the history of citizenship has been one of the most terrible exclusions that has been stemming up from the very denial of respect, rights and the very dignity of the individual where some agencies exercise the right over the other. Indeed we have to keep in mind that that very nature of citizenship has been extremely much about its exclusionary nature that it's inclusive nature (Kabeer, 2002, p.1) When the individual enrolls itself within this Mphil program, he/she takes up the research which has within itself imbibed a very important component (rural) immersion. The researcher takes up this action research and (rural) immersion as a part of Mphil Development Practice program, Ambedkar University and works closely with PRADAN³, which is one of the reputed organisations. It has been working with women in different states of the country actively forming women Self-Help Groups and involving them in various livelihood, gender and other activities. One of the major components of this action research considers to take a different role than fieldwork. Here the researcher starts living amongst the community members and also experience daily changes that takes place during the course of the stay.

About the village

For the immersion to begin with, I was placed in Mohgoan, mostly inhabited by the *Gonds*⁴, which comes under the jurisdiction of Barbaspur Panchayat. The name of the nearest block is Karanjia which is roughly 25kms away from the village. Connectivity to the village from the block is limited and one has to rely mostly on private vehicles or auto vans that ply on these roads.

Mohgoan has 5 hamlets: Bar Tola, Neecha Tola, Imli Tola, Khamar Tola, and Dongri Tola. These names of each hamlets have their own significance. Usually they would pick up names that would be either significantly found within the vicinity thus helping in particularly situating the hamlet. Each of the hamlets are in distance from each other and the houses in each hamlet are pretty scattered. To travel from one hamlet to the other there are no proper roads within the village and one has to walk within the fields which can be seen as a common sight in the villages. Walking from one place to the other gets extremely difficult especially in the rainy season. The village is spread across 411.77 hectares with a population of 563 with 275 males and 288 females. The number of households in the village has been put up to 126 households (Census, 2011). But then the number of households could increase with many people who have constructed recently and the ones who are in the process of constructing new. The other noticeable castes in the village are the Panikas (5 families), Laman Banjaras (2 families), Yadavs (2 families) and Lohar (2 Families) (Personal Communication January 19, 2018)

Migration of young men to work in urban areas was quite prominent. These young men would travel to other cities, work in companies, earn money and would not usually return increasing the workload of agriculture on the remaining members. In discussions with the older men, they also pointed that how the younger generation would usually refrain to work in the fields and rather step outside, as it indicated that it kind of uplifted their lifestyle which was different when they remained back. With agriculture as a primary occupation within the village, we witnessed that young men would eventually step out in search of new jobs and opportunities. Talks of jealousy and Black magic (*Jadu Tona*) would also come up time and again. There are no temples to be found within the village but people who follow certain groups would have prayer rooms where they would conduct prayer meets on weekends and some families would have a corner outside the house

Infrastructural amenities within and outside the village

Mohgoan has three Anganwadis. Two anganwadis were functional while the third one was not functioning, as the caretaker of the anganwadi had not visited for a long time and would only come around when there would be any inspection or visits (Personal Communication January 25th, 2018) The village has one upper primary school. After that the students are either supposed to travel to Rusa or travel to nearby village Sengura to complete their secondary school education. Higher secondary schools are in Rusa (village at a distance of 12kms from Mohgoan) and Karanjia. There is a Primary Health Care centre near Parsel (village at a distance of 3kms from Mohgoan) but apparently it is very small and the availability of doctors is negligent. The nearest

³<http://www.pradan.net/>

⁴ The Gonds are an Indian Ethnic group found widely spread across the central part of the Indian state. They have been given the status of a reserved category under Scheduled Tribe

bank was almost 12kms away from the village. The weekly haat⁵ or as they refer to it as *bazar* was Karanjia on Tuesdays while trying to sell off vegetables on other weekdays in nearby villages.

Literature Review

The rapid economic growth that we have witnessed has grappled the villages and in turn has majorly affected the people living in it. How does economic changes and technological advancements have a major impact on these villages? (Bremar, Kloos, & Saith, 1997:2-6) The government of India had partaken many initiatives to bring about changes in rural India. It would help in doing away with the prolonged stagnation of the rural economy. Subjects like technological backwardness of the Indian agriculture, scarcity of food and frequent number of famines and social disparities which were all considered the state of backwardness were being discussed within the development circles, then had resulted with the introduction of the green revolution in the 1970s. It had then given risen to a new set of vulnerabilities that the different states of India especially rural India had been undergoing. The important role that land still places, as it still continues to be economically the most valued asset in the rural northwest India. The impacts of green revolution was not equal and states like Punjab and Haryana, with the rise of middle-level agrarian caste groups. They had dominated the structure resulting in the investment of the surplus outside agriculture and in other activities. This has also resulted in increasing level of migration and marginalities amongst the communities who were not able to reap in the benefits of green revolution. Even till date as the newer generations increasingly tends to shift and migrate outside the villages in search of better opportunities of jobs and education and in turn do away with anything related to agriculture (Jodhka, 2016:183-188) This in fact was also noticed in case of Mohgoan village, where young men would run away to work in private sector jobs which would attract good amount of money and once they come back they would indulge in drinking alcohol and smoking pot not showing any interest in agricultural activities. It is important to note that the coming of the poverty alleviation programs, which are being continuously brought about for the construction of the rural infrastructure, in the form of new roads and other facilities including the building of houses as well as sanitation facilities and water facilities in the villages have brought these villages to a very close proximity to the urban centres. The rural areas have been bombarded with goods that has changed their thinking and has pushed them towards the vicious cycle of poverty and increasing inequality rather than decreasing it. It is necessary to recognize the mechanism, that increasingly put forward to bring about divisions in the structures within the village economy and politics specially keeping in mind the role played by globalisation. Understanding the changing nature of agriculture along with production relations and changing nature of land holdings within the villages is important. It would help in understanding the very basis of structure so that there can be some movement towards change that would bring within the lives of the Adivasi world. Hence, it becomes important to shift focus towards a more action driven research that would majorly focus on how there should be movement which would only be understood when one starts immersing oneself into the everyday circumstances that one lives in.

When it has come to interacting with the community members for the purpose of study, it has been in-depth interviews with the various villagers. These interviews would be conducted with men, women, children and old aged who would be part of different groups, SHG, governmental agencies. Open ended questions were used to probe and collect information. Discussions with SHG's were also part of the ways of collecting information. Focus group discussions have also been undertaken to validate the information provided. Discussions with the government officials, panchayat officials and visiting block offices have also been major criteria for collecting information. Secondary data from different department site and other available literature on the region and community has been collected and explored to further validate the information that was received which has also opened up new angles. The following tools were used to establish grounds on which to try and trace the historical evolution of the village. Through this process of institution and resource mapping, the study tries to understand the relations of coexistence among the people. Their accessibility to resources of the village and the relations of existence of the village with the outside world and how the structure of the village has been composited. Who gets access to what, who does not and how does it all underplay marks a major point of study within the village. The experiences of first and second immersion brought about various new situations and experiences. The community members especially the females refraining from attending the Gram Sabha due to some dispute long back within the village and the constant changes in the way problems are projected regarding infrastructural issues within the village shows how there is a seasonality in the nature of claim making.

⁵ A market, especially one held on weekly basis in a rural area.

The idea of the evolution of this very concept of Indian citizenship has witnessed the relationship primarily between the individual and the state, but it has also witnessed the relations between citizens (Jayal, 2013). It would be important to decipher so as to how this concept generally has been understood through history, its contemporary period in and around the world. So as to how this concept has put forward, the idea of struggle that communities have witnessed. This shows how marginalized and disadvantaged citizens have come together and mobilised themselves against all odds to make a claim over their rights. To come together in order to protect their resources and gain recognition for their respective identities, fighting all against global odds (Thompson and Tapscott, 2010) Citizenship can be defined as the way of defining personhood which would closely link it with rights and agency: 'Citizenship as rights then enables the individual to act as agents, who would then form an agency only to take part in fulfilling those rights as citizens' It is consequently considered, a very powerful word, which is marked with connotations of respect, rights and dignity (Lister, 1997 as mentioned in Kabeer, 2002, p.1) The processes of citizenship has been about the simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion as they have gradually occurred as they have been occurring. But the concept of citizenship also pertains in itself the idea of moving together, the idea of participation exercised by the political agents of the state, the individual and the groups has had its own stands in some academic and practitioner circles (Jayal, 2013) The components of citizenship involves and exclusive membership those who would be taking the key collective decision making process where the character of the community is often reflecting what the people want to make of it. It becomes important for members to participate in particular so as to determine how far, and in what ways, it would treat people as equals. All the components that have been stated have had their fair share of debates so as it sound exclusive and not something that is inclusive in character. It is necessary that the rights bestowed upon the citizens to participate in a democratic decision making process on free and equal terms, the very idea of democracy in terms of the citizens' rights might come in terms of different conclusions. As a result of which the rights of citizenship has to be seen somewhat paradoxically, as subjects to the decisions of the citizens themselves. The nature of participation of the citizens where the component of 'right to have the rights' have been indicated, that only the members of the political community have access to these. This had always been a major debate amongst human rights activists stating that the rights should be available to all on equal terms regardless of where you are born or live with. Rights should always try and transcend the boundaries of any political community and not just depend upon membership and participation but the contestations of citizenship has had its share debate in our country for a long period of time (Bellamy, 2008, p.12-17) When we speak of participatory projects and political action, it is important to understand the association of different types of institutional and structural transformations. It is closely required to understand and create a political space that would be helpful in further deciphering the notions of existing and gradually changing political spaces, given the platform of elections and power dynamics within notions of existing political spaces. Space in which the whole context is placed can have numerous number of authors having synchronized participation in which it is understood as a situated practice, a site for resistance and dynamic political field. Keeping in mind the complexity of existing political actors within the community as living and contested entities that would help in understanding both the political subject and the place and not just treat them vaguely. Rather, it is important to understand that the political subjects do tend to change and evolve in gradual rounds of identity formation and not just understood as constructed out of nothing. What becomes important for us is to keenly understand these actors in places of resistance and understanding them in complex nature, of how one changes gradually in complex situations of production and reproduction. The actors should not be seen as something that is local or a given community not romanticising the existence but rather understanding them in complex environments in order to relate to the concepts and practices of participation. What becomes crucial is to understand space as a social construct and understanding space as livid experiences of inclusion and exclusion where power relations and motivations matter in creating or entering spaces (Hickey and Mohan, 2008, p.17-18) Citizenship that is understood as rights and responsibilities bestowed upon by the state also becomes important, to closely look into how citizenship is claimed and rights are realised by the actions and agency where citizens are closely involved in claim making (Gaventa, 2006) What becomes necessary is that, often the existence of some other spaces where the movements led by the Non-governmental organizations or the people themselves leads to practise and encourage participation. It then enables them to transfer their new adopted learnings and skills that is to be transferred in state-created spaces and energise them, so that something new and productive is meddled out from such interactions (Mohanty 2004 referred in Mohanty, 2007) The development process has to be participatory. The decisions will have to be taken with the full involvement of the beneficiaries, keeping in mind that if that involves a delay in the process, that delay should be minimised. If a group of destitute or deprived people have to have a minimum standard of well-being, a simple transfer of income through doles or subsidies may not be the right policy (Sengupta, 2001, p.2536) The understanding of the dominant development discourses and to rethink both the

ideas of development and practice within the dominant discourses, not because to criticize off, but rather work along the lines of questioning and rethinking becomes more and more important. Given the ideas of citizenship and claim making, especially in order to improve the reach of the local communities as well as the role and involvement along with the stakeholders.

Findings

The beginning opened up the picture on the beneficiary mode of receiving and processing of schemes. The schemes are re-allotted gradually by the state one after the other and the expectation to function accordingly. *Ek na ek din toh baan hi jayega itna sochna kya* (Someday or the other it would be built, why thinking about it so much) (Personal Conversation, 28th of January, 2019) While going through the block office in Karanjia, what I had ended up discovering was how there were 8 Cement concrete roads that were sanctioned already in the year 2017 to be built within the village premises and that the secretary of the panchayat had himself signed on the papers. As I took a printout of the order and had taken it around the village, the members of the panchayat secretly conducted another Gram Sabha not on Republic day but a few days later without informing everyone in the village, with only a few members due to fear of backlash. When I visited the panchayat office and informed them about the information, he got extremely nervous and was just trying to avoid contact. At the very moment, it was extremely important that the members of the community should also be present in the panchayat office. But then the alliance of the few members of the community is extremely strong which then directs the ways in which schemes would be flowing through and fro within the village and the community. It is as if there is a particular network of social reinforcement that controls the accessibility and credibility of the schemes and participation within the community. If one suffices to their request, this is only when they would be able to grasp development within their lives which would bring them closer to the resources.

I also discovered that it was in this one particular hamlet that their payment dues was not been completed under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). When they had all complained in the panchayat office about the issue as well as the rude behaviour of the concerned authorities who does all the calculations, their request were debunked and people from that particular hamlet was isolated from the entire village. After conducting 2-3 focussed group discussions with the men and the women of the hamlet, it was discovered that the schemes that were to benefit the entire village was only given out to families who were a little well to do off or had good connections with the panchayat officials. We also witness a shifting of responsibilities in terms of making claims. The infrastructural issue within the village was shifted from time to time from one official to the other and even the community members wouldn't step out. We also witness the seasonality of demand and claim making. Due to monsoon rains, since there was heavy amount of mud and rain puddles that would create difficulty in walking, since everything has dried up and there is less amount of rainfall, people have stopped talking about the road. Since there is tendency of the water to dry up and after the cutting of the paddy, wheat is being sown, it is as of now water for irrigation and other purposes seems to be bothering them more. This also tends to shift the paradigm of making claim. We notice a seasonality of infrastructural provisions which keep on changing from time to time and this also shifts making any claim over a particular provision from time to time. Now since the community had decided to talk about the road because it no longer seems to be a difficulty and when any new work within the village opens up, it is more towards the work and the labour and who gets the opportunity to work in it. Gradually once I went around under covering layers of exclusion within the community members as well as patterns of exclusion towards people belonging to another community who were smaller in number in this case the Panikas who are OBCs. Thus began a process of interacting with these women and turning them into citizens claiming for their right. During the interaction with these women, I realised how these few families have been lacking behind in every sense. Having their houses towards the downward portion of the village, they did not have provisions for proper drinking water and nor did any of the villagers have access to toilets barring just one family. This clearly viewed how patterns of gradual exclusion is maintained within these confined spaces which gets impossible for the government officials to look into. Even when these officials visit, there are gaps which show how unfulfilled promises or even words that are given out during the elections, do not see the light of the day. I conducted four Focused group discussion where the final focus was on visiting the panchayat office and submitting a letter proposing that mandatory toilets to be made in households where each willing family would go submit an application with required documents. The list for toilet construction is a two way process. One which would include names of people who would be added by the panchayat officials and one where the list comes accordingly from the block office. Now since people have difficulties they suggested that toilets be either built by the Panchayat since they do not have resources to construct it themselves. But it was also

necessary that they contribute some amount of money to the construction to make it durable and usable. The day of the meet up around 9-10 women had turned up in the Panchayat Bhavan along with their application. They had called me themselves early morning and mentioned that they are all coming to the Bhavan, this kind of engagement was not expected at all. Around 11.30-12pm, the Sarpanch and other members had arrived and around 9 women and one man from the hamlet had come along accompanying them. The women settled towards one corner and the men settled in their chairs. The seating arrangement in the beginning for me felt problematic but then I realised that it would take them time to set themselves it that path. After submitting the application and the Sarpanch reading and understanding the application, the women began to speak. They complained how things are extremely different when it comes to their hamlet, how certain schemes are not prevalent in their hamlet and few household who have widows, their access to pension is also not continuing. When people start accessing these government buildings and officials it becomes easy for them, but on the other hand when people are not able to access, they have no one to go to which creates added problems for them when they don't even know whom to approach.

In order to involve the community to actively participate requires continuous engagement. While I visited government offices in the block, I realised the power hierarchy that exist. The three tier system of Panchayati Raj involves grass-root level engagement where each and every one has the right to vote, once the elections are finished, there is hardly anyone to listen to the voices of the helpless. From the experiences of the field, Mohgoan did portray this picture. In order to move the community towards an agenda, what becomes important is that they come to a consensus first which is initially a little difficult. But once it is reached, the community can move towards fulfilling their agenda. The schemes rolled out for the population does not always reach them. These schemes take many months to reach them. The process of understanding the importance of claim making with these women required me to interact and engage with these women for so many months. Immersion as a method was extremely helpful which showed how opening up to the individuals, started to show the true nature of exclusion that one faces within the village. Exclusionary patterns within the dynamics of the village can increase the difficulty when it comes to moving towards an agenda. It would only be possible when all the people of the village community come together and work upon single agendas one at a time. This is possible when people work together, realise the importance or the need that is to be addressed immediately and collectively work towards a common goal.

The under-representation of certain sections within the political institutions marks in for exclusion from the deliberative process. The systematic exclusion of various communities of socially disadvantaged sections in deliberative process often goes against the intention of inclusive development. While it could be notices that the age old exclusion of Dalit and tribal within India from the public sphere is not in consonance with the liberal democracy that has been sought to be practised within India for the last sixty-seventy years, this age old exclusion has forced people from not being able to participate in deliberative democratic processes. Their inferior positions within the representative institutions of bureaucracy and judiciary which still do not recognise the importance of deliberative democratic process In this case the people from Neecha Tola hamlet where almost nine families belong to the OBC community are in small number given to the dominance of other community within the village i.e. the Gond community. It has happened that they have not being able to be a part of deliberative process within their own village because of exclusion from the other community. Hence they have tend to lose of certain aspects of benefits that they are also supposed to be a part of. It then becomes extremely important for the community members to be more communicative and to be more engaging in matters related to their welfare. It also becomes the duty of the people who are elected to fulfil their responsibilities and the duties they have been vested.

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