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PARTICIPATION— RHETORIC AND REALITY: An Experience from PRADAN's Engagement

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Reflecting on PRADAN's engagement so far with the marginalized communities and the poorest of the poor, the author questions the impact that it has on village women. Are the interventions helping each woman to have a voice in her development, or do the interventions make her a mere beneficiary of programmes, in the form of a receiver of goods and services? Is she able to break free from the shackles of ignorance and servitude, of choice-less compliance? If not, can this be reversed?

‘PARTICIPATION’ IS A BUZZ WORD USED by almost all development agencies, be it government departments or non-government organizations (NGOs). ‘Participation’ is defined as direct citizen engagement in the processes of governance. It includes the creation of new decentralized institutions, and several participatory and consultative processes in national and global policy deliberations. This is to support the involvement of the poorest social groups, those who do not usually have sufficient resources (economic, educational and political) to influence the outcomes of traditional policy processes (Gaventa, 2003).

However, agencies talk about participation in differing ways, ranging from people joining a pre-designed programme of development agencies, including the government, by understanding (or not understanding, in most of the cases) its objective, to people’s involvement in planning and/or implementing programmes for their own village or neighbourhood. The intention of some of the development agencies, such as PRADAN, behind encouraging the participation of the local community has been to let people decide what they want and then work towards that.

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Under the rhetoric of participation, in reality, marginalized people often remain mere beneficiaries of the programmes in the form of receivers of goods and services, without much control over the decision-making process. This happens almost unknowingly and by the time it is noticed, it is too late to correct the approach, because the local elite have captured the new space for participation and it becomes difficult to undo that. Until and unless there is targeted direct engagement with these most marginalized sections, to help them claim their space in society, this slip will be almost automatic.

This article shares insights from PRADAN's engagement in developing a system in which Self Help Groups (SHGs) are merely receivers of goods and services and, in most of these cases, they are not even the choosers of those services. This is despite PRADAN's genuine belief that marginalized groups of people should participate, take charge of their life and livelihoods, rather than letting others decide for them.

The insights are triggered by my visits to some PRADAN teams last year (2017). In retrospect, I could also relate all these

struggles with my experience of working in one of the teams, long ago.

The Intention

PRADAN, usually, initiates its work in an area by mobilizing the women to form small SHGs. In order to strengthen the sense of solidarity, facilitate access to different government programmes and reach out on a larger scale, PRADAN also promotes other associative tiers, such as Clusters and Federations. The members of any associative tier are selected from the tier just below it; ideally, membership rotates every year or two, to ensure the participation of all the members in every tier. The overall goal is that these groups and collectives of marginalized women shape their own destiny.

PRADAN also collaborated with the government to implement different programmes, keeping in mind the broad goal. For example, the main intention of PRADAN's engagement in the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), a programme of Ministry of Rural Development, was to create newer avenues in the environment and to enhance the people's freedom of choice and

capability (Sen, 1999) to access those avenues. Another intention was to increase the outreach by creating large collectives.

PRADAN saw the NRLM programme as an opportunity to help the women in SHGs, as a group, to articulate what they wanted. If what they wanted was not available or accessible in the given environment, they could demand that the state create the provision for access to, and the availability of, government funds and bank loans to create more livelihood options. This may be looked at from the framework of citizenship too, which is defined as people participating in the development process to make and shape their own destiny (Gaventa, 2003).

Institutional Structure of the NRLM in Jharkhand

I will build on PRADAN's engagement in NRLM and analyse how far PRADAN's objective has been realized. The institutional structure followed in the NRLM programme varies in the areas where PRADAN works, depending on the extent to which PRADAN has been able to influence the state government. According to PRADAN, it has

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had the greatest influence in the state of Jharkhand. Ideally, therefore, in Jharkhand, there is more of a possibility of PRADAN's objective of marginalized people taking charge of their own lives becoming a reality.

Instead, in Jharkhand, the institutional arrangement of NRLM at the block Level, as shared by a PRADAN Executive is as follows. Besides SHGs, there are other three to four associative tiers (the SHG—the Village Organization, or VO—Cluster-level Federation, or CLF—Block-level Federation, or BLF) arranged in a pyramidal order. Two to three representatives from the immediate lower tier become members of the higher tier. Financial activities, including lending, are carried out at every tier and there are accountants and other staff at every level. There are four sub-committees at the VO level—Livelihoods, Rights and Entitlements, Women's Empowerment and Financial Inclusion. Every member of a VO is a member of one of the sub-committees. Trainings are

organized by PRADAN for sub-committee members on these four thematic areas and VO members are supposed to train SHG members with the help of Community Service Providers (CSPs¹).

SHG Members: Beneficiaries Rather than Decision-makers

In 2017, I visited some of the SHGs² nurtured by PRADAN under the NRLM programme in Jharkhand. In one SHG, I asked them about their activities. The SHG members³ said that they had received loans from the VO. When I asked why they had taken loans from the VO, the members replied that they did it because either a VO member or a CSP insisted that they take the loans.

Surprising that the group had taken a loan from outside when its bank pass book showed that it had its own funds, which could have been distributed as a loan. When I asked about the sub-committees, I was astonished that nobody in the group knew

about the existence of any such sub-committees. I found some pages in a cover-file where the trial balance of the group was written, but none of the members could explain what that was. The accountant of the SHG said that two auditors from the VO had come almost six months ago and had audited the financial status. When we asked about the amount in their funds, they could not tell us anything about the total savings, the outstanding loans, etc. I observed a similar pattern in the other SHGs nurtured by PRADAN in the two nearby districts in Jharkhand although there were some exceptions. By and large, it looked like that there were supplies of services from the higher tiers in the form of loans, training, audits, etc., to SHGs; and the participation of the SHG members in the NRLM programme remained limited to that of receivers of those services, sometimes, without even understanding why they needed those services.

PRADAN, in its approach document, articulates that

¹CSPs are local people trained by PRADAN. They provide a variety of services such as auditing SHG accounts and diagnosing and prescribing remedies for pest and disease attacks on crops. CSPs are either hired by SHGs, the VO and any other associative tier or they may work independently.

²The names and other details of the SHGs are available with the author.

³When I talk about SHG members, I speak with special reference to those who are not members of the associative tiers.

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the purpose of engagement of professional-staff with a marginalized community, especially women, was to facilitate a process in which the marginalized people would take charge of their own lives and occupy space as equal citizens in society. According to PRADAN, this demands direct involvement of PRADAN professionals with the most marginalized section of society. However, in reality, in NRLM projects, PRADAN professionals only have time to attend some of the meetings of the BLF, CLF, and VO. They don't even have time to attend all the VO meetings, let alone SHG meetings.

Attending some of the VO meetings, conducting trainings and managing programmes are major forms of engagement in the NRLM programme. PRADAN professionals were busy maintaining a gigantic structure. For example, one of the Executives from a team in Jharkhand shared that he was responsible for around 500 SHGs, 28 VOs and a number of other associative tiers. He could attend only a few of the VO meetings each month; he could not attend any of the SHG meetings. In fact, an Executive, with so much

management load, can attend, on an average, only two-three meetings of a VO in a year.

The objective of the NRLM programme is to create new opportunities for the members of the primary groups (SHGs) and to enhance their autonomy and ability so that they can exercise choices to access those opportunities. To achieve that, they have created a hierarchical pyramidal arrangement of the associative tiers. Goods and services, conceptualized as newer opportunities, are flown through this structure. The leaders of the associative tiers take the responsibility of making these goods and services accessible to the members of the primary groups. In order to do that, they follow an approach of 'making things happen'. Even if an SHG member does not need a loan, she has to take it so that the target for the VO is achieved, which, in turn, helps the local NRLM body's target to be met. SHG members know that the auditors come every six months to their group and do something but they do not understand what; they also know that a loan they do not need comes to their group from the VO. In a sense, in this whole arrangement, the SHGs and its

members take a stance of passive observers and silent receivers although they are supposed to be makers and shapers of society around them.

Local Elite Capture the Space

There is another angle to this story. The associative tiers are formed with representatives from SHGs. Usually, the more vocal and articulate members are selected for the purpose. Presumably, they already enjoy more power in the group because of their social, political and/or economic status. When these already powerful women meet at the VO, CLF or BLF, those forums actually become a coalition of the so-called 'elite section' of that local area. These local elite groups of women attend training programmes imparted by the government staff or agencies such as PRADAN. They also get the chance to frequently interact with PRADAN professionals and the government staff.

As a result, they become more capable, skilled and part of an active network of people and organizations that matter. This reinforces the fact that they are the powerful and elite lot in

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the locality. The representatives also understand that they are different from the rest of the SHG members, in terms of perspective, knowledge, skill and, above all, their newly developed network with PRADAN and the government. This understanding gives them an immense sense of power (Kothari, 2001). They gradually start believing that they are in-charge of shaping the destiny of the rest of the SHG members, and, therefore, they need to decide what is to be done for the benefit of others. In their mind also, the rest of the SHG members become beneficiaries.

If the marginalized people are to really participate and become the makers and shapers of their destiny, they are the ones who need to identify issues of their priority and act on those issues. So, issues are to be decided and actions are to be discussed at the level of the SHGs because all the women in this institutional arrangement are members of SHGs. The VOs, and other associative tiers, should then become the forum for creating a larger movement on those issues. In reality, things are just the other way around. The four sub-committees at each VO discuss the issues related to

the respective thematic areas. Whatever they decide is then implemented for the benefit of SHG members. This is a top-down approach in the institutional arrangement of NRLM.

Through NRLM interventions, SHG members have remained marginalized, have become more distant from the government and have become passive receivers of goods and services. The society around them has become more layered and organized in terms of power hierarchy.

Although here I have taken the example of NRLM, this is almost unavoidable wherever PRADAN has promoted the pyramidal structure of the SHG and the associative tiers; and PRADAN professionals are primarily engaged with the associative tiers.

Before this intervention by PRADAN, power was more diffused, in the sense that there was no such network of the 'vocal' and the 'powerful' SHG members; and that network was not linked with the government or organizations such as PRADAN. These powerful women are also part of their respective SHGs. PRADAN has facilitated the creation of a sharper, layered

society of the powerful and the powerless women in rural India.

Can this situation be altered?

Probably, yes. There are two possible ways.

One possibility is to recreate the space for participation of the marginalized within the pyramidal structure. However, this seems almost impossible because the elite have already captured the space. In the example of NRLM, both these elite groups and the NRLM body (government) have developed a kind of comfortable relationship with each other, thereby helping both to serve their respective interests. Any possibility, therefore, of disrupting this already established structure and arrangement will create huge opposition from both these parties. There are instances when PRADAN has intervened to change the leadership of the CLF and the BLF and the existing leaders took the help of government officers to remain in their position.

The other possibility is that the existing system may be left to conduct activities as they are

My proposal is that participation in those programmes may then become more meaningful—in the sense that marginalized people will take charge of their lives only when they have understood the reason for their current situation and have gone through a process of identifying issues and acting on them, thereby learning and becoming more confident

doing. PRADAN may work with small groups of marginalized people, which may or may not be coterminous with NRLM groups. PRADAN-ites engage directly with those groups, to help them understand why they are the way they are, help them articulate what they want, identify issues and act to shape their lives.

In larger groups, there are more possibilities that the elite member will capture the space in NRLM-promoted institutions, the way it has been captured by them now. Discussions in smaller groups will trigger more possibilities for each member to think and articulate about her life and what she wants. It is easier to uphold and nurture the democratic spirit in a small group. Values such as inclusion, distributive leadership, consensual decision-making and giving priority to the most marginalized are easier to facilitate and practice in smaller groups. Once the members inculcate these values, it becomes easier to practice and voice those in any other

forum and programmes such as NRLM. If, with these values, the women participate in NRLM programmes, they will be able to see the issues of power asymmetry in it and will raise their voices against it more confidently.

'Participation' in a programme such as NRLM, therefore, does not necessarily lead to any fundamental change in social relations. On the contrary, it reinforces the existing hierarchy. My proposal is that participation in those programmes may then become more meaningful—in the sense that marginalized people will take charge of their lives only when they have understood the reason for their current situation and have gone through a process of identifying issues and acting on them, thereby learning and becoming more confident.

Conclusion

In this article, I have been arguing that until and unless PRADAN-

ites get directly engaged with SHGs to help them exercise their freedom of choice, the people will remain mere receivers of goods and services, and a powerful few of them, as members of the associative tiers, will take the responsibility of shaping the lives of SHG members. If that were to happen, society will become more layered; this is contrary to the idea of the 'oceanic circle' (Ref M.K. Gandhi), which is the ideological base of PRADAN's visualization of a better society.

Although I have cited examples from PRADAN's engagement in the NRLM programme, there are many places where PRADAN is not working with NRLM and, yet, it is following a similar approach. The outcomes in those places are also, by and large, similar. It is more about us, PRADAN-ites, than the NRLM programme. We need to change our approach first, only then will it be possible to influence the NRLM programme with our field experience.

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