Grassroot Empowerment (1975-1990):
A Discussion Paper

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T he objectives and socioeconomic goals as enunciated in the preamble of the Constitution have a direct bearing on the status of women in India. The Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy provide the mandate for and guarantee the equality of sexes. The articulation of special provisions for women and children in the Constitution was prompted by the existence of strongly entrenched social injustice, disabilities and discrimination on the grounds of sex and age within the 'inherited social system'. Gender equality was a prerequisite for achievement of the goals of democracy and a secular, socialist republic.

The Report on the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) - Towards Equality (1974)1, on the one hand made a review of prevailing unequal status of women in the country with the help of empirical evidence, and on the other, made feasible recommendations for removal of the same to achieve the goals enshrined in the Constitution. The Report dwelt at length on the overwhelming situation of poverty in the country and on the large concentration of women in the unorganised sector, and emphasized that women in poverty should receive priority in all measures to promote and sustain women's equality. It has to be noted that this shift in emphasis was a departure both from earlier discussions on the women's question within India and from the debates initiated at the global level prior to 1975. It seems that the association of women with poverty was the great discovery of the International Women's Decade. Only its first glimmer became visible in 1975. The Report of the CSWI was a major contributor to that glimmer.

For this paper, the word 'grassroot' has mutually reinforcing economic, political and geographical connotations. The discussion therefore focusses on women in Poverty their concentration in rural and urban areas, and the organisational approach for their mobilization and empowerment. In the context of the current Indian women's movement such a focus seems to be appropriate as the maximum emphasis has been placed on the empowerment of women at the grassroots - viz. to the organisations of poor women in rural and urban areas. These are organisations of resource poor and powerless women - peasant women, women in household

industry and women in various other unorganised sectors - secondary and tertiary, with uncertain, discontinuous and meagre means of livelihood, and dependent on multiple occupations for their family's survival.

The concept of 'empowerment' of women is the product of post 1975 women's movement. However, despite its frequent use in policy documents, and by women activists and women's studies researchers, there is considerable confusion as to its meaning and interpretation, particularly when it is used with reference to grassroot women or organisations of poor women. The dictionary defines the word thus: 'to give power to (person/group) to give them capacity to perform some-physical or mental activity, to delegate authority, to give legal rights'. This definition does not seem to provide the subtle nuances, throbbing dynamism and the processual features inherent in the word 'empowerment' as it is used in the current women's movement. Similarly, the definition also fails to reveal the extreme nature of prevailing inequalities between sexes, the powerlessness of women, and the oppressive burden of inherited social system on grassroot women for the removal of which the women's movement prescribes and uses the term 'empowerment'.

There is an apparent difference in the understanding of the concept of empowerment between the government and the women's movement. While the latter emphasises more on its participatory dynamism, the former seems to have adopted its static meaning. For instance, policies and programmes of the Government meant to facilitate poor women's access to and control over essential productive resources, credit, technology, education, necessities of human life, information etc. as the means of empowerment do not clarify this underlying meaning nor do they spell this out as the philosophy or rationale for development progranunes. In a constitutionalist interpretation - it might have been possible with a reference to Articles 15, 16, and some others - to find within these measures the notion of entitlement or right, or building a capacity for the exercise of power. In many of the policy/programme documents either the definition of power/authority is missing or the instrumentalities lack clear statement of these two components. Nonetheless, the word 'empowerment' is now being pervasively used not only by government/international agencies, but by NGOs, activists and researchers as well.

In the case of poor women's empowerment the initial understanding (based on experiences of groups like. SEWA, WWF etc.)2 of the term was confined to two meanings - (a) Organisation for collective bargaining -an extension of the logic of trade unionism, considered appropriate in order to emphasize the worker status of poor women, and to eliminate the problem of their invisibility; and (b) the improvement of their capacity to receive essential basic services (education, health care, training etc).

The concept of empowerment being a product of the early eighties, it had its grounding in the changes in development thinking of the mid-1970s - which "saw the start of a fundamental shift away from the domination of the modernisation paradigm of development thinking and intervention and a move towards a systematic search for alternatives" (Oakley et.al:'91).3 That 'participation is empowering' became an accepted notion by 1985. 'The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (1979) emphasized the importance of transfer of power as implicit in participation. Since then 'empowering' has become an accepted term in development vocabulary… and relationship between participation and power I now widely recognized' (Oakley et.al:opcit).

By the mid-eighties, there, the initial understanding derived from experiences of SEA, WWF had widened to include participation as the real goal for which empowerment was an enabling process. The right to participate in the political process is a fundamental one guaranteed by the Constitution. Since grassroot experiences revealed many layers of obstacles that poor women face in exercising this right, in the same way that they are deprived of their due share of social resources/ benefits, empowerment of poor women was meant to have a strong element of participation which enable to acquire social, economic and political equality.

Researchers, activists, development planners/ practitioners, policy-makers, international agencies and others have attempted to give a range of meaning to women's 'empowerment'. The terms has been variously defined as:

(a)   Empowerment is autonomy - both collective and individual. It encompasses several mutually reinforcing components but begins with and is supported by economic independence. According to this definition: access to and control over, productive resources; knowledge and awareness of one's self and society, and of personal needs, health issues, legal rights, technological innovations, and the availability of social and economic resources; and how to take advantage of them; self image i.e. the realisation of one's capabilities and the potential and confidence to take action in one's life, are the components of empowerment. For women, empowerment is the restructuring of gender relations within both family and society at large, and it is society's recognition of women's equality with men in terms of their worth to society as independent persons (Hapke:1992).4

(b)   Empowerment means gaining autonomy and control over one's life. The empowered become agents of their own development, are able to exercise choices, set their own

agenda and are capable of challenging and changing their subordinated position in society. The several components are economic, social and political empowerment (Gitte Sorensen and Helle Poulsen: No date).5

(c)   Empowerment is the process in which people assume an increased involvement in defining and promoting their own agenda for political and social projects designed to enact change (Wilkinson: 1990)6

(d)   The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilisation that challenge basic power relations…. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context (Sharma: 1991-92).7

(e)   Empowerment implies a fundamental redistribution of power between different groups. In the case of poor women the groups include families, communities, classes and agencies of government and intermediaries. It is a process of equity I enhancement and can be achieved only through disempowering some structures, systems, processes, institutions etc. It is, by implication, an inherently induced process/mechanism of change towards ultimate equality. It is a journey from one position to another. Equality encompasses a range of components and ultimate realisation of equality means satisfaction of all these. Empowerment as an enabling process for equality demonstrates selectivity, unevenness, unexpected behaviour patterns, self-generated momentum and compulsions. Empowerment is the vehicle which enables women to renegotiate their existence on an equitable basis (Banerjee:1992).8

(f)   Women become empowered through collective reflection and decision-making. Its parameters are - building a positive self-image and self-confidence; developing the ability to think critically; building up group cohesion, and action; ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change; encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society; providing the wherewithal for economic independence (GOI: 1986).10

(g)   An emancipatory movement... should be expected not only to, provide a sufficient and equitable access to economic resources, but also to provide at emancipation from oppressive social and political forces... A truly emancipatory movement therefore requires a continuous political and social process. Such a process has been variously labelled in shorthand as empowerment, conscientisation, and self-reliance (Leiten:1992).10

(h)   Empowerment is a process to participate effectively, in decisions that affect women's lives at the family, community and higher levels of the political process (ISED:1991).11

(i)   Empowerment is a process of building capacities and confidence for taking decisions about one's own life at an individual and collective level and gaining control over productive resources are developed and built. The empowerment process is facilitated by creating awareness about one's rights and responsibilities and socioeconomic, educational and political opportunities, by developing skills for utilising productive resources and by involving oneself in collective activities and community life (Pandey: 1993).12

(j)   Some see empowering as the development of skills and abilities to enable rural people to manage better, have a say in or negotiate with existing development delivery systems; others see it as more fundamental and essentially concerned with enabling rural people to decide upon and to take the actions which they believe are essential to their development (Oakley et al:1991)13

(k)   The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power, may be termed empowerment (Batliwala:1994).14

(l)   Empowerment required transformation of structures of subordination through radical changes in law, property rights, and other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination (Sen and Grown:1985).15

These are some of the meanings given to. the term 'empowerment' and 'women's empowerment' - by policy-makers, researchers, activists, intermediaries and others. The question arises as to whether any of these perceptions/definitions/meanings are shared by the grassroot women themselves? Or are they concepts/constructs of interventionists? How do the women at the grassroot perceive the processes changing their lives - physically, mentally, emotionally, socially? This needs to be clearly documented by the women's movement.

For instance, some illiterate tribal women from Bankura who have been exposed to organisational mobilisation for some years view their transformation over the years as a consequence of acquiring Shakti (a mix of power, inner-strength, ability, energy and self-confidence), which they have achieved in their own minds, and have drawn from their immediate socio-political milieu by becoming organised and by receiving information about their rights from an intermediary. In the process, they say, they have also gained Khomota (a mix of strength, might, ability, capacity, power) and a new social identity, (Parichoy) and

become involved in a participatory development process where they are listened to. The Shakti so gained is now inseparable from their lives and at no cost they want to part with it. Having become 'empowered' they do not wish to relapse into their former state of powerlessness. The previous identity only remains as a point of reference of the past from where they have advanced to a state of new identity. They want to use the acquired shakti or kizomota for wider social, economic and political gains. What they meant by Shakti was closer to what has been described above as 'grassroot empowerment'.

In the above definitions as well as in the rural women's perception on empowerment the two words -'power' and 'authority' appear again and again. As empowerment is all about empowering the powerless, 'power ' is fundamental to the enabling process of empowerment. Power has been defined as "the ability to accomplish one's will regardless of the means employed" (March and Taqque: 1982).16 Authority, on the other hand derives from legitimacy. The crux of ligitimzte authority is that it is exercised with public sanction. It presumes to represent the collective public will and the basis for its claim to power over other lies in the presumption that it expresses that collective will". (Ibid).

Since rural women's, especially poor women's organizations are central to this discussion, it needs to be seen how such collectives acquire power and command authority. This brings us to the question of forms of grassroot organization that exist today. Because, it is argued, empowerment of organizations…… requires resources (finance, knowledge, technology), skills training, and leadership formation on the one side; and demogratic processes, dialogue, participation in policy and decision making, and technique for conflict resolution on the other (DAWN: 1985).17

Although it is difficult to put the grassroot organization into distinct categories, they generally appear in the following forms:

(a)   Over the length and breadth of this country hundreds of independent women's co-operatives and registered societies exist in dispersed manner. Each of them is either single or occasionally multiple-village based organizations: these are presumed to be formal organizations, as they have a legal status. They have however seldom attempted to build a formal network between them either at the sub-district, district, or state level. Each of them has to have a formal structure, and to follow open and democratic processes. They are required to observe certain statutory obligations as registered co-operatives/ societies. Beyond, this they enjoy considerable autonomy.

(b)   There is large number of village-based groups mobilized by a registered women's cooperative/ society located elsewhere around credit, non-formal education, income generating activities etc. having informal affiliation to the latter. The internal structure of such groups is decided by the mobilizer intermediary organization generally. These groups internalize the philosophy of the intermediary and are guided by it.

A sub-category of this type also appears where the village based groups are formally registered at the instance of the intermediary who mobilizes them. They are considerably influenced by the objectives and philosophy and maintain a working relation with the latter but may or may not be formally affiliated to it.

(c)   A third type as loosely held women's groups with no proper internal structure, as partial beneficiaries of a project having emphasis on community or area development being implemented by Government or a non-government organization. A sub-group of this type can be village women's groups with internal democratic structure and managing certain programmes relating to women independently under the supervision of the implementing NGO. They are part of the latter also.

(d)   A more developed type with high potential for grassroot empowerment appear as independent registered societies forming the structural base of an indigenous apex registered Organisation to which the former are formally affiliated. Each of these village level registered groups and their apex body maintain an informal relation with a city based and enlightened Organisation engaged in women's empowerment.

(e)   Women's groups promoted under DWCRA, WDP, Mahila Samakhya, Water and Sanitation Board, Bank Credits (self-help groups), some Dairy project, Forestry, Handicrafts, etc. mainly at government initiative appear as another type.

(f)   Both formal and informal self-initiated groups are also found to have appeared in response to an issue of common interest such as wage, land, forest or any social issue directly affecting grassroot women.

(g)   There are grassroot women's groups having affiliation to political parties, trade unions and radical political groups. They have mainly a struggle based political agenda.

The above list is not exhaustive as non-governmental intermediaries engaged in mobilising grassroot women have adopted various relational arrangements, and have given various forms to the organised groups. The complexity grew more in the eighties onwards. Similarly, various governmental approaches and programmes added to that complexity.

The above typology is important to understand three issues. First, which of these types has the capacity/potential to generate power from within for the purpose of initiating grassroot empowerment? Second, is grassroot empowerment in the Indian context has to be essentially induced or externally initiated? Third, whether functional or organisational approach of the groups retards or accelerates the enabling process of empowerment?

There is clear evidence to show that barring a handful, grassroot women by and large have hardly received the knowledge they must and need to have of constitutional guarantees and their rights to equality. Such information tends to get blocked, receives low priority, and lacks appropriate medium for horizontal spread. Grassroot women attending conferences held by autonomous women's organisations have felt alienated because the emphasis, format and language were not always within their comprehension. The experiences of the Centre for Women's Development Studies on the other hand at Peasant Women's Conferences and camps of grassroot women exposed to some amount of mobilisation show that once the direction is appropriately delineated there is a growth of women's potential and receptiveness to the process of empowerment.

Approach to Women's Empowerment

There has been a great deal of debate in this country both in the pre-1975 and post-1975 periods on how empowerment of grassroot women is to be effected. Although the term empowerment was not used until about the 80s, the notion of empowerment was central to discussions on women's development and women's equality. Towards Equality (1974) was the first major attempt to review and evaluate not only the data on various aspects of women's status but also the changes in women's roles, rights and opportunities due to planned development. Its conclusion that the process of change was moving in a direction opposite to the goals of our society and its plans for development, triggered off a series of initiatives.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) adopted a programme of sponsored research on women, especially poor women. The main elements of the programme were :- (i) to generate and analyse data on significant patterns of social and economic

organisation affecting women's position in the long run; (ii) to develop new perspectives in the social sciences, particularly through clarification of such concepts as the family, household, women's work, economic activity and productivity; and (iii) to understand the regional and sectional differences in women's roles, status, problems, and the differential impact of development on their lives. Such a programme of research contributed immensely to the understanding of the heterogeneity and diversity among grassroot women on the one hand and their work and contributions to the society and economy on the other. This exercise continues tin today with a growing emphasis on life histories/experiences of individuals as well as of the experiences of groups of grassroot women, and contributes largely to the conceptualization/ formulation/ clarification of the concept of empowerment among grassroot women.

Given the number of powerless grassroot women in the country, it was realised from the very begining that development of empowerment of individual women living at centre of several layers of obstacles was an impossibility. As a result, national the development strategies from the 50s onwards had emphasised the promotion of grassroot women's organisations (Mahila Mandals) for the delivery of services, and for income generating activities. The CSWI (1974), however, observed that the purely voluntary and non-representative status of Mahila Mandals denied them recognition from local statutory self-governing institutions and therefore recommended that statutory women's Panchayats be set up at the village level as a transitional measure to ensure greater participation by women in the political process, especially in development decisions.

Several evaluative studies on Mahila Mandals carried out between 1975 and 1980 also pointed out the inherent weaknesses in their structure, functioning, coverage and outreach. The Report of the Working Group on Development of Village Level Organisations of Rural Women (1978)18 felt that the existing Mahila Mandal programme had failed to make any serious impact on grassroot women due to lack of clarity in objectives, neglect of economic activity and training in productive skills. The Working Group therefore suggested a new programme to "draw rural women into the mainstream of development and to enable them to function as instruments of social change by providing them with programmes in which they will have a stake and sustained interest". The broad areas of action defined by it were:

i)   reduction of unemployment and underemployment of women;
ii)   promotion of fora for women from poorer/weaker sections through which they may participate in decisions that affect their lives in order to enable them to have full access to development resources.

The Working Group thus observed that a single type of women's Organisation like the Mahila Mandal -cannot meet all situations and the needs of all groups of women because of existing inequalities and difference in interests among rural women. Several alternative models therefore needed to be explored. It was proposed that 10,000 rural women's organisations all over the country should be developed and strengthened during the Vlth Plan period.

The Committee on Panchayati Raj Structures (1977-78)19 emphasised the need for village level women's organisations to influence - both 'the directional and implementation levels' of development planning. The need to organise rural women workers to eliminate their economic and social vulnerability was emphasized not only by the policy making bodies of this country but by the NAM Movement (Baghdad '79)20 and UN systems as well by the mid-eighties (e.g. Copenhagen Programme of Action).21

The organisational approach for rural poor women's development was emphasized subsequently in the VIIth Five Year Plan document 'to increase the absorptive capacity of the poor, provide them social strength for articulation, and improved access to development inputs and services'.22 This philosophy was followed up through the government programmes like Support to Employment and Training Programme (STEP), and Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). Similarly, Women's Development Programme (WDP) of Rajasthan, awareness generation -programmes of the Central Social Welfare Board, Mahila Samakhya Project of the Ministry of Human Resource Development are some of the programmes with a basic thrust on grassroot empowerment through women's own organisation. This thrust was further emphasized by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (NCSW) in its report Shramshakti (1988).23

The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000 AD)24 recommended that for maximum impact, wherever possible, programmes must adopt the group approach to the mobilization of women. Similarly, the Revised Programme of Action (1992)25 of the National Policy of Education while identifying the parameters of empowerment of women. suggested that decision making and action through collective processes, must be fostered.

Although the debate on the exact forms, types and status of grassroot women's organisation is an ongoing one, there has been a kind of general agreement that the empowerment of grassroot women can at least be initiated through women's collectives created at several levels. It was felt that grassroot women's organisations formed as separate collectives outside the family household but within the community structure should provide the needed

additional source of identity for women. In the context of rural India, the need for such organisation was felt more acutely due to widespread practice of village, exogamy in marriage practice. 'Rural women go to live in an unknown village on marriage, and being removed from parental support, a sense of insecurity haunts them. This has often prompted them to develop informal relationship for mutual support and emotional strength. Anthropologists Maher has dubbed the casual, daily relationships among women the 'woman network'.26 Such 'woman network' is found to exist in Indian villages for various purposes and can be used as the foundation of grasgroot organisation of women.

The women's movement in this country also realised at the same time that in certain contexts it would be difficult to claim exclusive women's rights and therefore it would be best to penetrate such areas through representation in the Panchayati Raj institutions, Programme of Joint Management of Forests, Wage Struggles, etc. Isolated instances of exclusive women's Panchayats and Forest Protection Committees are however not wanting in this country today - e.g. former in West Bengal and Maharashtra and latter in West Bengal.

The Enabling Process of Empowerment

Some major debates still continue to revolve around the enabling process of grassroot level empowerment. The initial debate originated from the concept of empowerment itself. Admittedly, the use of the concept of empowerment has greater relevance and application to 'third world' countries which were characterised by high levels of poverty and feminisation of poverty, low female literacy, invisibility of women and strong patriarchal and community values. Because of these characteristics practically nothing was expected to evolve on its own as an enabling process from within the poorest, most powerless class of women. There are hardly any instances to show that indigenous or spontaneous grassroot organisation of poor women has occurred in this country except in one or two isolated cases in response to certain specific issues directly affecting a section of women in specific locations. It was clear therefore that empowerment was possible only through external intervention of some kind. This seems to have been accepted as an appropriate approach in the context of the nature and condition of the target population, the conceptual content of empowerment and the immensity of the task involved.

One major issue that surfaced fairly early concerned appropriate 'time' and 'space' available to the poor women for organisational work, tied as they are to their increasing labour obligations with diminishing autonomy and cultural worth : how was the process of organizing

to begin. Both non-government intermediaries and government agencies lacked accurate, detailed information about the life styles, work patterns and mental capacities etc. of poor women, especially in the context of agro-climatic and occupational diversity. Several research studies indicate that many efforts at grassroot empowerment initiated by NGOs or the Government started with pre-conceived assumptions on, for example, the sexual division of labour, or women's powerlessness and passivity.

This information gap - especially on the patterns of 'labour allocation within the household, social values as interpreted at the level of the family, defining women's options, and the connections between such values/options with the production process- began to be partially met in the latter half of the eighties. A fair amount of such information has been gathered by social action groups now playing an active role in women's empowerment. Other fallouts from this development are - (i) attempts to narrow the gap between research and action at the individual or institutional level and (ii) increasing consciousness of social responsibility among researchers and the erosion of the theory of academic neutrality among a section of social scientists in this country.

There was another consideration in the adoption of induced organisational approach for women's empowerment. It is believed that women's power is limited because their authority rarely extends beyond the limits of small family units, and even within them it is usually circumscribed by cultural norms and often legal structures. Established feminist theory on the public-private dichotomy argues that sexual equality is promoted by involving men in the domestic sphere and by drawing women out into public life. 'When men's authority is invested along with women's in the family and household, and the women's embraces the wider community, the legitimacy of both sexes power is more nearly equal' (March and Taqque:1982).27

In the context of grassroot empowerment then, an analysis of the domestic and public space assumes great importance. Considering the fact that a great deal of diversity and that research in this area is still theoretically and heterogeneity exist in this country it will be premature to delve into this area just now, conceptually rather weak, failure of grassroot empowerment However, it should suffice to say that the success or failure of grassroot empowerment is to some extent related to the whole concept of this geography. One could easily hypothesise that the collective empowerment process succeeds with really poor women - whose livelihood occupations have always, i.e. traditionally, been restricted to the 'private' domain. On the other hand women from a somewhat higher family status, being more used to

economic dependence on the family and some form of social seclusion, many find an identical approach more threatening/ intimidating, at least initially.

The second debate, albeit largely operational, actually originates from the previous one described above. it throws up the following questions: - (a) How/ who will initiate the mobilisation of poor women? (b) How can such organizations be sustained? (c) What is the role of the intervening/intermediary group/institutions/persons? (d) What should be the thrust areas, stages and indicators of empowerment? and (e) What changes characterize the relationship between the women at the grassroot and the interventionists? All these issues in this wide spectrum of debate have not been very systematically addressed yet, and opinions vary among interventionists, and within the women's movement itself.

While trends during the period indicated increasing acceptance by the government of the need for non-governmental intermediaries, debates on this question continue, without any clear consensus. As indicated earlier, the government and the women's movement clearly had the experience of Mahila Mandals in mind. The response of the state during the post-1975 period in its attempts to organize women at the grassroot level cannot be said to have been consistent and/or efficient. For instance, the two schemes launched by the government viz. STEP and DWCRA aimed at strengthening the socioeconomic base of rural women through a group approach, awareness generation and provision of support services. The schemes also provide for the training of functionaries in basic concepts and approaches in programme planning so that they are able to understand the concepts of participatory development and group approach whose ultimate objectives are empowerment and women's equality. The schemes have been implemented both by government and non-governmental intermediaries. While generalisations are risky on the basis of impressions it is generally believed that while in the case of government agencies the emphasis was more on quantity (number of groups organised), in the case of NGOs it was quality. The primary goals of the latter were and are true participatory of wider concerns, cohesiveness of groups organized and entry of such groups into wider socio-political issues.

The awareness generation programme of the Central Social Welfare Board and the Mahila Samakhya Programme of the Ministry of Education are other examples of the government attempts grassroot empowerment. While the first programme was almost totally dependent on NGO intermediaries, the second programme involve both government and NGO intermediaries. Both the programmes context wise are similar as well as dissimilar, but both basically do not seem to be grassroots women's immediate need-specific in the sense that they are likely to be unsustainable in the long run. Issues are being currently approached in an

isolated manner. In other words, both the programmes need extensive and immediate support from other programes for a strong foundation and group cohesiveness, and subsequent continuous interaction for several years to put women on the path of empowerment. It is unrealistic to devise a time bound/ single dose programme for poor women's empowerment.

The doubts concerning the efficacy of such intervention at the micro level with government support or by government itself in some areas, have intensified due to certain fallouts in the recent past. For example, there is evidence to show that although at the policy level many state governments agreed to transfer land (good, bad, wasted) to grassroot women's groups, at the operational level, hurdles and harassment came into prominence. This has been the experience of intermediaries working with poor women in Gujarat and Rajasthan. SUJATA - a voluntary Organisation in Himachal Pradesh - ran into problems while implementing awareness. generating programme against alcoholism through women's groups. In Andhra Pradesh, motivated by the text-book materials of the National Literacy Mission, scores of neo-literate women joined together to close down village liquor shops and waged war against drunkards, liquor dealers, and even their own husbands. Curiously enough, the same state which made a public policy -of enabling grassroot women's empowerment was trying to oppose these attempts by women as liquor contributes to state revenue. The 'Andhra Pradesh Government is reported to have gone further by attempting to censor the textbooks which contain such positive messages. There have been attempts also to these movements as part of caste or class movements28, ignoring the fact that the cries of women's groups are being smother and their empowerment jeopardized. In the end, the women's movement is faced with the question of the sustainability of grassroot groups supported by and/or organised by the government, and rightly suspects the genuineness of government attempts at grassroot empowerment.

In 1980, when seven national women's organisations presented a joint memorandum to the Government of India, recommending major policy thrusts needed for women's empowerment (AIWC - 1980 29 majority of the organisations ruled out any active role by the government in organising women at the grassroots. There was a distinct unity on the issue despite ideological diversity. Same organisations were willing to take resources from the government but preferred to do the organising themselves. Some had objected even to the acceptance of resources.

A section of the women's movement, which claims complete autonomy from the state and political parties, also debated on the issue of taking government resources to work for grassroot empowerment. These autonomous groups based their objection on both ideological

(the state represents the repressive power of the dominant class and is, therefore by nature incapable of supporting the. empowerment of the poor and oppressed) and pragmatic ("we would get co-opted by the state") grounds.

Defenders of state support for the empowerment/organisation approach have argued all along that:

(a)   women's powerlessness at the local/ micro level cannot be eliminated without legitimate and powerful support;

(b)   it is the State's constitutional responsibility to provide this type of support;

(c)   only State sponsored programmes could achieve adequate spread across the country and arrest the neglect, marginalisation and increasing impoverishment of women; and

(d)   it is the only way to publicly register and acknowledge poor women's rightful claim to a share of national development and resources.

The National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (1988) also argued squarely for governmental support to organisations of poor women. The argument is justified in a situation where few organisations exist, and on the ground that non-governmental intermediaries are too few in relation to the size/needs of the target population, and that poor women's own efforts are practically non-existent due to no fault of theirs. NCSW also demanded that the State should help initiate a network of grassroot level organisations as "development is basically about the people" and as equality has been guaranteed for women by the Constitution. In any case - the concept of empowerment was already a part of government policy, though its universality was still under debate in 1988. On the basis of nearly five years of experience of DWCRA, the Department of Rural Development of the Government of India suggested to the Cabinet in 1987 that the 'group approach' should be adopted for all women covered under IRDP as well. Acceptance however did not follow - despite the NCSW's recommendation.

Even if it is agreed that (i) the organisational approach, (ii) the need of an external intermediary, and (iii) state support through intensive policy articulation and appropriate programme backup are prerequisites for women's empowerment in this country, all problem areas will still remain. The issues of sustainability, the nature of transformational developments, adjustment mechanisms, and the direction etc. of grassroot organisations and resultant degree of empowerment cannot be tackled immediately. The State will continue to have an advantage over non-governmental intermediaries, political parties, trade unions etc. involved in grassroot

empowerment in that it can lay claim to a continuity that is denied to other forms of organisations.

What is critical today is the need to formalise and ensure some longevity to the organisations that have emerged all over the country, on the foundations of women's informal or formal networks, around issues, programme activities, or socio-political relations. They need to be identified and mobilised through research, documentation, information/ experience sharing etc. to widen their base.

An ideological consensus in the political life of this country for grassroot women's empowerment as a comprehensive strategy as opposed to the current partial, fragmented thrusts for narrow political or departmental gains is a fundamental priority. Grassroot women may be socially or occupationally divided, but as a class they do represent certain secular values and demonstrate the basic instincts of sharing, reciprocal help, and responsiveness to reach out to others in similar conditions. These noble human traits of poor and illiterate women hold great hope and potential.

Experiment in different corners of the country, under diverse situations, have yielded enough evidence to show that the pathological situation created by poverty, illiteracy, marginalization, subordination, invisibility and social disabilities is not an impediment to poor women's mobilization. Approaches to grassroot empowerment, therefore, have to be synergic in nature, and should not be viewed as points of arrival but as components of the process itself. It has to be a combined process of external promotion and internal initiatives. The 'target' women must experience development from very outset.

The Enabling Process and the State

Throughout the women's decade and thereafter the government's support for grassroot empowerment was hesitant, fragmented, discontinuous and experimental. Government functionaries responsible for programme implementation did not get much or no exposure to face to face dialogue with grassroot women. They depended heavily for this purpose on NGOs wherever they existed or on a category of low-paid women functionaries (gramsevikas, anganwadi workers, sathins, village health guides, lady extension officers etc.) whose identities were ambiguous as they were not fully part of the grassroot group - even they belonged to a similar, if not the same, background.

A few bureaucrats at the highest policy making level established consultative relations with leaders of the women's movement and came up with some new programmes. Women's cell/ Departments in two or three Ministries, Women's Development Cooperation in certain state etc. were assigned the task of making polices and programme to empower grassroot women. A review of the period indicates that the following steps were taken by different Ministries of the government.

i)   Individual grassroot women's economic empowerment was sought to be achieved through the delivery of joint paths (joint title to land), training and economic activities and some vague statements of women's right to household productive resources; in anti-poverty programmes, a quota was fixed for women beneficiaries.

For women's groups, programmes like DWACRA, STEP etc. were launched; a few states passed a resolution to transfer government revenue land to women's groups on a leasehold basis.

Both individual and women's groups were declared eligible for bank credit for economic activity. For all wage labourers, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed.

ii)   Grassroot women's social empowerment was sought to be achieved mainly through awareness generation programmes which were supposed to reach messages of constitutional and legal rights, and legislative provisions for women, the evils of child marriage, the small family norm, how to fight social disabilities, the evils of dowry, the legal age of marriage for boys and girls, etc.

iii) To provide more space to grassroot women in the political process, seats reserved for women in Panchayats bodies were increased in a few states. A Constitutional Amendment Bill was prepared to regularise Panchayat Institutions and enhance their powers and functions, and to introduce compulsory reservation of 1/3 seats for women at all levels.

iv)   Grassroot women were targeted in non-formal education, by the National Literacy Mission and Mahila Samakhya Programmes.

v)   Programmes like ICDS, Creches for Working and Ailing Mothers, Immunization and Family Welfare and focus on the girl-child were seen as support services for rural women.

vi.   That drinking water, sanitation, fuel, fodder and the problems arising out of environmental degradation and deforestation are basically grassroot women related problems received some recognition.

It is not the purpose here to review the content of these policies and programmes and to survey how far these have been successfully implemented. As to their impact, it is best to turn the pages of Shram-shakti to see how the Commission assessed the situation as late as 1987-88. With the deterioration of the political situation since then - and the current resource crunch, too much cannot be expected.

Enabling Process and the Non-Governmental Effort.

The meagre instance of grassroot empowerment which are visible today have been made possible through the intervention of committed activists (mainly women) and non-governmental intermediaries. In the seventies, there were only a handful of such individuals and organisations working mainly with urban poor women. In the eighties, there were hundreds with a greater focus on rural poor women. ' Other significant developments of the eighties in the area of grassroot empowerment are - (i) the induction of some - male activists in - the empowering process, (ii) the gradual involvement of educational institution (unfortunately not so much at the grassroot level) in projects involving empowerment at the grassroot level.

The popular notion that women's organisations and their women cadres are best suited to bring in grassroot empowerment led to the formation of this type of intermediaries at first, but later on this exclusiveness was not maintained due to certain compulsions in the rural scenario. Today, one can still find women's organisations with clearly declared objectives working with grassroot women. One can also find organisations mainly engaged in rural development with a strong component devoted to women's development. Still others consider women's development as part of village development or household welfare programme. In their approach, in general there has been a greater emphasis on the, group approach, and in the matter of status there are obvious differences between organisations. The forms of grassroot organisations/ groups which came into existence in the eighties as a result of intervention by the above intermediaries have been discussed earlier.

There were also certain intermediaries who do not work directly with grassroot women but their products such as literature, audio-visuals, training materials, technology etc. are aimed at grassroot empowerment. They normally assist intermediaries in direct contact with grassroot women. Lastly, there are networks of intermediaries, who come together only occasionally or through a forum to play the advocacy 'and strategy- planning roles for grassroot empowerment.

It is not the purpose here to make a qualitative evaluation of these intermediaries, or to delve into their types, structures, ideological orientation, nature of relation with the target etc. in a systematic and exhaustive manner. It will be enough to say that by a variety of initiatives of the non-governmental intermediaries, a large number of islands of hope/centres of energy have been created. By and large, such initiatives have been secular and non-casteist in character as well. However, in the experience of the majority of intermediaries, tribal women from backward communities, women in the hills and forests and women in mining activities have been not only the most targetted but also the most satisfying to reach.

The shift in emphasis by some of the intermediaries in directing the grassroot women's attention to natural resources land, water, forest and other local productive resources) with which their relationship has been traditional and intimate, and about which they have a vast knowledge applicable to current development has brought extraordinary results in many parts of the country. This approach has been further strengthened by rediscovering and readvocating the actual role of this class of women in agriculture, forestry, handicrafts, livestock, sericulture, small trade, household savings etc.

The nagging question on the role and capabilities of NGOs still remains. Firstly, a NGO working with grassroot women cannot guarantee its own longevity and a long term association with the grassroot groups. Many of them are also single person-oriented structures. In the course of political mobilisation for empowerment, party politics often surfaces in the agenda of many, and cooperation takes place. Since horizontal empowerment takes time., and new aspirations of groups in the process of transformation make new demands, it is very difficult for the intermediaries to sever links with the groups. The question of ethics also demands that once the group has been led to the path of struggle, it is improper for the intermediary to leave them midway. At the same time - if they chose to stay on to help - then they have to face the tricky questions of their own changing roles and functions - as the grassroot group gathers strength as well as status.

Enabling Process and Political Parties, Trade Unions, Etc.

Most of the national political parties today, for the purpose of political mobilisation have women's fronts. In this area, compared to others, the track record of the left parties is slightly better. ' For instance, the two communist parties have a far better penetration to the grassroots, though the priority conceded to women's empowerment is still highly inadequate. On the question of ensuring minimum wages and equality of wages to grassroot women labourers, it

has not been possible for any party to ensure enforcement of the same. Similarly, provision of adequate employment, essential support services, and ensuring constitutional and legal rights to grassroot women have been only recently articulated in a limited way. One of the national parties still upholds casteism, sexism, untouchability and glorifies 'sati'. One of the associates of this party had rigorously opposed equal rights for women when the Hindu Code Bill was being discussed in Parliament.

The track record of the Trade Unions and workers' movements in the country is far worse. The experiences of SEWA in Gujarat, Shramik Sangathan in Maharashtra, Chattisgarh Mine Workers' Association in Madhya Pradesh, are cases in point. The Trade Unions tend to hold the view -that within workers' and peasant organisations, women need to be organised separately in order to take up women-specific issues. On the other hand, a group of women's organisations (AIWC, 1980)30 placed a great deal of hope on trade union while arguing the task of organising grassroot women. The group stressed that the task should be left to the NGOs or trade unions and rejected the suggestions that the government should undertake this responsibility. The important question is how much is possible for the NGOs if the trade unions do not join. The country is vast the Constitution is 40 years old. This problem is further aggravated by the fact that activists or intermediaries as of now in the scene today, are largely drawn from the articulate urban middle class as opposed to grassroot groups belonging to the toiling class.

Discussion

Towards Equality (1974) and Shramshakti (1988) provide comparable macro assessments of the situation of the mass of Indian women at two points in time. The former identifies 'regression' and 'powerlessness' as the main drawbacks of women's situation at the grassroots level. The latter, on the other hand, adopted a positive stance on grassroot empowerment. These two texts prove evidence that grassroot empowerment, non-existent upto 1975, had emerged as part of a central debate a decade later. The period between 1975-1990 was marked by greater interaction and involvement of NGOs with grassroot women, increased research, documentation by researchers and activists, and intensive review of grassroot women's situation, the programmes of the government and the politics in regard to those. There were several occasions on which the national women's organizations interaction among themselves as well as with the government and the with peasant women on the issue of women's empowerment.

Despite differences in perspectives, approaches and methodology, there seems to be a general agreement both within the government and the women's movement that grassroot organizations of urban and rural poor women workers are vital instruments to provide them with collective strength, social mobility, bargaining power, collective articulation and participatory options to safeguard their interests. Grassroots organizations are viewed as pressure groups and levers of power and at the action level, they combine agitational and developmental aspects of power and resources. As expectations have received opposition at the local grassroot level from many quarters and have occasionally even been the cause of law and order problems.

The other problem of grassroot empowerment, faced both by NGOs and the government, relates to the means of reaching out to grassroot women. NGOs have adopted a variety of means - e.g., economic activities, employment generation, awareness-raising, educational programmes, issue-based struggle, and in some cases specific programmes of the governments. The government's approach by and large has remained mainly programme-based - DWCRA, STEP, SAMAKHYA etc. While NGOs have been able to combine various activities with the ultimate object of overall empowerment, the same has not been possible for the government in view of the limited scope and emphasis of its programmes. The extension services of the government programmes suffer on this account and additionally have hardly been able to target the class of women who need attention first. At the grassroot level there also exists considerable hesitation on the part of government and statutory bodies to share power with grassroot organisations per se, much less with women.

There are two viewpoints about the role of intermediaries organising rural and urban poor women. Some believe that mobilising poor women on economic issues is critical to enable them to challenge the forces of their social oppression which has roots in economic vulnerability. The other view-point holds that exclusive concentration on economic issues without paying adequate attention to sources of disempowerment may dilute the ideological issues in the WID debate and may have a depoliticizing effect on women. However, current experiences indicate that economic issues do emerge as a critical area of intervention for grassroot empowerment. Similarly, NGOs ate also divided on the issue of partnership with the government in the enabling process of grassroot empowerment. Some of the women's groups prefer to adopt an adversarial style vis-a-vis the government as they do not consider that the government is playing any role in the promotion of grassroot groups.

The period under review is also characterised by the development of a new role, that of advocacy by middle class women. They have been taking up issues on behalf of grassroot women. Towards the end of this period, there has been a shift to the other extreme. It has now been possible with some degree of success to enable grassroot women to present their view points directly where formerly middle class women/ intermediaries played facilitating roles.

It has been the general experience that the groups organised by intermediaries develop a dependency relation on the latter. As opposed to this general development, the question of self-reliance of the organised groups is articulated by many. How can groups become totally self reliant is an issue for which no conclusive evidence or clear answers have been thrown up during the period. However, considering the historical fact of women's subordination and marginalisation, both these issues will have relevance for quite some time. Additionally, self-reliance is very narrowly defined in the context of economic activities and management of groups. Grassroot empowerment is essentially a process of change and therefore the question of self-reliance cannot be restricted to narrow parameters.

Conclusion

Grassroot empowerment also needs to be viewed from the standpoint of share of grassroot women in the women's movement per se. While there is little doubt that the vitality of the Indian women's movement owes a great deal to the pressures generated from the grassroots, it would be far more difficult to answer the question how far has the women's movement been able to carry the grassroots? What has been largely! achieved is representation by intermediaries of the views and issues of grassroot women. To induct grassroot women as vocal and active participants in the women's movement, is the challenge of the nineties. The relationship would be of mutual interest. The current political situation makes this imperative, as with the national crisis deepening and violence on the increase, the constructive efforts of over a decade could be washed away overnight.

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