

GENDERING DEVELOPMENT, CREATING ALTERNATIVES IN NEO LIBERAL TIMES

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The term “development” has been used in a number of different contexts and has come to mean many things to many people. The direction of development in our country has been marked by a shift to a market based growth model over the past two decades, which has largely excluded the poorer, more marginalized sections, including the majority of women from its ambit. The concerted attempt within political and academic circles has been to equate development with GDP growth, focussing on increasing availability of products and services. However, scant attention is being paid to basic needs, which would improve the quality of life, human potential and capacities of all sections of society. Therefore, at a very fundamental level “development” has to be redefined to mean a process that enhances the well-being of all people; it is a process that should aim to protect the dignity of citizens irrespective of their caste, creed, sex or religious and political beliefs.

Going by this definition, India’s development record under a neo liberal regime has been abysmal. While successive Governments have been claiming an impressive growth profile, underlying the dazzling statistics, human development has suffered immensely. Moreover, the most serious deprivations and discriminations have been faced by the daughters of this nation. Coining of slogans like “*beti padhao beti bachao*” cannot achieve much without proper policies and adequate allocation of resources in core sectors like education, health and social welfare. The general disregard towards the equal rights of women is the outcome of an extremely patriarchal approach, combined with a profit-oriented paradigm due to which they are pushed to the periphery of the development agenda.

The People First campaign asserts that for development to be truly inclusive, the concerns of women will have to be brought onto the mainstream agenda. Some of the main issues, which could feature in formulating development plans that are more gender specific, are being placed for discussion in the following section. However, this is not an exhaustive list. More aspects can be added, as the campaign gets underway. We have to keep in mind the rich diversity that prevails in our country, and allow for regional priorities to shape the agenda. Moreover, all the various themes being dealt with in the task of setting forth a people’s alternative for development must also include a gender component. Gendering the development agenda requires this twofold approach, if our goal of making women equal partners in bringing about pro people change has to succeed.

COMBATING FOOD INSECURITY

India occupies the unfortunate position of the country with the highest number of malnourished people in the whole world! Identifying the reasons and overcoming the policy obstacles is central to an alternative development agenda. The pursuit of high economic growth has been accompanied with chronic food deficiency and hunger. As per the 2013 UNDP Human Development Index, India ranks 94th out of 199 countries in the Global Hunger Index. Each minute, five Indians die of hunger, which makes 7000, each day and 2.5 million people dying of hunger in India every year. The NSS reports falling average consumption of calories from 2246 per capita per day in rural areas in 1972-73 to 2020 in 2009-10, and from 2107 calories to 1946 in urban areas. The high growth states of BJP-ruled Gujarat and Maharashtra are amongst the worst where malnutrition is especially pronounced for children and women. Almost half of India's children under age five years (48 %) are chronically malnourished while seven out of every 10 children age 6-59 months in India are anaemic. 36% of women are undernourished, with a BMI less than 18.5, indicating a high prevalence of nutritional deficiency. Over half of women (55 %) are anaemic.

There is a wide range of issues underlying the grim situation. Amongst them, the weakening of the PDS, the continuation of the hopelessly flawed targeted system and the exclusion of large sections of the poor in the name of their being APL have had a very damaging impact on poorer families. The National Food Security Act guarantees only 5 kg of food grain per month to 67% of Indian households, 75% in rural and 50% in urban areas. This is well below the ICMR's 14 kg requirement. It does not ensure availability of sugar, pulses, oil and other essential items. Even this has been undercut by the current dispensation, which has reduced allocations to states, resulting in irrational exclusion of many deserving people.

UID-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer and Direct cash transfer schemes are being projected as an efficient means of transferring subsidies. In reality, women have to run from pillar to post to check on the subsidies, which very often do not reach them at all or reach very late. Often enough, the introduction of cash transfers leads to further price hikes, because the prices of food and other commodities and services get deregulated and are left entirely to the market forces. While the Aadhar card is being pushed as some kind of magic bullet to do away with all ills, this bullet is going to hit the beneficiaries of welfare schemes the hardest. It is now being mandated for children to access the mid day meal scheme, in violation of Supreme Court guidelines. The UID biometric technology is unproven and the infrastructure costs are huge. There is no guarantee that DBT cash will actually be used for buying the commodity for which the cash is given. The LPG Cash Transfer Scheme has caused great hardship to women in regions where it is being implemented.

Ultimately, all round development can never go hand in hand with an empty stomach. The people's agenda demands an end to malnutrition and hunger, for a start, by curbing price rise through appropriate policy measures, strengthening of the PDS, providing essential items at controlled prices through fair price shops; provide subsidized LPG for cooking Mid Day Meals

and ICDS Centres; and delinking of Aadhar and biometric verification from all entitlements and government schemes including food security programmes.

ADDRESSING THE GENDER GAP IN EMPLOYMENT

Over the past decade, there has been a widening gender gap in employment across sectors which has been haunting women with growing ferocity. As prices go up, and home expenditures escalate exponentially, women's demand for income has been on the rise, but market led development has squeezed women out of existing jobs and forced them to contend with jobless growth. The share of women in the country's labour force dropped from 33% in 1993-94 to just 27.5% in 2011-12. The fall is even more serious in the rural areas, where 34% of women were in the workforce in 1983, but it had dropped to 25% by 2011-12. Since the workforce figures include unpaid workers who may be working with other household members, but would not have any independent income, the situation is even worse than the statistics show. Women seek work mostly in the unorganized sector, but even in sectors like home based work, there has been a cut back. The number of underpaid and unpaid women workers suffering from insecurity and instability of income and employment is also burgeoning. The worst hits are the adivasi, dalit and muslim women workers.

Unless this trend is reversed, and the labour market is transformed to provide more and better-paid employment opportunities, there can be no inclusive development. Women's right to work, earn a minimum wage, receive equal wages, be provided security at the work place, are key aspects to be taken up.

While neo liberal thinkers have run down the MNREGA scheme, which mandates a 100-day job guarantee for every family in rural areas, the fact is that it has come to the rescue of the beleaguered rural women in a big way. In the eleven years since its passage, this Act has provided employment to over 10 crore families, and it is noteworthy that around 75 to 80% of workers under this scheme are women. The effective implementation of this scheme - which is demand driven, will contribute to ameliorating the impact of the agrarian crisis, and reduce distress migration from villages to urban areas. The experience of the MNREGA, and the huge response from women, despite the many hiccups is a pointer to the importance of bringing in an Urban Employment Guarantee Act also.

An area of special intervention must be to list out the protective labour laws and social welfare schemes that still exist, but which are mostly not implemented. All efforts in this direction would bring the development agenda closer to the interests of working women. The demand for crèche facilities, implementation of the Maternity Benefit Act for unorganized sector workers, setting up of anti sexual assault committees wherever women are employed- are issues of a similar nature. Many more matters may come up and be included in the campaign. But the bottom-line is to make sure that there is an awareness of the extent to which women's work – within the home and outside of it - is unpaid and therefore underestimated. The nation's GDP must take into account her contribution, and enhance her status in society.

IMPROVING EDUCATION AND HEALTH INDICATORS

India's dismal position at the international level in the education and health sector reveals the need for a much greater attention to these core indices of development. The statistics on children out of school and those who drop out mid way are alarming. The attrition rate is much higher amongst girls, especially from the weaker sections. While the Right to Education Act has been passed, attention to its implementation is very tardy. A key intervention by this campaign must be to focus on the RTE Act, and move for its effective implementation.

To promote girls education, the government had announced a number of schemes like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP), PRAGATI, Udaan, Swami Vivekananda Scholarship for Single girl child in the last two years. However, the resource allocation has not kept pace with the announcement of new schemes. Except for Rs. 100 crore in BBBP, no other allocation was made. Interventions in the arena of education can include the following demands addressed to policy makers:

- a. allocation of at least 6% of GDP for education;
- b. implementation of the RTE Act, improving basic school infrastructure, including provision of toilets with water facility, teacher training, and teacher recruitment;
- c. construction of good, safe hostels for girls especially from SC/ ST communities and in remote areas; and
- d. promotion of Women's Studies Centres in all Universities across the country.

In parallel to the task of raising policy matters, a participative initiative, which attempts to involve more people in a campaign mode, can be envisaged. We can think of many, varied activities and programmes, which bring local communities together onto a common platform around shared educational needs. These initiatives could include literacy drives, creating knowledge centres around rights of citizens in a democracy, imparting secular skills, maybe songs and skits that bring youth together, providing legal, and health literacy... and so on.

The health indicators in the country are also extremely disturbing. It is true that the maternal and infant death figures have improved after the NRHM programme was brought in, but they are still unacceptably high. India's MMR in 2015 was 174 per 100,000 births while in China it was 27 and in Sri Lanka the figure was 30. Unfortunately, Government policy is shifting away from providing better health facilities to the needy, and encouraging the private sector to come into health care provisioning in a big way. The new policy initiative by way of the insurance scheme for poor families and a National Dialysis Programme in Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode and the overall thrust of the Draft National Health Policy 2015, are the latest examples of this trend. This will increase the Out of Pocket (OOP) expenditures on healthcare. Already, NSS 71st Round Report on Health notes that nearly 70 percent ailments were treated in the private sector and the average amount spent for treatment per hospitalised case in private hospitals was four

times that of public hospitals. The country needs a system dependent more on public provisioning of healthcare.

Some policy changes that the campaign could place as demands, to improve the situation:

- a. allocation of at least 6% of the GDP for public health care with emphasis on strengthening public rural health care infrastructure (PHCs, skilled health personnel, medicines, etc.);
- b. withdrawal of all forms of user fees in the public health system and providing essential drugs and diagnostics free of cost in all public health facilities;
- c. bringing the essential drug list under price control ; d) enhancing the allocation for training of nurses; and
- d. focussing on a life-cycle approach, to address the different concerns related to women's health.

Another area of concern is the refusal to recognize the role that ASHAs, mid day meal workers, anganwadi workers (ICDS) - all largely women- are playing in changing the existing dismal situation. The advantages of a whole, vast , network of various scheme workers that has been created to cater to the basic needs of deprived women and children is sought to be frittered away by the privatization impetus of the current dispensation. These workers are denied minimum wages, employee benefits and other forms of security. There are millions of women working in these schemes, whose interests and the interests of the people are closely intertwined. hence, the programmes under which they work must be upgraded and designed into well funded schemes which will have an extremely beneficial impact not just on the care givers, but on the larger society as well.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER CONCERNS

The hype around smart cities and smart villages has completely failed to take on board the concerns of the underprivileged sections, especially women. Whether in towns, or in villages, the provisioning of water, sanitation, electricity, etc. is being more and more delegated to private contractors. How we can make sure of protected piped drinking water supply for all, how we can construct toilets that can be utilized comfortably, how waste disposal is efficiently managed so that it does not feed into the mounting health hazards, etc, are issues that require the expertise of pro people technologists, and scientists. The campaign on these issues would also need to tackle the greater discrimination and denial that is faced by the dalit, and muslim habitations. There is tremendous scope to involve the local community in these interventions, and our strategy must encompass it.

A related fall out of the capitalist development paradigm is the aggressive takeover of natural resources by the corporate sector, which is being facilitated by the Government in its pursuit of neo liberal policies. Entire communities are being displaced and dispossessed in the name of development. This has had adverse implications for women, who have the primary responsibility to collect fodder, fuel, water, minor forest produce, etc. The encroachment and annexation of natural resources; the widespread displacement on account of land acquisition and launching of

mega projects, etc has meant that these resources have become less accessible and more expensive, increasing women's work and drudgery. The absence of adequate rehabilitation and resettlement takes a heavy toll on women. Alternatives which will safeguard the rights of tribals and forest dwellers have to be worked out.

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO CREDIT: STRENGTHENING THE SHG MOVEMENT

The Self Help Group (SHG) movement in India grew rapidly since its inception, and proved to be one of the world's largest and the most successful networks of community based organisations. However, the sector is facing several critical challenges such as policy contradictions, unenthusiastic banks, less promotional support, inadequate capacity building infrastructure and lack of sustainability.

Direct SHG Bank Linkage eluded most of the states and sections, especially the needy states and social categories. Financial services rendered by the SHG federations are indispensable for reaching credit to the unreached women. But many lacunae persist. As of now in most of the financial federations, primary members are not able to take charge and the Self Help Promoting Agencies (SHPAs) and their staff play a predominant role in the management of the institutions and functions. **Reasons are -**

- a. Inadequate investment in the capacity building of the primary members;
- b. SHPAs' lack of trust regarding the ability of primary members to manage the financial functions and institutions, hence no role transformation;
- c. Stakeholders - NABARD and Banks also do not trust the abilities of SHG women to manage financial federations and services. As a result, the SHPAs remain important sources of funds for many federations, which may compel them to involve themselves deeply in the functioning of the federations;
- d. Because of legal restrictions, some of the federations are not able to mobilize savings and deposits from their members and member organizations in some states and continue to depend on SHPAs; and
- e. In most of the federations, the financial services are based on microfinance practices, instead of the cooperative values and principles.

This clearly suggests that financial intermediation by SHG federations is necessary. However, how do we make the SHG federations providers of effective financial services? The support and facilitation by NABARD and Banks may enhance the effective financial inclusion through financial federations.

A variety of very interesting and effective livelihood services and related interventions could be seen in SHG institutions across the country. Yet, most of them were isolated experiences. We all know that women constitute half of the world's population, perform two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of its income, and own less than 1% of its property. Expecting individual women to rise above systems of inequality will not assuage her credit needs. Collective action is necessary. Women aspire to use SHGs as their weapon to fight for common causes and make the

network successful. Therefore, realizing the potential of women and SHGs, we have to think and reconsider the positive idea behind the financial inclusion programmes in India during 1969 and NABARD should consider ways to extend programmes like SHG capacity building and investment, which could be sufficiently disseminated and utilised.

The banks, and platforms like People First can strengthen the demand to enhance policy support for lending to SHGs unequivocally. They must be brought into the priority sector lending categories, with lower interest charges. It is time to think how to inter-relate our agenda - to facilitate the women SHG movement in India, and correlate it with the larger process of finding solutions to meet the credit needs of women (who own less than 1% of world's property!) This nation-wide campaign must study the SHGs to understand the region-wise problems faced, and make efforts to extend the SHG programme to the more neglected and remote parts of the country. Discussions around financial inclusion of women in all programmes and budgeting exercises must be ensured.

VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND WOMEN

Understanding and tackling the menacing increase in violence against women and children can hardly be ignored, when discussing equitable development. The NCRB data shows that crimes against women have increased in allegories, especially sexual violence and harassment. Very often, the issue of rising crimes against women is sought to be addressed by placing the burden of women's safety on her own agency. On the one hand, women victims of violence find themselves being blamed for being sexually assaulted- where was she, why was she there, whom was she with, what was the time, what was she doing... and so on. On the other, the legal apparatus is very creaky, and often patriarchal in its functioning. The question of women's right to a life without violence must cut through the gendered prejudices, and look at the various factors that lead to crimes against women.

Undoubtedly, the sources of violence against women are multidimensional, and require systemic change at many levels. It cannot be viewed only as a law and order issue. At the same time, the police, the courts, the justice system, the laws that have been formulated, should be within reach of women victims. In making justice accessible to the poor women, the people's campaign can and must play a significant role. We have to ask for enhanced public provisions for prevention and redressal of violence against women. This would include sensitive policing, safe and affordable public transport, properly lit public spaces, schemes for relief and rehabilitation of survivors of violence against women including medical assistance, shelters, etc., implementation of gender - just laws, etc. and for campaigns that uphold the values of equality and the democratic rights of women to prevent violence. What should not happen is for the issue to be reduced to one of enhanced surveillance and technological solutions (such as CCTVs and Mobile Apps) that in fact lead to greater controls over women and restrict their freedoms in the name of better security.

The people's campaign has to identify the roots of violence that are firmly embedded in the patriarchal system, and the trend towards commodification that objectifies women, and seek ways and means to tackle them. In recent times, the communal and caste forces have become more strident, leading to killings and crimes in the name of honour. There has been a backlash from conservative forces to the new found freedom and assertion that young women are laying claim to. This is manifest in various restrictions on clothes, mobile phones, women's mobility etc, declared by the reactionary elements of whichever dispensation off and on. These are direct attacks on their constitutional rights, and must be resisted.

Hence, in recognition of the magnitude of this problem, special efforts are needed to bring out the various dimensions of violence against women. Separate activities and programmes can be planned for this purpose. While women's participation is crucial, it is also important to emphasize that men must be involved in these programmes in equal measure.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Finally, the political exclusion of women can be gauged by the fact that in 2015 the percentage of parliamentary seats occupied by women was a measly 12.2%. Despite repeated efforts from the women's organizations and other democratic voices, the Women's Reservation Bill for 33% seats in Parliament and State Assemblies has been pending for over 20 years. Women's absence in adequate numbers from the highest decision making bodies has implications for the kind of policies and issues that are prioritized. Women are beginning to play a much more active role in panchayats and local bodies, where they now constitute 50% of elected members in most states. Their experiences and perspectives require much more attention. There is much that can be done by the people's campaign to increase the capacities and skills of elected women.

Bringing women into the process of building an alternate development agenda must begin from the gram panchayat – and progress in stages, right upto Parliament. Let us prepare ourselves for this momentous and inspiring task through the People First nation wide campaign!

(Views expressed are personal)

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