Empowerment of the Marginalised through Open Learning : Quest for an Alternative Body of Knowledge

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Abstract: *The concept of 'empowerment' of the marginalised people has acquired a new connotation in recent years among the social scientists, policy planners, development activists, and also among the educationists in the contexts of globalisation and paradigm shift in development strategy of the state on the one hand, and resurgence of grass-roots mobilisation and new collective identity formation of these groups on the other. This concept has got a especial coinage in the vocabulary of the Non-Governmental Organization's (NGOs) activism, and has got patronage of various international bodies and donor agencies as catchword of emergent social development paradigm. In the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) establishments this concept is also frequently used especially in the context of the Open University's commitment for the educational well being of the marginalised people. However, the full meaning and ramifications of acceptance of this empowerment oriented educational strategy at the ODL, in the backdrop of stagnation of a vast mass of people in the abject poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, ignorance, unemployment, uncertainty, powerlessness, social segregation and resurgence of the culture of resistance of the marginalised people, have yet to be thoroughly examined. In this given scenario this paper proposes to examine: the criticality of the notion of empowerment especially in the context of the realities of the lives of the marginalised, role of knowledge in the dynamics of empowerment of the marginalised, and finally the problems and prospects of constructing praxis for empowerment of the marginalised by generating an alternative body of knowledge at the ODL.*

Empowerment, Power and Knowledge: the Interface

The centrality of the notion of empowerment is located in the dynamics of sharing, distribution and redistribution of power, which has a basis of legitimacy. In the sociological sense of Max Weber, power is one's capacity to have control over others; and as such, when this capacity to control is legitimised, it becomes authority (Julien, 1968:8). Indeed the logic of empowerment essentially involves the dynamics of authority and not power. Two issues are of crucial importance here while the concept of empowerment is contextualised for the marginalised people:

a) That the pre-existing arrangement(s) of distribution of power (legitimate power/ authority) is but hierarchical in nature. This process of hierarchisation has arranged

the social groups in the steep ordering of people with 'a powerful few' at the social and economic command, deciding the mainstream of the society, polity and the economy. On the other hand, within the same arrangement the vast majority have remained 'powerless', occupying the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and surviving at the periphery or the margin of social order. Here power as an enabling provision has deprived the powerless i.e. the marginalised people, to decide the course of their lives by themselves.

b) That this process of unequal distribution of power is legitimised by the economic, normative, institutional, ideological foundations and traditional values and other rational, legal arrangements of the society. By providing legitimacy to this system of unequal sharing and distribution of power, the systemic arrangements not only legitimise the process of subordination of vast mass of the society, but also contribute to the process of reproduction of this inequality and social construction of marginalisation. Thus the process of marginalisation has also been historically imbedded in a socio-cultural context to provide a very limited public space for the upward mobility of the marginalised groups within this arrangement.

The modern welfare state while is mostly engaged in the maintenance of law and order (system integration), has also started expressing its concern (notwithstanding the theoretical rhetoric) of late on the issues of subordination of marginalised groups. Various strategies and initiatives are notionally espoused by the state in the name of 'emancipation', 'development', 'social uplift', 'social development' and 'empowerment' for these sections of population. Indeed, empowerment has been the latest addition to this social development discourse and has been viewed as the panacea to all social ailment (Singha Roy, 2001).

At this stage, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the process of empowerment. It is already indicated that the central thrust of the process of empowerment is the dynamics of power — i.e. one's capacity to influence or control others. To elaborate it further, one can have effective power to control others by having control over material and knowledge resources and ideology. Thus, those who have power are those who control knowledge and material resources and ideology. Hence the process of gaining control over self, ideology, material and knowledge resources which determine power may be termed empowerment (Batliwala, 1993:7). Knowledge thus forms a crucial component of power. Since empowerment deals with power, from the perspective of the marginalised groups, it challenges the power structures of subordination. In the words of Sen and Grown empowerment is concerned with the transformation of the structure of subordination (1988:81). It implies a process of redistribution of power within and between families/societies and a process aiming at social equality, which can be achieved only by dis-empowering some structures, systems and institutions. To Sharma, it is having a specific focus for the disadvantaged sections. It aims at changing the nature and direction of the systemic forces, which marginalise them (Sharma, 1992: 29).

The process of demolition of the pre-existing structure of subordination and redistribution of power, however, is not automatic. It involves a participatory approach that enables peoples to emancipate themselves (Kronenburg, 1986: 229), a process of

the 'creation of new knowledge' (Colin 1990), a process of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972) and 'new identity formation' with alternative sensibility. It also involves the possibilities of transformative politics (Stewart, 2001). Hence empowerment is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end, a strategy to bring liberation from all domination. Liberation from all domination, to Freire is the fundamental theme of this epoch. But this liberation is not a mechanical process. The critical thinking of the socio-historical reality of the life, ability to intervene in reality with a commitment are harbingers of liberation. To quote Freire: Men emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality, as it is unveiled. Intervention represents a step forward from emergence, and results from the conscientisation of the situation. Conscientisation is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristics of all emergence. By achieving awareness they come to perceive reality differently (1972: 81-85).As knowledge plays a crucial role in the dynamics of power, and also towards the process of conscientisation and achieving awareness, the act of production of knowledge and its propagation are ought to be taken very seriously. This issue is of utmost significance in the context of the ODL which is having a commitment for the socially disadvantaged.

Education System, Knowledge and Human Creativity: the Quest for New Identity

It is widely recognised that development and transmission of knowledge are the basic premises of any education system. The fundamental question here is: What kind of knowledge would an open university system produce to make it a tool for empowerment of the marginalised groups? What would be the mode of its transmission-both academic/ pedagogic and physical? The first question, obviously is epistemological in nature and is problematic:

a) That the range of everyday concept of knowing is very wide as it includes the issues of familiarities and competence in several matters;

b) That along with the notions of understanding and controlling nature, knowledge is also associated with ideas of contemplation, absorption, and appreciation. Thus 'knowledge in such contexts marks the whole context our intellectual heritage, which education is concerned to pass on to succeeding generations';

c) That knowledge expresses our standing and tests. Here 'education is concerned to transmit not only what we know, but our manner of knowing, that is our approved standards of competence in performance, in inquiring and in intellectual criticism (Scheffler, 1999).

Knowledge however, has always a subjective bias when it entails the process of building of an alternative world view and obviously ideology to support that world view. In the context of empowerment and social praxis this bias becomes more explicit, since a teacher is to generate and transmit knowledge with a specific purpose: i.e. to create:

• a new environment and social images
• a new social identity
• alternative sensibility

- urge for liberation
- restructuring of cognition,
- a process of conscientisation, and
- new sets of awareness and ideology.

All these creations indeed belong to the domain of human creativity and essentially are products of social movements. Thus knowledge contributes to the process of social movement through human creativity and thereby towards the process of empowerment. Hence, to Melucci(1996), social movements grow around relationships that are voluntarily conceived to empower members in defense of identity. Eyerman and Jamison assert that ' by articulating consciousness, social movements provides public spaces for generating new thoughts, activating new actors, generating new ideas, Thus by producing new knowledge, reflecting on their own cognitive identity, by saying what they stand for, by challenging the dominant assumptions of the social order, social movements develop new ideas those are fundamental to the process of human creativity.... Social movements develop world views that restructure cognition, that re-cognize reality itself. The cognitive praxis of social movements is an important source of new social images and transformation of societal identities (1996:161-166).

Does the body of knowledge as produced and transmitted by open learning system possesses the required potential for empowerment of the marginalised groups?

The Open Education System: Dilemmas between Social Commitments and Market Dynamics

Open and distance learning (ODL) system has got the mandate to espouse the educational cause of the marginalised groups of the society. As a development strategy of 1990s the notion of empowerment has been associated with the social development discourse of the marginalised groups in the ODL. However, ever since the inception of the ODL in its modern form it has been caught in the horn of dilemmas between its social responsibilities on the one hand and market requirements on the other. The process of globalisation, revolution in the information technology, paradigm shift in the development strategy have obviously accentuated this dilemma of ODL as a function to an industry-vis-à-vis ODL as a liberating force for the marginalised people of the society. Even though there has a parallel development between these forces balance seldom tilts in favour of the liberating function of the ODL. There is no denying to the fact that in a system of market economy where knowledge has acquired a commodity value, any knowledge industry would produce and disseminate those sets of academic packages which have a ready made market, more financial return, and less risk involved in producing and marketing of these products. Obviously knowledge packaging is the area of management of all concerned, while information technology, skill up gradation of the existing bureaucrats, managers and so on may be regarded as the areas of hot pursuit academic endeavours, as these provide significantly easy returns and contribute significantly to the process of revenue generation of the academic institutions. Most of the academic institutions, including training, research, teaching (formal or non formal) institutions are posited with the challenge of becoming integrated with this global

phenomena. The ODL system is very much in it. And there has been a shift in the emphasis towards the marketisation of the knowledge all over.

The areas of 'hot pursuit academic endeavour' are widely encouraged by the process of globalisation, not only for marketing the advanced technology of the west in the developing countries, but also for the dissemination of knowledge which is produced for structural integration and for the maintenance of stability of a system.

It is significant to mention here that one of the prime objective of the emergent social development discourse is to maintain 'stability'. The Social Development Summit at Copenhagen 1995 declares: 'that in both economic and social terms the most proactive policies and investment are those which empower people to maximise their capacities, resources and opportunities and brings stability in world order'. The heads of the states and the government also announced their commitment to provide a "stable legal framework" as per the laws of the land towards this endeavour (Social Development Summit 1995). It is evident that the present discourse of 'development with empowerment' is a part of new economic globalisation of western capitalism'; that it implies a formal process of sharing power without altering the pre-existing institutional arrangement'; that it subordinates the state to the market forces; that it tries to appropriate the pedagogy of the oppressed; and that it emphasizes on social stability for the market forces (Mohanty, 2001).

Again, in the wake of the response of the state to the GATS and WTO the tilt of the ODL towards the market dynamics has been rather obvious. The WTO and the GATS agreements have smoothened the process of commodification of 'educational services which are supplied on the commercial basis, especially the career colleges, IT institutions operating on a commercial environment. As there has been all round effort from the top: a) to introduce advanced Information Technology at the ODL and b) to produce market oriented career courses and c) to commercialise/privatise the various components of the ODL one should critically examine the political implication of the commercialization of IT based learning for the ODL of the developing world.

It is rather logical that to suffice the need of contemporary market forces only those kinds of knowledge (both for production and dissemination) are encouraged that would support and propagate the ideology of structural integration either implicitly or explicitly. As against this backdrop the social science education would obviously belong to the low priority domain of academic pursuit until and unless these are listed to be market 'wise' or market friendly and contribute as a function to structural stability to the market forces. Accordingly there has been a craze to provide a 'management' jacket to the knowledge packages of social science programmes and courses of the ODL. However, tragedy lies with the fact that this approach only contributes towards the processes of repackaging of existing knowledge and ideology as a function to the market forces. The existing bodies of knowledge, notwithstanding its liberal facets, withhold the interest of the 'eminent domain'. Exclusion of the critical discourse on the marginalised is only a function of this process.

Quest for a Space from Within : Knowledge, Transformaive Alternatives and Praxis for Empowerment

The process of empowerment widely depends on a body of knowledge that helps create a new identity for the demolition of subordination and the structure of hierarchy. As mentioned at the very out set that knowledge needs competence in performance, ability of contemplation, absorption, and appreciation at standing, and an urge for intellectual criticism. Knowledge is also a part of one's intellectual heritage. Should knowledge is to be a function to the construction of a praxis for empowerment there is an emergent need :

a) For recasting the existing body of knowledge from the perspectives of the marginalised groups. This recasting would question the various institutional arrangements and bases of legitimacy for subordination of the marginalised groups and would ideologically reconstruct the pre-existing processes of social construction of various hierarchies of social categories. The processes of social construction of caste, and gender in Indian society may be cited as cases in point.

b) The realities of the regular struggle and resistance of the marginalised groups, which are manifested as reflection of challenge to the dominant order, are required to be documented as part of cultural heritage.

c) The alternative institutional structure(s) emerging out of the processes to break the barriers of dependency are to be recognized and replicated as organised endeavours of redoing social construction.

All these need flexible systemic arrangements that have the capacity of contemplation, absorption and appreciation for an alternative body of knowledge. Societies in India are changing very rapidly caused by industrialization, urbanisation, penetration of mass communication and information technology and a culture of resistance from the below. These changes have made the pre-existing process of marginalisation significantly complicated. The social matrix of marginalisation has been again accentuated by the growing regional imbalances, class inequalities, caste rigidity and gender segregation. Increased quantum of marginalisation especially with regard to access to knowledge and information and alternative options for livelihood security have been the order of the day for the marginalised people within this social formation. However, there has emerged a culture of protest against domination of various forms and a quest for a new identity among the marginalised people. The endeavour of the contemporary development discourse to evolve a safty valve mechanism – (a) to use and integrate the initiatives of various civil bodies with the state and b) to keep the discontent of the marginalised under control for securing stability for the market forces would obviously prove to be counter productive in the long run. Such efforts would only contribute towards distortion of truth and knowledge. There lies the significance of the ODL to sensitise these understandings by creating an alternative body of knowledge that could be used as praxis for empowerment of the marginalised. The best possible ways of producing this alternative body of knowledge are to:

a) Promote interdisciplinary research activities at the ODL on the issues of the marginalised people across the country making full utilization of its network;

b) Integrate the knowledge emerging, out of this research in to the course curriculum;

c) Undertake action research on this theme in collaboration with the NGOs, State Universities and extension education centres.; and,

d) Encourage collaborate learning processes between universities; universities and NGOs; learners and teachers.

ODL in the Indian context as it stands today provides more scope for reproduction of existing body of knowledge than creation of an alternative one. Most of the research in the ODL in the name of "systemic research" contributes more towards the processes of structural integration than towards the processes of building up of an alternative body of knowledge or at least a body of knowledge that has a standing of its own. As there has been a limited space for discipline-based research, the scope for producing alternative body of knowledge and its integration in the distance education pedagogy has been very limited. Similarly action/participatory projects, whatsoever little efforts are made, do not own their origin in research results initiated by the academics themselves. The process of collaborative learning has also got a marginal place within these arrangements. Again, the collaborative and participatory learning processes suffer from several inherent limitations. These are mostly guided by the expectations of the donor agencies and have stopped functioning at the level of intermediaries. These efforts have not reached out to the marginalised people in the real sense of the term. Indeed, curriculum development based on research, collaborative learning and action project needs a longer gestation period. One is not so sure whether in a competitive market economy any revenue generating institution would be interested to generate knowledge and design curriculum taking such a longer root and risk unless the institution itself clearly spells out its social commitment.

Significantly, Open Education system has got a politico-legal mandate for educational empowerment of the marginalised people. The social objectives of the open learning system provide significant scope for transformative alternatives for the marginalised people. Notwithstanding the limitations, supposedly imposed by the contemporary development discourse, the academics of the ODL can use these social objectives of transformative alternatives as the effective tool to curb out the required space to be pro-active thinkers, social activists and analysts in their own term than to be assembly line workers or delivery agents. Such sustained creative engagement would smoothen the possibilities of building an alternative body of knowledge at the ODL.

Teachers in the ODL have a moral responsibility not only to uphold the social commitment of the open university, but also for shaping an alternative body of knowledge. A pro-active strategy of the teaching community to articulate, shape and generate an alternative body of knowledge is as much essential for their professional empowerment as far the fulfillment of the commitment of the ODL to the nation and the society. It is only through the proactive initiatives of the teachers of the ODL that an alternative body of knowledge is produced that would contribute towards the formulation of praxis for empowerment of the marginalised through demystification of knowledge.

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