

## Conceptualising Empowerment: A matter of Approach

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**Abstract:** *In twenty first century the term empowerment has gained an added significance. It has largely become an unquestioned good aspired to by such diverse and contradictory institutions as the World Bank, Oxfam and many non government organization, radical or otherwise. Initially, the term was most commonly associated with alternative approaches to development, with their concern for local grass root community and their movements and initiatives and their growing disenchantment with mainstream top-down approaches to development. More recently empowerment has been adopted by mainstream development agencies as well to address questions of the status quo and to foster social transformation. Why is empowerment acceptable to everybody? What can empowerment mean if it is watchword of such different and often-conflicting development approaches and institutions?*

*The objective of the present paper is to respond to some of the above questions. It seeks to propose empowerment focusing on three things. First, understanding empowerment requires a more nuanced analysis of power. Empowerment is not simply the ability to exert power over people and resources. Empowerment must be understood in terms of both individual conscientization (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to change.*

*Second, although empowerment is a process whereby women and men experience as well as subvert power relationship, it takes place in institutional, material and discursive settings or contexts. Whether gaining skills, developing consciousness or making decisions, individual empowerment takes place within the structural constraints of institutions and discursive practices. Groups become empowered through collective action, but that action is enabled or constrained by the structures of power that they encounter.*

*Thirdly, empowerment is both a process and an outcome. It is a process in that it is often unpredictable and requires attention to the specificities of struggle over time and space. It can also be seen as an outcome that can be measured against expected accomplishments.*

*The paper argues that empowerment is a process which can be best defined within the context of capabilities. Because it gives the maximum autonomy to the freedom of individuals.*

**Keywords:** Enabling Environment, Women's Movement, Caste System in India, Capabilities, and Functionings.

Empowerment has become a popular buzzword over the last decades and a half. Because it seems to fit many shoes. (Lane L. Parpart & etal, 2002) But there has been little informed discussion on the term empowerment. Most of the analysis around it so far has been more contexts driven than theory driven. In political theory empowerment is a new arrival. In fact political theory has never examined the concept independently. Even though individual rights and individual autonomy were discussed in theory yet the term was never explicitly used. It was only when the feminist scholars increasingly used empowerment in their discourses in order to challenge the mainstream theory the concept received attention of the scholars. But even today feminists use it as a context to explain their ideology. Hence it is important then to look at the context in which discussions over empowerment have arisen. On

the whole, the context is one where there is a contradiction between a hierarchical social order and a democratic political system where the rights of citizenship and a democratic constitution founded against entrenched tradition and prejudice.( Andre Beteille, 1999). However it is to be noted that even in many societies where caste is not a salient feature, even this contradiction exists. For example we may take the example of Blacks in U.S.A. Beteille while saying that he had caste in mind he was mostly referring to Indian condition. But we can argue that caste is one of the major factors for such a contradiction. The process of empowerment, which can be understood in many ways, aims at overcoming these disadvantages through a range of strategies. The purpose of the present paper is to make an assessment of the process of empowerment and its applicability in the present context.

## DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a contemporary buzzword. But the word empower is not new. It's origin goes back to 17<sup>th</sup> century with the legalistic meaning invest with authority. Shortly thereafter it began to be used with an infinitive in a more general way meaning enable or permit. It's modern use originated in the civil rights movement which sought political empowerment for its followers. The word empower was then taken up by the women's movement. The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts. An exploration of local terms associated with empowerment around the word include self-strength, control, self-power, self-relationship, autonomous choice, life of dignity in accordance with autonomous own values, capacity to fight for one's rights, independence, autonomous decision making, being free, awakening etc. These definitions are embedded in local values and belief system. (Malavika Karlekar, 2004)

Empowerment is relevant at the individual and collective level and can be economic, social or political. Hence there are obviously many possible definitions of empowerment, including rights based definitions. (Mohanty, 2000). One could be surprised to see this paradox of having many definitions. How can empowerment has different meanings and consequences. This explanation may lie in the fluidity of the term power. (Friedmann, 1992)

The most conspicuous feature of the term empowerment is that it contains within it the word power. In every society there are powerful and powerless groups. Power is exercised in social, economic and political relations between individual and groups. Politically affluent people, economically well-off sections and socially dominant groups derive and enjoy the fruits of development through the exercise of power. Now the question raises what is power. Definition of power is always contested. Max Weber defines power as the probability that one actor in a social relationship will carry out his own will against the resistance of others. Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan construed exercise of power as acts affecting or determining other acts. Robert Dhal defined power as one actors's ability to make another do something that the latter would not otherwise do. Steven Lukes argues that the main idea behind power is that one actor somehow affects another. To exercise power as Lukes puts it is to affect another in some morally significant or non-trivial way. Significant or non-trivial means to affect their interest in some adverse way. He argues that an exercise of power involves impeding or impairing their human interest in autonomy. (Ball, 1995). Foucault moves the analysis further. He argues that power permeates society. It is fluid, relational and exists only in the everyday relationship of people both individually and in institutions, such power can lead to repressive

practices that are expressed in disciplined bodies, actions and thoughts and discourses.

Hannah Arndt appears to have made a radical departure when she conceives the notion of power in terms of community. Arndt's concept of power condemns the use of force or violence by the state and exhorts the people to cooperate in order to create and sustain a social order that would be conducive to their common happiness and freedom. Power is not the property of the individual. It corresponds to the human ability not just to act but also to act in concert. (Arndt, 1958). It belongs to the group and remains in existence so long as the groups hold together. Power symbolizes the quality of mass where as violence symbolizes the property of the state, which is used against the people.

Power exists not only when a group is controlled but also when a group comes together energized and organize it, thereby becoming able to achieve something for itself. Modern liberation movements have shown that the powerless can fight the powerful and let us not forget Gandhi and Martin Luther King who taught the powerless millions how to be powerful. For the critical theorists this is called "power of the powerless". Power has an emancipatory potential.

Here the paradigm case is not one of command but one of enablement in which a disorganized and unforced group acquires an identity and a resolve to act in light of its newfound sense of purpose. (Pathak, 2003). Critical theorists treat people as creatures actively involved in creating and sustaining all their forms of social life including their relations of power. Power is not always inherently oppressive. It is simply the capacity to achieve the outcomes and is not as such an obstacle to freedom or emancipation. (Ball, 1995)

Indian experience shows that the society is arranged in a hierarchy and here power relationship is unequal. Empowerment is a process, which requires transformation of structure of subordination through radical changes in law, property and other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate domination. Power accrues to those who control distribution of material resources, knowledge and ideology. Extent of power held by any individual corresponds to the kind of resources they can control. This control in turn confers power of decision-making. In India the rural poor are relatively powerless with little or no control over resources and little decision making power. In the case of women, the prevailing patriarchal ideology that promotes the values of submission, sacrifice and obedience and silent suffering often undermines even those attempts by women to assert themselves or demand some share of resources.

The process of challenging the existing power relations and of gaining control over the source of power may be termed as empowerment. (Pathak, 2003). There is no doubt that empowerment seeks to shift the balance of power in favor of the oppressed. Empowerment is not a mechanical process of sharing, distribution or redistribution of power. Rather it involves far wider changes in social and economic institutional arrangements, political ideologies, and traditional practices and even in the mindset of the marginalized people through consentation. Such changes should be directed a) to create a new collective identity of the marginalized group for the demolition of the structure of subordination imposed on them, b) to provide the required space for their intervention in all issues of their collective social concern, c) to provide access to knowledge, ideology and resources for their material and social well-being, d) to generate a social environment free of inequalities disfavoring these people and to ensure the basic enabling provision to each member of society required for their self-fulfillment and expression. Historical evidence shows that such changes are possible only through sustained grassroots mobilization, social movements, selfless interventions of civil societies (NGOs, people's Cooperatives and Progressive institutions) and well articulated alternative policy formulations and their execution within political commitment for the redressal of power imbalances at the grass roots. (Ray, 2000). After all, partners of development cannot stand in isolation on an equal footing compared with that of the state and civil societies.

Andre Beteille argues that today empowerment is substituted with a system of quotas. It has become a burden on society. He argues that there is a problem in which the question of redistribution of power is posed. To him redistribution of power can never be a solution to empower the people. It is because the notion of redistribution will affect the functioning of major institutions of society. (Beteille, 1999). For him, it is through enlarging the sphere of citizenship that we can transform the society. However, if one looks deep into the arguments of Beteille, it seems he is in a dilemma over the question over reservation and quotas. To quote him:

“It is one thing to acknowledge that the benefits and burdens are in fact distributed unequally among castes and communities and between men and women. It is quite another to give legal and moral support to policies that assign precedence in the name of social justice to community, caste and gender over the individual as a citizen. Special provisions may no doubt be made for the benefit of severely stigmatized or marginalized groups: but they should be restricted and not pervasive and their costs to individuals as citizens should not be ignored”. (Beteille, 1999)

First of all, even though he perceives the problem brilliantly, yet no solution is offered. When we are involved in a cost benefit analysis, it is natural that we are swept away by the voice of the majority. When we frequently speak about society's major institutions he fails to conceive that those institutions are not democratic in many ways. Enlarging the citizenship thesis would never work here since the foundations of society are unequal and it is deeply embedded into the structures of society. Thus equality comes prior to the citizenship thesis. Redistribution of power through reservation is one of the means through which this unequal structure can be tilted towards the poor. Of course it is a different matter that reservation policy has failed in India. It has failed because it has not been implemented in true spirit. However one needs to be careful while dealing with reservation. There are some sensitive issues like who should get reservation, how long it should continue etc. This puts the policy makers in a dilemma. But to deny the significance of reservation is to accept the voice of majority. Again reservation is not the only means of redistribution of power. There are several other structural measures like land reforms, which have never been explored, in true spirit. This measure has the potential to provide economic security to the powerless. Hence, there is a need to come out of the dilemma of reservation and look beyond where we can really shift the balance of power in favour of the oppressed.

#### CAPABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment liberates the poor from the chain of oppression. The poor cannot be liberated until and unless they enjoy freedom in their lives. That is why the idea of capability gains significance in the empowerment discourse. In India the quality of democracy is seriously compromised by economic and social inequality. The latter often prevents the underprivileged from participating effectively in democratic institutions. This problem applies to varying extents in every democracy, but it is particularly serious in India where sharp economic and social inequalities have led to a significant marginalisation of many disadvantaged groups from democratic institutions. One aspect of this problem is the lack of voice of disadvantaged groups in Indian society and politics. For instance take the case of the interests of the so called scheduled tribes. They have received extraordinarily little attention in Indian politics. That is why millions of tribal people are displaced from their natural habitat for the construction of big dams and other large-scale developmental projects. The situation is changing now. But the problem of voicelessness remains in substantial measure.

Empowerment addresses the problem of voicelessness. In its broadest sense, empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. It means increasing one's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one's life.

As people exercise real choice, they gain increased control over their lives. Poor people's choices are extremely limited, both by their lack of assets and by their powerlessness to negotiate better terms for themselves with a range of institutions, both formal and informal. Since powerlessness is imbedded in the nature of institutional relations, in the context of poverty reduction, an institutional definition of empowerment is appropriate. World development Report 2000/2001 defined empowerment as the "Expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives". (Narayan, 2002)

Poor women and men need a range of assets and capabilities to increase their well-being and security, as well as their self-confidence, so they can negotiate with those more powerful. Because poverty is multidimensional, so are these assets and capabilities. Assets refer to material and financial. Such assets including land, housing, livestock, savings and jewellery enable people to withstand shocks and expand their horizon of choices. The extreme limitation of poor people's physical and financial assets severely constrains their capacity to negotiate fair deals for themselves and increases the vulnerability.

Capabilities on the other hand, are inherent in people and enable them to use their assets in different ways to increase their well-being. Human capabilities include good health, education and production or other life-enhancing skills. Social capabilities include social belonging, leadership, relations of trust, a sense of identity, values that give meaning to life and capacity to organize. Political capabilities include the capacity to represent one or others, access to information, form associations and participate in the political life of a community or a country.

Assets and capabilities can be individual or collective. Given lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers even in many formal democracies, poor people are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to invest in their assets or exercise their individual rights. For poor people, the capacity to organize and mobilize to solve problems is a critical collective capability. That helps them overcome problems of limited resources and marginalisation in society. Social capital, the norms and networks that enable collective action, allows poor people to increase their access to resources and economic opportunities, obtain basic services and participate in local governance. There are important gender differences in social capital that need to be addressed. Poor people are often high in bonding close ties and social capital. These close ties help them cope with their poverty. Sometimes poor people's groups establish ties with other groups. However traditionally these ties have been unequal,

as in patron-client relations. When poor people's organizations link up or bridge with organizations of the state, civil society or the private sector, they are able to access additional resources and participate more fully in society. (Narayan, 2002)

Political theory respects collective capability because of its indispensability in realizing individual rights. The foremost reason for such is to ensure the practice of democracy. It is a fact the equal rights for citizens are the primary concern of democracy. But unfortunately the claims of immigrants, refugees and other such populations did not for a considerable length of time; receive any serious consideration from the theorists of democracy. (Mahajan, 1998). Collective capability assumes significance in the context of the unprivileged minorities. When the unprivileged form a group to ensure their rights, the moral strength of their demand becomes high. For example we may cite the backward caste movement and the tribal community's opposition to forced displacement. In such cases political action has succeeded in empowering disadvantaged social groups even in the absence of any significant economic improvement. (Sen & Dreeze, 2002). There was a time when tribal communities were forced to leave their natural habitat for construction of dams and other large projects. Today tribals have learnt to organize themselves against forced displacement. Of course they have not been successful in changing the public policy. But the point is this movement is among the most politically active and best organized in India and is also a source of much inspiration to the world. This shows the power and vigor of organized popular resistance. However, there can not be water tight compartmentalization of individual capability and collective capability. Both reciprocate each other.

There is reciprocal relationship between individual assets and capabilities and the capacity to act collectively. (Narayan, 2002). This two-way relationship holds true for all groups in society, although the focus here is on poor people. Poor people who are healthy, educated and secured can contribute more effectively to collective action, at the same time; collective action can improve poor people's access to quality schools or health clinics. Poor people's freedom of choice and action can thus be expanded in various ways. Investments in health, education and life skills are of intrinsic value and can also increase economic returns to the individual.

Poor people's organizations, groups and networks, working with others, can mobilize resources to improve individual health, education and security of assets. Working through representative community based organizations poor people can express their preferences, exercise voice, and hold governments and state service providers, accountable for providing quality services in education, health, water, sanitation,

agriculture or other areas. Collective action through poor people's membership based organizations can also improve access to business development and financial services and to new markets where people can buy needed items and sell their produce.

In an institutional context, empowerment is about changing unequal institutional relationships. The institutions that affect the poor people's lives may be formal or informal. Formal institutions include the laws and rules embedded in state, private sector and civil society organizations at the local, national and global level as well as international organizations. Informal institutions include for example, norms of inferior or superior status, expectations of bribes, networks of kin, informal restrictions of bribes, restrictions placed on women inheriting property etc.

State policies and the culture of state institutions shape the actions of all other actors like poor men and women, other excluded groups, the private sector, civil society including unions and faith based organizations and international agencies. When states are captured by the wealthy and powerful and become mired in a culture of corruption and discrimination, even well meaning policies and programmes fail to promote investment or reduce poverty. (Banarjee, 1993). Hence it is important to address the culture, values and ethics of institutions, since these can defeat formal rules poor people are generally excluded from participation in state institutions. This is what leads poor people to conclude, "nobody hears the poor".

Empowerment puts poor people at the centre of development and views them as the most important resource rather than as the problem. (Banarjee, 1993). It recognizes and values their identity. This implies changes in the beliefs, mindsets and behavior that outsiders bring to poverty reduction. Empowerment relies on poor people's strength, their knowledge, skills, values, initiative and motivation to solve problems, manage resources and rise out of poverty. It treats poor people as worthy of honor, respect and dignity. Since most societies are not socially homogeneous but are marked by class, ethnicity, caste, religion, and gender differences, institutional strategies to empower people will necessarily vary. Strategies to enable poor women to inherit property will differ from strategies to make local schools accountable to parents or to have ethnic minority concerns reflected in national budgets. Each of these in turn will vary depending on the political, institutional, cultural and social context. Strategies also evolve and change over time in any given context. With time there is generally a movement away from reliance on informal mechanisms toward formal mechanisms and from direct and more time intensive forms of participation towards indirect forms of participation.

## UTILITY OF EMPOWERMENT

There is a large cross-disciplinary literature and substantial development experience on the links between empowerment, growth, and poverty reduction. Income poverty has fallen most rapidly in economies that have grown dynamically, and poverty has remained high or has increased in countries with poor growth records. But experience also shows that growth alone is not enough to ensure substantial and sustainable poverty reduction. A comprehensive study of different country's statistics indicate that similar growth rates can lead to very different poverty reduction outcomes.

A critical aspect of the empowerment agenda is to reduce inequality by broadening human capabilities and improving the distribution of tangible assets. Such an approach brings with it the potential to enhance the poverty reducing development effectiveness of growth inducing policies and investments. When inequality is high, poor people lack capabilities and assets and thus have difficulty in taking advantage of economic opportunity. This limits a society's potential for growth in general and pro-poor growth in particular, and consequently the effectiveness of development efforts. Gender discrimination, whether legal or customary, is a particularly important aspect of inequality. By curtailing the economic contribution of half the population, it limits overall prospects for growth and higher living standards – a situation perpetuated into future generations by inadequate investment in female education. (Lane L. Paraport, 2002)

Empowerment also implies more participatory, bottom-up approaches to working toward development objectives. There is now substantial agreement that such approaches, give poor people more freedom to make economic decisions, enhance development effectiveness at the local level in terms of design, implementation, and outcomes. A particularly striking example of the positive consequences of empowering people in these ways comes from China. Two major Chinese reforms, the household Responsibility System and the Township and village enterprise movement, promoted poor people's participation and freedom to make economic choices in rural areas, releasing the entrepreneurial energies of the Chinese people and thereby helping China to achieve rapid pro-poor growth. (Ray, 2000)

Finally, empowerment or lack of it can also have positive or negative sociopolitical effects on the outcomes of countries poverty reduction efforts. Societies that genuinely espouse empowerment, and take steps towards wider social inclusion, broader voice, and enhanced

accountability of governments to their peoples, can better achieve the social cohesion and capacity for collective action needed to carry through sometimes-difficult reforms effectively. They are also more likely to have a greater degree of polity and political stability, both of which help to promote sustainable and equitable pro-poor development, broadly defined.

Analysis of both large sets of projects and individual operations confirms the relationship between empowerment-in terms of variables such as voice, participation, and civil liberties- and development effectiveness in terms of outcomes. There is a strong empirical link between civil liberties and the performance of government projects. Thus civil liberties, especially in the form of citizen voice based on information, participation, and public accountability, can enhance the effectiveness of government action. Empowerment in terms of citizen inclusion and participation at the local level can help ensure that basic services reach poor people, and can lower operation and maintenance costs by comparison with centrally managed activities. A study by World Bank's Operation Evaluation Department (OED) found that bank-financed projects managed by local communities were slightly more successful than those managed by other entities.

Empowerment through community involvement is particularly effective in the management of local public goods such as water supply, sanitation, forests, roads, schools, and health clinics. (karlekar, 2004). The poverty targeting of village-level food-for education programs is improved by community involvement. More specifically, within the range of variables associated with empowerment, a detailed analysis of village water and sanitation committees in two Indian states found that water system effectiveness, operation, and maintenance were most strongly linked to transparency of information, followed by ownership, participation, and inclusion.

Devolving authority and decisions to the local level is not necessarily a panacea. Improvements in outcomes depend critically on local conditions and on tailoring institutional design to meet them. For example, a study of the Aga Khan Rural Support program in Pakistan found that community specific factors such as social heterogeneity, communal inequality, and leadership accounted for half of the variation in collective performance on, local infrastructure maintenance but

that project design features could compensate for adverse community-specified factors. (Parpart, 2002). Institutional mechanisms for ensuring effectiveness, and for preventing capture by local elites, varied from case to case and drew an understanding of local powers structures and investment in local capacity.

"The Voices of the Poor" a study, conducted in 60 countries has shown that, despite very different social, economic and political contexts poor people's experiences are pervaded by a common sense of powerlessness and voicelessness. (Ralanirunai, 1999). Working to enhance empowerment is thus a huge challenge for developing countries and their external partners. It is both a moral challenge and an intensely practical one. Reducing the human degradation of powerlessness and releasing the energies of people to contribute to their societies through empowerment are two sides of the same coin, and represent not only key inputs to development effectiveness but also criteria by which the development efforts of the twenty first century will be judged.

To sum up, it can be said that empowerment is always a misunderstood concept. It does not have any particular shape because everybody wears it. Starting from World Bank to civil society associations, empowerment has been the main theme of their discussion. Everybody puts emphasis on capacity building and to build an environment where the individuals can enable themselves to deliver. Even though this is a most requirement, we should not forget that the process of empowerment cannot be imposed on people. It can never be based on a Patron-Client relationship. Individual autonomy is crucial to the understanding of the process of empowerment. Critics feel that empowerment has now become a patronized concept. While it is true that the process of empowerment needs the support of state to enhance the capability of individuals, yet the state should not be the boss at the top who decides the fate of those who are at the bottom. This is what the critics have pointed out. Empowerment is meant to liberate the individuals from the chain of oppression. The state has the potential to be the instrument or weapon in the hands of poor to fight for their rights. Instead of doing that, the state is retreating itself, a step, which damages the image of state. Andre Beteille has rightly said that empowerment is meant for the common people, the poor and the oppressed. In this regard if the process of empowerment fails to liberate these and secure their rights, then it is meaningless to waste our energy on discussions of empowerment.

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