

Role of Research Policy in Empowering Socially Excluded Communities for Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

In the perspective of national development, it is imperative to formulate suitable research policy to focus on all the socially and economically disadvantaged groups-- popularly known as socially excluded communities-- so that the process of knowledge generation about interventions and that of equitable development of all in the country becomes mutually supportive. Apparent it is to take into account the relative importance and acuteness of developmental needs and problems of the marginalized sections of society. For this greater attention and efforts on the part of researchers' community to provide a database on the degree of success of programme implementation for inclusiveness and empowerment is required. In this regard, research efforts both at the macro and micro levels need to be coordinated for bringing social reality for deeper understanding of the phenomena of social exclusion in local context and at national level. Thus, multi-disciplinary approach to formulate suitable research policy for national development is required in order to make research socially more relevant and meaningful. Community participation in development programmes needs to be evaluated to gauge the level of their socio-economic status along with improvement in their standard of living. Here, paradigm shift in educational research is also expected to play an important role in policy formulation as it is concerned with schooling and educability in the context of addressing to the needs of the stakeholders, especially excluded groups such as ruralites, women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes along with physically and mentally challenged groups vis-à-vis the expectations of the government in the democratic and secular social order--in search of social justice with equity. For the sustainability of the development programmes like poverty alleviation along with more stress education and skill development the researchers' priorities need to be focused on these vulnerable groups--either excluded or prone to exclusion in development schemata. A number of development programmes, focusing on different facets of human and social life for enabling them to be productive and responsible members of nation such as continuing education, life-long learning, inclusive education, integrated education, special education for differently abled students have been initiated with more vigor during the last two decades to achieve sustainable development goals like quality education, gender equality, quality of life etc. It is a known fact that these phenomena related to social life can't be addressed with same research design due to various underlying socio- economic and political reasons. Hence, to better understand and explain social life, both kinds of data i.e. quantitative and qualitative need to be taken at individual level and community level to assess the magnitude of success of these programmes in terms of stated measurable targets of sustainable development goals (SDGs). To illustrate, the impact of literacy or continuing education or skill development programmes--both for income generation and good quality of life especially through micro level organizations such as self-help groups can be better understood only with participatory approach to research, by focusing on various kinds of targeted population groups-- blended with quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The concept of self- reliant rural economy calls for more emphasis on these excluded groups residing in the remote rural areas by addressing to their educability, employability and good standard of living with no stress or preference to migrate to urban areas or alien lands in search of earning livelihood and seeking meaning to life. Additionally, added value to understand the social reality will be through research on purpose and process of schooling to weave the meaning of education in developmental context--both socio-cultural and economic. The role of state and others such as philanthropic and voluntary organizations along with that of corporate world in the present times also comes under researchers' focus to safeguard the community interests in the light of constitutional framework and evolving a civil and an enlightened society. In the wake of these concerns--regarding state and society in the globalizing world economy--social sciences research including education must focus on the research problem and then using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the social problem. Any research policy in the perspective of national development cannot be talked in absolute terms, but rather in relative, changing and evolving contexts with regard to growing contours of social and national goals for evolving an egalitarian social order.

1. Introduction

In the perspective of national development it is imperative to formulate suitable research policy to focus on all the socially and economically disadvantaged groups-- popularly known as socially excluded communities-- so that the process of knowledge generation about interventions and that of equitable development of all in the country becomes mutually supportive. In this scenario inclusive development-- as pro-poor approach-- which equally values and incorporates the contribution of all stakeholders (more specifically socially excluded or marginalized groups) has become the need of the hour. Participatory and inclusive development efforts are an indispensable aspect for sustainable development. 'Agenda 2030', commonly known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), envisages to address to different levels of inequalities and crippling conditions existing in the society that put certain social groups into disadvantage and hampers their living with dignity. It puts the notion of sustainable development at the center where democracy and people's participation are the vehicles to ensure an all-inclusive society.

2. Who are Socially Excluded Communities?

One of the most serious challenge faced by 21st century world is exclusion of certain groups or classes of society from mainstream development. The concept of social exclusion is seen as covering a remarkably wide range of socio-economic problems and much graver than just being in poverty and a definitely violation of basic human rights. Social exclusion (or though subtly marginalization) is a social disadvantage and relegation of certain group of people to the fringe of society. Social Exclusion is a built phenomenon in social milieu of any country by which the minority or sub-group is excluded and caused poverty. Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional concept in which people are excluded on the basis of – livelihood, security, employment, income, property, housing, health, education, skills, cultural capital, citizenship and legal equality, democratic participation, public goods, family and sociability, humanity, respect, fulfilment and understanding (Silver, 1995).

Exclusion could be partial or complete; but more importantly it is contextual. Buvinic and Mazza (2005) have defined social exclusion as 'the inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society', and argue that social exclusion is 'the denial of equal access to opportunities by certain groups of society upon others.' In India there are three specific sources of social exclusion: cultural heterogeneity, spatial externality and social hierarchy. The marginality in Indian society have seen in the form of social exclusion of minority groups such as SCs, STs, BCs, Safai Karamcharis, de-notified tribes, nomadic tribes, religious minorities, children with special needs (CWSN), Persons with Disability (PwD), girls/ women and transgender personsetc. on various grounds.

3. Intervention and Mainstreaming of Socially Excluded Communities

The greater attention and efforts on the part of researchers' community to provide a database on the degree of

success of programme implementation for inclusiveness and empowerment is required. In this regard, research efforts both at the macro and micro levels need to be coordinated for bringing social reality for deeper understanding of the phenomena of social exclusion in local context and at national level. Thus, multi-disciplinary approach to formulate research policy for national development is required in order to make research socially more relevant and meaningful. For the sustainability of the development programmes like poverty alleviation along with more stress on education and skill development the researchers' priorities need to be focused on these vulnerable groups either(excluded or prone to exclusion) in development schemata. A number of development programmes, focusing on different facets of human and social life for enabling them to be productive and responsible members of nation such as continuing education, life-long learning, inclusive education, integrated education, special education for differently abled students have been initiated with more vigour during the last two decades to achieve sustainable development goals like quality education, gender equality, quality of life etc.

A paradigm shift in educational research is also expected to play an important role in policy formulation as it is concerned with schooling and educability in the context of addressing to the needs of the stakeholders, especially excluded groups such as ruralites, women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes along with physically and mentally challenged groups vis-à-vis the expectations of the government in the democratic and secular social order--in search of social justice with equity. It is a known fact that these phenomena related to social life can't be addressed with same research design due to various underlying socio- economic and political reasons.

To better understand and explain social life, both kinds of data i.e. quantitative and qualitative need to be taken at individual level and community level to assess the magnitude of success of these programmes in terms of stated measurable targets of sustainable development goals (SDGs). To illustrate, the impact of literacy or continuing education or skill development programmes — both for income generation and good quality of life especially through micro level organizations such as self-help groups — can be better understood only with participatory approach to research. This calls for focusing on various kinds of targeted population groups on a wide spectrum of socio-psychological and cultural facets by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques.

To evolve, formulate and implement a suitable strategy for inclusion, one must recognize the nature and types of exclusion to eliminate and to reduce the intensity of this inevitable exclusion process. For instance: development administration cannot be same for socially disadvantaged groups such as SCs, STs, OBCs, BCs and religious minorities. To achieve the goal of social justice, right based perspective in administration need to be explored for designing of all development plans mainly focusing on educational and skill based activities for their optimal development. So, institutional reforms are required in strategies like: sensitization; administrative advocacy; using the tool of RTI Act; social auditing; conscientization and mobilization.

Another important and alarmingly increasing population is of persons with disabilities (PwDs) who have been at disadvantage due to limited accessibility to: education, employment, skill development, livelihood and healthcare system and cultural biasness. For their integration into the mainstream society, certain specific interventions need to be taken such as: institutional reforms, multi-sectoral and integrated approach, training of functionaries of service delivery systems like healthcare (ANM, nurses, doctors) and education (teachers). Coordination between Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) and Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) should be evolved in a better way to ensure provision of services to the PwDs in the villages/localities through Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies so that their disabilities may turn out to be assets for national development.

One of the important feature and reason of poverty in India is spatial inequality due to inter-regional variations, remoteness of area, and low potential accessible regions. This manifested high poverty incidence in these regions both in absolute and comparative levels. There is a need to re-examine the process of policy formulation for economic development at both the national and the local level to mainstream such socio-geographic excluded population's groups. This can be done by identifying areas and regions having high incidence of long duration poverty, illiteracy and other disadvantages due to these two. This calls for addressing the drivers of chronic poverty (especially in forest and coastal based economies) through micro level interventions for alleviating their socio-economic status within their own habitation, though connected with outside world in an effective way.

Innovations and technology in service sector have further exaggerated the conditions of poverty as they provides fewer opportunities to informally trained and illiterate subsistence farmers and labourers, thus, involved new forms of social and territorial social exclusion in India. The increasing tendency of becoming dependent on technology driven structures for development creates a threat to large number of people to be excluded because of non-availability or lack of supportive infrastructure for them in return.

While mainstreaming of girl child and women especially in rural areas and belonging to socially disadvantaged sector is required for the transformation of unequal social and institutional structures into equal and just structures for both men and women. Increasing women's participation and bringing the experience, knowledge, and interests of women parallel to men on the development agenda can bring gender equality. For this changes are required in current goals, strategies, programmes, and intervention actions so that both women and men can influence, participate in, and benefit from development processes. Reorganization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes need to be emphasized to incorporate gender equality perspective in all policies at all levels and stages. Gender-sensitive approach to sectoral policy and programmes need to be adopted more vigorously, both in educational programmes (especially at school level) and skill based programmes for income generation along with enhancing their participation in higher education. Needless to mention, the demographic dividend in Indian population should also be seen in terms of gender

dividend to escalate their participation, both in education and development activities.

4. Empowering Socially Excluded Communities for Social Transformation

For the elimination of any form of inequalities, discrimination and exclusion to achieve— social justice and cohesion— the promotion of a normative vision of society in a harmonious way is required for the sustainable inclusive development of any nation. The concept of self-reliant rural economy calls for more emphasis on these excluded groups residing in the remote rural areas by addressing to their educability, employability and good standard of living with no stress or preference to migrate to urban areas or alien lands in search of earning livelihood and seeking meaning to life. To promote social transformation; transparency & accountability; and enhances development, collaboration between government, civil society and private sector is required.

Policies promoting universal rights-based entitlements, equal and meaningful participation based on norms of solidarity and reciprocity and paying due respect to diversity and the environment are more likely to be framed to enable social inclusion. Government interventions in the form of enhancement of productive capacities, improved access to quality social services, adequate social protection and decent work are crucial to achieve socially inclusive, broad-based and sustainable developed nation. Government of India has implemented many programmes to bring overall improvement in the quality of life in rural areas through employment generation, development of rural infrastructure and provision of other basic amenities to achieve the targets of SDGs such as:

eradicating extreme poverty; ensuring access to basic resources; enhancing well-being and healthy lives by reducing maternal mortality and preventable deaths of children; providing universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services; inclusive and equitable education through universal access to pre-primary education and completion of primary and secondary education; developing opportunities to enhance vocational and lifelong learning; eliminating discrimination, violence and harmful social practices to promote gender equality; ensure universal access to water and sanitation and sustainable energy; promotes universal employment opportunities; reducing inequalities within and among countries to achieve social, economic and political inclusion; guarantees access to housing, basic services, and transportation with special attention for women, children, people with disabilities and older persons; and promotes inclusive societies and institutions to reduce violence and death, abuse, trafficking and torture of children and to ensure participatory decision-making for fundamental freedoms.

Government of India through the Ministry of Rural Development and Ministry of Human Development has been planning and implementing various programmes through State Governments to achieve SDG targets' like: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Mid-Day Meal Programme, Beti Bachao Beti Pado (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) Initiative, Sagarmala Programme, Nai Manzil, Nai Talim, National

Nutrition Mission, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) and The Transgender Persons (Protection Of Rights) Bill, 2018, etc. in the country.

5. Evolving an Enlightened and Civil Society

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) play an important role in supporting as well as challenging governments' obligations to protect and realise the human rights of the whole population in a non-discriminatory way. This can be done: by increasing accountability and demanding that citizens are protected by the rule of law; by influencing policymaking; by delivering services where the state will not; and by tackling prejudice and changing behaviour. NGOs provide a platform to the voice of excluded groups by giving them a participation in policy and decision making process and link grassroots work to national and international policy processes. As a case, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India (a trade union for women in the informal sector), touched the lives of various women by providing them direct services such as primary healthcare, savings and insurance. The organisation also works for advocacy for policy change at municipal, state, national and global levels and challenges the rules that discriminates against the women's interests (such as registration of trade unions). Similarly, Multiple Actions Research Group (MARG) works for the legal empowerment of the vulnerable and the marginalized sections of the society i.e. women, children, persons with disabilities, dalits and the poor, etc. through legal awareness drives, necessary legal assistance and advocacy, capacity building and policy development initiatives. In the same way, Smile Foundation has been working on ensuring education for children; livelihood for the youth; healthcare in rural villages and urban slums; women empowerment and sensitization of the privileged masses to be empathic to their less privilege and deprived brethren.

The private sector has often seen as a driver of exclusionary processes rather than as a partner in improving the status and livelihood of socially-excluded populations. However, corporate sector initiatives known as corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme may be an enabler to increase economic and social capabilities of socially-excluded groups positively. These days the basic objective of CSR is to maximize the company's overall impact on the society and stakeholders as they believe that they can contribute in the upliftment and empowerment of the nation especially focusing on the needs of marginalised sections of the society. Various initiatives of CSR programs ranges from individual development to community development in the field of education, environment and healthcare to promote social inclusion as follows: Infosys Foundation focuses on economic development; promoting education; eradication of hunger, poverty and malnutrition; strengthening rural areas; promoting gender equality; women empowerment and environment sustainability. Similarly, Reliance Foundation works to promote quality life among rural people by providing affordable access to education and healthcare and work for urban renewal as well to safeguard the interests of urban marginalized community.

6. Education and Quality of Life

Education and youth participation play a key role in strengthening the cohesion of societies by transmitting

universal values, fostering social integration, enhancing intercultural understanding and the sense of belonging to a community. Education equips young mind with the social, cultural and civic competences to foster positive interaction, understanding and respect among individuals from diverse backgrounds. An idea of socially inclusive society can be developed only by enhancing access to good quality education for all by combating inequalities of all forms at every level in educational system. Various central and state government schemes bring a reform in education and skill development area to give free and compulsory access to education and employment to large number of youth from disadvantaged communities. Like a scheme of vocational training in tribal areas is being started to develop the skills of the ST youth for different natures of employment as well as for self-employment to empower them. Various scholarship programmes have been planned and implemented by government of India to solve educational problems of disadvantaged sections at different levels, enhance their enrolment, reduce drop-out rate, secure professional qualifications and ensure employability and self-sustenance such as: Pre-Matric Scholarship; Post-Matric Scholarship; National Fellowships; National Overseas Scholarships; Means- Cum Merit Scholarship; Top Class Education and Maulana Azad National Fellowship etc. The ongoing educational programmes with three E's (Expansion, Equity and Excellence) need to be evaluated at different stages from pre-school to elementary and then to secondary education for achieving the goal of universal school education (USE). Further participation in higher education is to be taken care of for enhancing their learning outcomes at- cognitive, affective and psychomotor level. The low quality of learning outcomes—known as learning deficit—need to be explored through blended techniques of research to strengthen teaching-learning process. The role of education, especially higher education in the national development need to be understood in socio-cultural perspective to evolve learning and enlightened social order.

7. Concluding Remarks

Community participation in development programmes needs to be evaluated to gauge the level of their socio-economic status along with improvement in their standard of living. Additionally, added value to understand the social reality will be through research on purpose and process of schooling to weave the meaning of education in developmental context--both socio-cultural and economic. The role of state and others such as philanthropic and voluntary organizations along with that of corporate world in the present times also comes under researchers' focus to safeguard the community interests in the light of constitutional framework and evolving a civil and an enlightened society. In the wake of these concerns--regarding state and society in the globalizing world economy--social sciences research including education must focus on the research problem and then using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the social problem. There is a need to bring alternative forms of education to practice inclusion to embrace individual needs in diversity. Thus any research policy in the perspective of national development cannot be talked in absolute terms, but rather in relative, changing and evolving contexts with regard to growing contours of social and national goals for evolving an egalitarian social order.

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