

INTERFACES IN SOCIAL INNOVATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STORY ON A TRIBAL WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE

SUNIL D. SANTHA
*Centre for Livelihoods and Social Innovation
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India
sunilds@tiss.edu*

SOWMYA BALASUBRAMANIAM
*Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India
sowmyakbb@gmail.com*

ASHA BANU SOLETTI
*Centre for Health and Mental Health
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India
ashabanu@tiss.edu*

Abstract: This paper examines the nature of social interfaces that has emerged in the context of social innovations with vulnerable and marginalised tribal communities along the Tansa Reservoir in Maharashtra, India. This paper is part of a larger action research project that strives towards improving the livelihoods of tribal women through collectives such as self-help groups. The analysis presented in this paper pertains to the experiences of 13 tribal women who have come forward to form a self-help group to supplement their livelihoods. According to the tribal women, the collective spaces that the self-help group provide has itself been termed as innovation. In the above-mentioned context, this paper specifically examines the nature of diverse values and beliefs, interests, knowledge and power among different actors involved in promoting livelihood-based women's collectives. It also explores the nature of response among tribal women to the intervention of outside experts in the day-to-day activities of their collective. The findings of this paper illustrate the discontinuities associated with the collective and specifically on the nature of frictions, disagreements and conflicts between actors, which are mediated and transformed at critical junctures. This signifies an underlying asymmetry between the knowledge systems of tribal women and outside experts respectively. Furthermore, this paper argues that if not properly nurtured, such innovative collective spaces can become sites of domination and agents for the perpetuation of mere socio-technical interest. Instead, the discourse of social innovation needs to be socially embedded within the issues of rights, recognition, representation and empowerment of those people who are vulnerable and marginalised in the society.

Keywords: social interface, social innovation, knowledge, insider-outsider, livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

This paper primarily aims to analyse the frictions and conflicts that emerge in the context of social innovations with vulnerable and marginalised communities. It specifically examines the nature of social interfaces that has emerged in the

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
2017, 3, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2017.3.9
Published online by "Globus et Locus" at www.glocalismjournal.net



Some rights reserved

context of collectivising a group of tribal women towards creating supplementary livelihood opportunities. The collective that we refer in this paper is a self-help group (SHG) consisting of 13 tribal women, who belong to the Warli community in Jambulpada. This tribal hamlet is located in a remote forested region, around 100 kilometres from the city of Mumbai in Maharashtra, India. This paper is part of a larger action research project that strives towards improving the livelihoods and well-being of the tribal communities along the Tansa Reservoir basin in Maharashtra, India.

The concept of social innovation has recently attracted widespread attention. Existing definitions of social innovation signify itself as a process that resolves unresolved social problems in a new way, and often by shaping new types of social relationships (Levesque 2013). Critics of social innovation, however, argue that by integrating public policy issues with business motives and market-oriented strategies, social innovation has been gradually mainstreamed (Moulaert 2009; Martinelli 2012; Jessop et al. 2013; Kumar 2014). This has paradoxically emptied it of its innovative dimensions (Martinelli 2012). In addition, this has reduced the ethical aspects of social innovation (Jessop 2013). The “social” seems to have weakened in today’s social innovations and at the same time is being thrust upon as a panacea for the retrenching welfare state (Martinelli 2012). These developments have exposed social innovation as largely an instrumental-rhetoric, and as a medium to transfer socio-technical interests from the technology realms to societal realms (Martinelli 2012; Levesque 2013).

Goel and Rishi (2012) claim that self-help groups (SHGs) are innovations that have the potential to improve the lives of marginalised and vulnerable communities. SHGs are defined as “any small group of persons who come together with the intention of finding a solution to a common problem with a degree of self-sufficiency” (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2004: 5). In a usual sense, SHGs consists of 15-20 registered or unregistered micro-entrepreneurs who pool their small savings and use them to provide loans to gather access to livelihood assets and resources. The interests drawn from the loan are further added to the savings pool. In India, SHGs are purely conceived as community based organisations (CBOs), nevertheless are mostly promoted by the State departments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Social Enterprises and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) firms. Occasionally they are also voluntary in nature. Thus, SHGs have become an innovative in-

stitutional space for diverse actors for purposeful development intervention (Kannabiran 2005).

A critique of the SHG models has been that there has been a massive upscaling, where these institutional spaces are standardised and transformed as universal development interventions for women (Jakimow 2009; Jakimow and Kilby 2006). Global economic order and neoliberal institutions envisage women to take a greater role and responsibility in social reproduction, and external experts (representing government or civil society organisations) act as intermediaries in these processes to assist SHGs to take up market-based ventures by providing technical and organisational support (Dolhinow 2005). Social innovation, in this sense acts as a bridge between capitalism and the poor.

In the context of an action research project, this paper examines the validity of the above arguments by locating the social interfaces between a tribal women's self-help group and outside experts. This paper explores how diverse values and beliefs, interests, knowledge and power of different actors interface with each other while promoting livelihood ventures among tribal women. It also analyses the social consequences and response of poor and marginalised tribal women to social innovations and the socially constructed nature of their strategic actions. The key assumption guiding such an analysis is that external interventions enter the lifeworlds of tribal women and thus form part of those resources and constraints that they strategically develop (Long 1992). Yet another assumption is that tribal women, despite their contexts of marginalisation and poverty, engage in preserving some normative consensus and control over their own social arrangements in the face of both internal and external pressures (Arce and Long 1987). In addition, they are also knowledgeable and capable of extracting some benefits from it (Scott 1985). Exploring these assumptions, this paper analyses the nature of response among tribal women to development interventions promoted by outside experts. It further explores the social discontinuities that emerge in the context of promoting self-help groups as a form of social innovation.

It is envisaged that the issues raised in this paper could contribute to existing debates on social innovation, gender inequalities and asymmetric power relations in development policy and practice. Such an approach also enables us to critically reflect on the relevance of existing development interventions and social innovation models in contrast to local organi-

sation practices of marginalised groups (Nuijten 1992). Moreover, this would enable us to understand social innovation as an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process, and as not simply the execution of an already specified plan of action with anticipated outcomes (Long 1992).

THE SOCIAL INTERFACE FRAME

Social interface analysis is a useful tool to examine how social actors with diverse values, interests, knowledge and power intersect at specific arenas of development interventions (Long 1989, 2001). Social interfaces could be understood as a critical point of intersection between different life-worlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power, are most likely to be located (Long 2001: 177). The critical points of interaction are those social and spatial locations (or social arenas) where actors confront each other, and struggles over social meanings and practices takes place (Long and Long 1992). Interface analysis, thus represents the dynamic and conflictive nature of social interactions or encounter between diverse social actors with differing interests, knowledge, resources and power in various social realms (Long 1989; Long and Long 1992).

A social interface lens helps to develop an understanding on the relationships between planning, implementation and outcomes of social innovation (Long 1989; Thim 2010). It also helps in illustrating the social consequences and responses of poor and marginalised groups to these development interventions (ibid). It also provides deeper insights on how diverse actors within a specific marginalised community develop strategies to deal with new challenges they face. These strategies are often weaved around the problems of designing alternate ways of negotiating, bridging, accommodating to, withdrawing or struggling against each others' different social and cognitive worlds (Long 1989, 2001). It is also thus significant to explore within the realm of social innovation, what is the nature of conflicts in social innovation, what is the nature of knowledge and power asymmetries, who is part of the conflicts, who dominates whom, and how these frictions or encounters at the interfaces are dealt with (Long and Long 1992).

In the context of the above debates, this paper attempts to provide insights on the following questions: *a)* what are the

diverse values and beliefs, interests, knowledge and power of different actors involved in promoting livelihood-based women's collectives in the tribal hamlet? How have these dimensions shaped the entrepreneurial capabilities of the tribal women's collective? *b*) What has been the nature of response among tribal women to the intervention of outside experts in the day-to-day activities of their collective? *c*) What has been the nature of discontinuities associated with the collective, specifically with reference to expert interventions in the development of self-help groups? *d*) How were frictions, disagreements and conflicts mediated and transformed at critical junctures?

This paper is organised into the following sections. The initial part of the paper discusses the context in which action research was taken up as the methodological choice. It further summarises the action research story. The nature of social interfaces with respect to the tribal women and outside experts is elaborated in terms of values and beliefs, interests, knowledge and power respectively. Followed by which, the paper deliberates on issues related to the asymmetries of power and knowledge in social innovation and how tribal women and their collective respond to emerging social contexts. The positionality of the authors is also added at the end of the discussion, as we are also outsiders intervening with the lifeworld of the tribal women.

THE ACTION RESEARCH STORY

The context of action research

As mentioned in the beginning, this paper is part of a larger field action project aimed at improving the wellbeing of tribal communities along the Tansa Reservoir basin in Aghai village of Maharashtra. The larger project titled Integrated Rural Health and Development Project (IRHDP) was initiated in 1986 by a team of social work professionals associated with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Initially, its prime focus was to demonstrate sustainable community health practices in the project area. Gradually, the professionals associated with this project realised that there is a need to enhance livelihood opportunities among tribal communities so as to holistically address issues related to public health, education and sustainable tribal development. Subsequently, as part of IRHDP, a

participatory action research to enhance the livelihood opportunities and entrepreneurial capabilities of tribal women was initiated in the year 2014. This paper specifically refers to the insights gathered from this particular action research project, which attempted to improve the livelihood conditions of 13 tribal women in Jambulpada.

Three social work professionals were largely responsible for the facilitation of this specific action research project. In addition, a para social worker and eight social work students supported them. Social workers were only one among the many categories of experts that interfaced with the lifeworld of tribal women. Outside our organisational boundaries, there were three project managers representing certain CSR ventures and three officials, extension officers and two community level trainers representing the state bureaucracy who interfaced with the tribal women at different phases of the action research process. The CSR team had their background in agriculture, management and marketing. The state government officials were more oriented towards the allocation of resources and selection of beneficiaries for certain tribal development programmes of the state. The extension officers were largely involved in the day-to-day administration and management of self-help groups as per the guidelines issued by the state government. In a similar vein, the community level trainers were also involved in the capacity building of self-help group members and helping them design entrepreneurial ventures.

Action research could be defined as “a term used to describe a family of related investigative approaches that integrate theory and action, with the goal of addressing important organisational, community and social issues together with those who experience them” (Coghland and Brydon-Miller 2014: xxv). As social workers, we felt that action research could create democratic spaces for a deeper engagement between the practitioners and the community (Reason 2006). Our guiding principle was that all the processes that emerge would be designed and shaped in a participatory and collaborative manner with the tribal women’s collective. With respect to this particular project, the social workers’ critical practice is influenced by enquiring whose values, interests and knowledge counts in entrepreneurship development and collective action; how are different types of knowledge represented in these processes; and whose interests and knowledge is institutionalised in ways that lead to the asymmetric power relations? The

different phases in which the action research evolved is summarised below. This categorisation is solely for our analytical purpose. In practice, there have been instances where the different phases have overlapped with one another. Various data collection methods were applied across these phases. These include convergent interviews, community profiling, transect walk, risk mapping, oral histories and focused group discussions. Formative analysis of qualitative data was carried out manually so as to develop and consolidate the actionable steps. The summative analysis was carried out using ATLAS.Ti software, so as to thematically categorise the reflections from the action research processes.

Phase 1. Understanding the context

The tribal hamlet Jambulpada consists of 35 households with a population of 511 people. The Warli tribes are the main inhabitants of the hamlet, while a few households belong to the Mahadeo Koli tribe. Our primary understanding revealed that the people of Jambulpada have been historically marginalised in terms of socio-economic, political and related structural inequities. This has resulted in several social and livelihood challenges such as unemployment, migration of men to cities in search of better work opportunities, insecure land tenure, lack of access to education, health care and other public infrastructure. Out of the 35 households, only around 12 households possess legal ownership of land. Most of these households are involved in seasonal agriculture, mainly in the cultivation of a local variety of paddy crop. Their agriculture is sustenance-oriented and mainly meant for household level consumption. Surplus paddy is sold to the local market in *Aghai* town, around 5 kilometres from the hamlet. Their sustenance is also dependent on minor forest produce such as procurement and sale of *mahua*¹ flowers, *patravali*² leaves and some kind of sweetener gums collected from the forests. However, their local trading systems are highly exploitative because traders from outside often cheat them by bartering their produce with low priced goods or by paying less than the market price. For example, we have witnessed that the tribal women exchange forest-gum worth 300 rupees per kilogram against sugar that costs 50 rupees per kilogram or potatoes that cost less than 50 rupees per kilogram.

Their farm-based activities are dependent on the monsoon rains. Severe drought conditions over a decade have drastically reduced their farm-based outputs. Post-monsoon, farming is not practiced due to severe water shortage. This has subsequently resulted in large-scale migration of men from the households to the nearest urban centres such as *Shahpur* or *Mumbai* to work as daily wage labourers or construction workers. The migration of men from the village to the cities has resulted in increased women's burden in the households in terms of accessing basic livelihood resources and single-handedly managing the day-to-day domestic chores. As drinking water availability has also become very scarce, women are forced to procure water from water bodies that are far away from their homes. It is in the above mentioned-context, the team of action researchers decided to work with the people in this hamlet.

A crucial challenge at this phase was to initiate and sustain trust-based relationships with the household members, nurture local leadership and collaborative decision-making processes in the community. The initial phase of the project was thus guided by queries and observation on how the vulnerability contexts of the tribal households are embedded within the wider political economy of their day-to-day livelihood struggles. The intent was to identify, discuss and deliberate on some of the significant factors influencing ecological and livelihood uncertainties in the community. Various participatory research techniques such as community profiling, transect walk, risk mapping, oral histories and focused group interviews aided us to analyse the diverse vulnerability contexts. The idea was to gather as well as strengthen a shared meaning of their own historicity, identities, past experiences, success stories and failures in collective action.

Phase 2. Mobilising the tribal women

During our interactions with the women in the tribal hamlet, we realised that they were exploring supplementary means of enhancing their livelihoods, such that they are able to generate additional income to meet essential needs. During this phase, we used various action research tools such as convergent interviews, key informant interviews, oral histories and in-depth group discussions to understand the context of the women's aspirations. These enquiries revealed that earlier ef-

forts by the state government departments, banks or CSR organisations to organise women or other community members into collectives such as SHGs did not sustain due to diverse factors like difficulty for officials to maintain access to the village, top-down approaches in programme designing and failure to regularly motivate and follow up the activities of the group. Nevertheless, some women in the community felt that there is enough scope for them to organise as a collective. However, the only institutional form that they felt was still feasible in their local context was to form an SHG.

Several motivation and ideation sessions were held with the women who were interested to form the collective. Individual and group sessions were carried out to build the confidence of women who had volunteered to organise and start a collective enterprise. Documentaries on successful self-help groups were shown to the group and participatory deliberations were nurtured. The willingness of the women to engage with group activity was very important. After three to four months of consistent engagement, a group of 13 tribal women came together to register themselves as a collective namely, Samta Self Help Group and accordingly opened a bank account. To begin with, they initiated the savings activity of the SHG. Accordingly, all the members had to contribute 50 rupees on a monthly basis to the SHG. This money is being deposited in their bank account. They are eligible to take a loan to start a venture after the deposit reaches an amount of 15,000 rupees.

In due course of time, we realised that this specific group of tribal women did not look at entrepreneurship development as an alternative to their existing livelihoods. For them, any form of entrepreneurship development should have had the potential to address some of their cash-based needs, without disrupting their traditional sources of livelihoods. As they considered papads and fryums production as a supplementary source of livelihood, they did not believe in either taking risks or scaling their ventures to huge, profit making enterprises. Instead, they believed that money pooled in every month will generate some savings as well as in accessing loans or credits from banks. Thus, these women sustained their interest to be part of the collective largely due to the scope for savings, emergency credit and some possibilities of diversifying their livelihood opportunities. In addition, the collective was a space for dialogue and deliberation for the women. They believed in creating a space to engage with themselves and out-

siders in demonstrating their tribal “self” and the creative potential of their embedded knowledge systems.

In this context, it is also important to analyse how the women’s group constructed the notion of being a collective. To gather as a collective meant that each woman could pool her economic risk with others. This risk often pertained to accessing sufficient funds for educating their children or buying certain farm-inputs during the beginning of their agricultural season. Yet another aspect of the collective was that each member was held equally accountable to the regular and smooth functioning of the group and no free-riding was encouraged. In this regard, everyone had to adhere to the decision taken by the group. It was observed by the group members that violation of the group norm could result in fragmentation of the collective, leading to demotivation among group members. They also feared that frequent instances of demotivation could result in group contagion and failure of the collective.

Our reflection also showed that the age of group members and prior experiences in working with a formal collective are two important factors that could affect the motivational interests of each woman in the group. Memories pertaining to the failure of past collective experiences and false promises by outside experts were always a demotivation for the members in the group. People who have had meaningful past experiences with self-help groups were motivated to continue their work with the present collective as well.

It was also observed that there is an important association between remittances by migrant family members and motivation of the younger women to be part of the entrepreneurial aspects of the collective. Our analysis showed that most of the younger women’s husband had migrated to the city for work and their remittances took care of the cash-based needs of the household. Therefore, these women were initially interested only towards contributing to the savings function of the self-help group and not emphatically towards the entrepreneurial elements. These women had to spend more time on their farm-based works that satisfy their non-cash needs. On the other hand, for the elderly women, their men was not able to migrate to the cities due to their old age. Therefore, they had less source of money to address their cash-based needs. Over a series of deliberations, the younger women also agreed to the demands of the elder women to plan for a supplementary livelihood venture.

Phase 3: Ideation and planning

The action research team facilitated interaction sessions with the group to identify the strengths and skill sets that members had as a group. Our work with the women's collective revealed that the women members had some important value systems that guided their behaviour and participation in the group activities. They believed in the need for recognition of one's own cultural boundaries and gendered, ethnic identities. According to them, any intervention towards livelihood promotion or entrepreneurship development should recognise their cultural contexts, their local needs and resources, and the inherent, embedded knowledge and skills that they apply in their day-to-day life. The following illustration on the decision making process of the collective to take up papad making as their entrepreneurial activity will explain this further.

During one of the initial deliberations, we realised that the women were not open to those ideas to which they had no prior experience or skill. Apart from making papads and fryums, the idea of starting a drumstick-processing unit, a poultry farm or a homestead farm was also floated within the group. In response to these ideas, the women responded as follows,

The drumstick grows throughout the year. However, due to severe water scarcity, we will not be able to provide water regularly to these trees. The drumstick will get dried up quickly. Also for processing, we may have to procure large quantities of drumsticks. This may be beyond our capacities [...] regarding poultry, in our region chicks die due to diseases in winter. Also, we get chicken at the rate of 20 rupees per chick in the Sunday Bazaar. So why should we buy chicks from the government at a higher rate of 60 rupees per chick. Moreover, we would prefer local indigenous breeds instead of broiler chicken [...]. Each of us already have around 20 to 30 hens. People come from neighbouring villages to buy country chicken from us at a price of 200-300 rupees per hen. They also buy eggs from us at a price of eight rupees. But, these days, we don't sell the eggs... Instead, if they are left to hatch, we will get more hens, [...] so why to sell? [...] Homestead farming or kitchen gardening is a good idea [...] However, if we sow the seeds now (during the summer) and water it daily, then all the dogs, hens and chicks will come and sleep on it due to the chillness in the ground, and all our efforts will get wasted [...] Therefore, kitchen gardening can commence only after the monsoons.

After such an in-depth contextual analysis of their own local circumstances and capacities, the group finally decided to make papads and fryums (papads are thin, crisp and circle shaped food that is made out of rice and peeled black gram flour; fryums are cereal-based ready to fry pellets).

Phase 4. Prototype development

The tribal women relied basically on their local knowledge and skills in promoting their enterprise. As the planning for the venture progressed, their experiential understanding and practical wisdom in using certain raw materials and resources, deciding on the size, texture and flavour of their products, or the method of drying or packaging gave them a unique advantage when we compared similar products in the market. Their localised knowledge did not pertain to the product alone. Instead, it was embedded within an intimate, closely bounded social network, where each member knew and trusted one another in a mutually reciprocative manner. We also observed during these processes that the very act of doing something passionately and creatively by exercising their own agency sustained the interests of women to continue with the activities of the collective. The anticipated outcome at a sub-conscious level thus included both dignity and recognition of their work.

The elderly women in the group carried out few demonstration sessions on papad making. The group then began the hand-made production of papads and fryums. It was decided that to begin with, each member would produce papads from their homes. The first set of product was shared among the households in the hamlet for their own consumption. During this phase, the group realised that they required additional skill-based inputs to improve the quality of their product.

Phase 5. Capacity building (or capacity draining) by outside experts

Our immediate steps were to identify key stakeholders and collaborate with key institutions to mobilise appropriate resources. In this regard, we decided to take help from various skill providers. These included trainers from the state government organisation (under which the SHG is registered) and a CSR firm, and community resource persons from neigh-

bourhood villages. However, in due course of engagement with these outside experts, we realised that these actors lacked trust on the capabilities of the tribal women's group. In one particular context, the trainer (herself being a member of another ethnic tribe), who came to help the group make papads and fryums, commented skeptically to the social worker,

No one would like to eat the papads prepared by these dirty tribal people. I am not saying that they are dirty, but people around say...

Such an attitude towards the tribal women entrepreneurs was a major constraint in motivating the group and taking the entrepreneurial efforts forward. These external experts felt that considerable skill and technical improvisation is required in terms of production, drying, packaging and marketing. According to them, the product output in terms of quantity was poor and had to be enhanced through the provision of advanced technology such as rollers and dryers. Their approach was to make the group realise the need to buy papad – drying equipment, to maintain quality of production and consistently meet customer demand. A community resource person commented as follows,

You are tribal women living in the forest. You always prepare papad and it will be dirty since you allow your hens and chicks to move around the house. By producing papad manually, how much will you earn when you do not have access to the market? You are not even aware of how much is the market competition. How will you sell amidst all these difficulties?

In one of the capacity building sessions, yet another expert appointed by the agency commented as follows:

How much profit will you be able to generate from making papads? Even pickle making is not profitable. So our department does not allow self-help groups to take up these two ventures [...] how many papads can 13 people produce? It doesn't suit the needs of the market [...] we need to buy papad making machines and driers. Then the quantity can be increased. Moreover, you women will not make papads during the monsoons [...] you will go to work in the fields! How will the enterprise survive then?

Thus, the external experts also imposed their knowledge frames upon the tribal women and discouraged the women from participating in the manual production of certain ven-

tures like papad making. These experts were insensitive to the fact that the manual production of papad making is an inherent part of the tribal culture, though seasonal and non-linear in nature. Instead, they tried to ascertain their supremacy guided by their interests on modern and costly large-scale technology. All these aspects did translate into their domination over the tribal people and resulted in a knowledge asymmetry between the tribal women and the outside actors. This paper primarily elaborates the nature of social interfaces that emerged in this particular point of intersection where outside experts with diverse values, interests and knowledge engaged with the tribal women's collective, who have their own unique values, interests and knowledge contexts.

Phase 6. Confidence re-building and improvisation of the prototype

There were lot of discontinuities that emerged after the capacity building sessions, affecting the collective spirit and motivation of the tribal women. We observed that the participation levels varied in the follow-up discussions. Many young women members did not turn for the next round of meetings. There was also a complete lack of interest in producing papads or fryums. Instead, there was a kind of resistance or withdrawal to any discussions related to venture planning.

It took another six months of continuous engagement with the group to motivate them to continue with their collective enterprise. In the second phase of production, product samples were given to city-based retailers for trying out with prospective customers. As this was a pilot phase, we took up the responsibility to market this produce. After receiving some encouraging and positive feedback from the retailers and customers, the women improved their product quality accordingly. In the third phase of production, the group earned a profit of 1,500 rupees and also earned the confidence of few reliable customers. Though, the profit amount does not guarantee any form of sustainability, it delighted the women, as it was their first visible income as part of the collective. These women were very much aspiring to witness and experience certain immediate tangible results. The feedback from the customers did motivate the women to continue their papad making venture as a supplementary source of livelihood. This project is ongoing. According to the group's decision, this venture of

papad making will be a seasonal activity and they will pursue it further during the non-agricultural season.

LOCAL-EXPERT ENCOUNTERS AND THE NATURE OF SOCIAL INTERFACES

The nature of social interfaces in social innovation can be analysed from the perspectives of the two main actors described above namely, the tribal women members of the collective, and outsiders including domain or sectorial experts, bureaucrats, trainers, community resource persons. These perspectives can be further analysed in terms of values and beliefs, interests, knowledge, and power that influence the behaviour and motivations of each of these actors. The social encounters between actors with diverse values, interests and knowledge gets reflected in asymmetric power relations at various social realms, for example between insiders versus outsiders, informal versus formal, or non-linear versus linear ways of understanding, thinking and doing.

The outside experts make use of various visibility spaces such as the formalisation of self-help groups through hierarchical structures, advanced technology, markets, retailing and skill building to dominate the thinking and doing of tribal women. On the other hand, the tribal women with the self-knowledge of their own gendered identity and marginality, adhere to various acts of resistance ranging from negotiation, nominal participation to complete withdrawal. Drawing insights from the works of Scott (1985, 1990), we could also locate the hidden transcripts that the women propagate in their day-to-day conversations about the outsiders such as “those people come and go [...] we have to continue living our lives”, or “that training was wrong, the trainer did not know anything”, or “the bank people are cheats, they cheated us of all our savings”.

We also observed that there were relationships of domination within the women’s group as well. These were largely shaped by the existing patriarchal power structures in the tribal hamlet. For example, we could see differences cropping up between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the group meetings. There were also young men in the village who were waiting to fill the market opportunity spaces that emerged out of the group’s entrepreneurial venture. Such behaviour emerges, as the existing power structures tend to be-

lieve that marketing is a man's job and women cannot do it. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that there are differences in the ways in which the tribal women deal with the power asymmetries. With community insiders, their strategy is to largely accommodate the differences and move ahead. In contrast, with outsiders, the extreme strategy is to completely withdraw from participating in the activities of the collective.

This collective space was essential for the tribal women as they neither did appreciate the elitist perception of outsiders nor their top-down decision-making approaches. On the other hand, it was significantly important for the tribal women to be represented through the collective such as the SHG, and simultaneously be recognised by outsiders of their existence, experiences and identities. This also necessitated the group to showcase immediate, tangible outcomes (such as production and packaging of papads and fryums), which was also an important channel for self-motivation.

Our analysis shows that external experts have often interfaced with this particular tribal community without giving due consideration to the tribal people's knowledge, skills and resources. The interest of women to collectivise was based on trust among themselves and with the outside actors. However, this trust was broken several times due to lack of transparency and accountability in the actions of the outsiders. For instance, a young woman in the tribal hamlet recollects her experience with an earlier collective as follows.

I was part of the Vanrai self-help group. During a particular occasion, we collectively decided to take a loan of Rupees One Lakh as the bank officials told us that there was 50 per cent subsidy for the same. But when we repaid Rupees Fifty-Thousand back, they demanded for more money, saying that we have to pay extra money. They took all our savings and thus we got cheated. The Vanrai self-group thus came to a halt and I have lost belief in all such collectives.

Secondly, the outside experts have seldom attempted to sustain the groups' interest or recognise the non-linear characteristics of local collectives. Their interests were always towards maintaining their respective institutional interests shaped by the linear logic of providing inputs to take up activities, so as to produce outcomes, which contributes to the project objective, creating large scale impact. In addition, these outside experts were largely guided by the faith on neoliberal economic institutions rather than the cultural contexts of the tribals. They stressed on market-specific attributes such as

competitiveness, marketability and innovations to scale, while these were considered as matters of less importance by the tribal women. For the outside experts, any intervention had to be customer-focused rather than the cultural contexts, vulnerabilities and aspirations of the impact groups. Further, the mainstream notion of entrepreneurship is a linear process ranging from planning and implementation to scaling; and the outside experts were striving towards enforcing this linearity on the life-world of the tribal women. On the other hand, such linearity is seldom visible in the day-to-day life struggles of tribal women. According to a prominent social activist who has observed this non-linearity in the lifeworld of marginalised women in rural India,

Her idiom is not ours. We experience impatience and boredom. We do not have the mental concept of time that she has. Though we may share the larger inheritance of India, we see time as linear, she as cyclical. The hurry and bustle of our minds and our conscience is to catch up with it. Hers, an inevitability of the cycle of life – apparent not only in life and death, but in the daily chores of living and in facing the upheavals of life (Aruna Roy in Bakshi 1998: 46).

While the knowledge frames of the tribal women are embedded within their routinized lifeworld, the outside actors perceive the tribal world through a structured and linear, but compartmentalised understanding. Largely, this understanding is dominated by the language of economics, finance, market, bureaucracy and banking. They have a superior knowledge on the customer preferences, largely guided by the notion of profit maximisation. At the same time, they are insensitive to the local cultural contexts and the gendered contexts as well. The trainers and other actors involved in capacity building of self-help group members always feel that they are superior to the tribal women. Moreover, they propagate a gendered stereotype that certain enterprises are only meant for men and not women. Thus, the common entrepreneurial solutions advocated by the outside experts included cooking and catering, beauty parlours, incense stick manufacturing and tailoring. This construction of entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity is often perpetuated by the outside experts through the symbols or representations associated with masculinities, mostly aimed at generating personal profit, others being more altruistic and intended to ensure the economic well-being of the families (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio 2004). Also, women's entrepreneurial capability is associated to the running of small

firms and also under-performing compared to a male run enterprise (Marlow and McAdam 2013). We observed in our frequent interface with the outside experts that they considered the tribal women as someone who were supposed to only carry out their regular household routines and necessarily not capable of taking up any entrepreneurial transactions.

There is an underlying asymmetry between the knowledge systems of tribal women and outside experts respectively. The tribal women often expressed their inferiority and insecurity in coping with the demands of marketing and scaling their venture. Even the economics-based language of banking and accounting made them highly uncomfortable. Such discomforts among the group members also resulted in the erosion of trust between the tribal women and the outside experts. In this context, the tribal women were of the opinion that all stakeholders should focus towards institutionalising their collective before making decisions of any further scaling. According to *Renuka Thai*,

Few years back, I was a member of the Vanrai self-help group. However, our efforts towards scaling our enterprise failed due to the mistrust that cropped up between the bank officials and us. Even today, we believe that the bank cheated us. All the women who had monthly savings were asked to pay extra money and our savings were completely siphoned off. This very thought demotivates us to be part of any such collective. We feel that every collective will take at least two years to stabilise themselves. Each group will require a gestation time to take up further risk, especially while interfacing with the outside world. Until then it is better that we only aim at promoting savings and take up some micro-level enterprise, instead of large scale venture plans.

In the context of the above-mentioned knowledge asymmetry, it was also observed that tribal women engage in a process of knowledge validation, specifically on whether to trust the knowledge of the outside experts. For instance, according to *Tahanabai Tai*, a woman member of the collective,

The trainer gave us training for making papads. I know the training was wrong [...] because, when I went to my sister's house, she provided me papads for lunch [...] those papads did not break. On the other hand, if we make papads as per the training, it breaks into very tiny pieces.

In continuation to the above conversation, other women in the group also commented about the ingredients,

We use urad dal [...] that is why our papad is dark in colour. Other than that we can also make papads with rice and potato. Sweet papads can also be made.

Amidst these discussions, one woman member also went to bring the papads that they have prepared earlier and explained about each variety with great interest and excitement. Later, in our reflections, we realised that these deliberations and follow up action were all aspects of their strategies of knowledge validation; a validation of their local knowledge with that of the outside experts. The knowledge validation is also characterised by a kind of contextual analysis and thereby ascertaining their own strengths and weaknesses, and accordingly make decisive actions.

REFLECTIVE POSITIONALITIES AND WAY FORWARD

We (as social workers, action researchers and as urban residents) were (are) still identified as “outsiders” who are engaging with the community (insiders) on specific social spaces, interfacing with both the tribal women’s collectives and the experts. We are aware that in the initial day-to-day discourses and memories of our work with the tribal community, we were similar to those officials from the government departments who used to deliver a lot of unmet promises to them. Nevertheless, the methods of practice and fieldwork skills of social workers enabled us to overcome these challenges to some extent. In the words of a female colleague of ours:

At one stage, it was very difficult for us to proceed further with community organisation and planning. Only some men used to participate in our discussions. The women in these households were rather shy and unwilling to engage with us [...] to motivate them to participate in the processes, I had to become one among them. I went and lived with them. I learned to wear sarees like they wear [...] that was a turning point. Almost all women came forward to teach me how to wear a saree... and after some time they began to sit in all our meetings and discussions.

Our key values, as both social workers and action researchers, were to work with empathy, compassion and in a participatory manner. We believed in listening to the needs and aspirations of marginalised groups within their own historical and cultural contexts; and working with them recognis-

ing their local designs, knowledge, resources, skills and expertise. Quite contrast to the outside experts, our emphasis was on the impact group and not the market or the end customers of the papad. Thus, our approach was largely process-oriented rather than outcome oriented, though at times we did facilitate the group to demonstrate tangible outcomes of their collective. This was necessary to motivate the women members to sustain their activities as part of the collective.

Our primary interest was to sustain the collective spirit and enthusiasm of the members in the self-help group. We also felt that experiencing tangible results in short-term could contribute to the democratic engagements of the group in taking appropriate decisions. In this regard, we observed that the very act of making papads and packing it brought the members together to take decisions pertaining to the sustainability of the collective. Enthusiasm to work as a collective emerged after the group was able to completely visualise and experience the life cycle of the production process. It is more important to visualise this cycle, which has a meaningful process-led impact, when compared to the profit motive alone. During one of our reflection sessions, a co-author of this paper observed the following:

Forming a self-help group with the tribal women, initially, seemed to me as a minor and easy task. However, I very soon realised that it is not going to be so. Exclusively when outsiders like us give them ideas to improve their livelihoods, they will seldom exhibit any true interest. The interest will be largely mechanical rather than being pragmatic and communicative. How much ever efforts we take to inform them and mobilise them, only when the people are really interested and need a particular intervention, they will cooperate whole-heartedly. This tribal community has their own way of doing things and women in particular are burdened with too many things at the same time. They have to work in the field (as their husbands have migrated), take care of children, fetch water from wells that are at a distance and other household works too [...]. So, during certain occasions, it becomes very critical for us social workers to reflect on what our interests and priorities are! I realise that any kind of social innovation in such contexts should follow certain underlying ethical principles of working with marginalised groups.

Our reflections reveal that there were instances where our knowledge frames also as “outsiders” dominated the initial venture designing phase. However, over a period of continuous engagement, we became aware of this tendency to dominate, consciously withdrew from imposing our ideas on the

tribal women. We gradually evolved ourselves as actors enabling the collective to gather moderate insights between their own cultural contexts of production and the existing market spaces. Our strength was in understanding the group dynamics and developing suitable collective action and institutional building strategies. Our role in this regard became more empathetic, analytical and facilitative. Nevertheless, we are still striving hard to mend the gap arising out of the local-expert encounters. We often realised that we lacked the agency to influence the thinking and doing of the women's collective. Our role emerged more as that of a facilitator in motivating and encouraging the group to realise their own aspirations and capacities.

According to the tribal women, the collective spaces that these SHGs provide has itself been termed as innovation. These collective spaces, which are able to create small changes in their day-to-day uncertainties of earning livelihoods, learning new livelihood skills and widening of the social network is being considered as innovation. Innovative strategies that the members pointed out were encouraging practices of communal sharing, innovative production and marketing strategies using local resources and social networks, promotion of savings, widening the web (value chain) by providing training to other women/employing them. The local knowledge systems of tribal women were highly context specific and routinized in their day-to-day livelihood struggles. Unlike formal knowledge systems promoted by external experts, the local knowledge systems of tribal women were deeply embedded within the culture and resource contexts of the tribal community. While the formal knowledge systems were largely socio-technical in nature, our observations reveal that the local knowledge systems had scope for dialogical and communicative forms of practice. In this context, promotion of mere socio-technical interests may not sustain participation and commitment of group members in a social enterprise. Furthermore, if not properly nurtured, such innovative collective spaces can become sites of domination and agents for the perpetuation of mere socio-technical interest. The discourse of social innovation thus needs to be socially embedded within the issues of rights, recognition, representation and citizenship, as well as a renewed role for the state (and the experts representing them) (Jessop 2013; Martinelli 2012). In this sense, any development intervention that claims to be innovative has to be located within the context of social justice, equality, collective action

and empowerment of those people who are vulnerable and marginalised in the society.

To conclude, this paper has analysed the nature of social interfaces in social innovation from the perspective of diverse actors namely, the tribal women, the women's collective, outside experts representing the state government, development organisations and professional social workers. Our findings show that there are diverse complex asymmetries in terms of values, interests, knowledge and power among these actors. Key responses of local actors such as the tribal women's group varied across a diverse range of strategies ranging from negotiation, accommodation or complete withdrawal from the intervention processes. Social innovation thus needs to be understood as a dynamic, non-linear and complex set of organisational practices. Often, it also involves the validation and re-validation of knowledge systems and trust built among various actors. SHGs as institutions, representing and recognising the agency of marginalised groups, could emerge as meaningful social innovations. Nevertheless, if not properly nurtured (by neglecting the local, historical and cultural contexts of these groups), SHGs could become spaces for further marginalisation and exploitation. To some extent, action research processes embedded with values of empathy, compassion and participation could facilitate the strengthening of meaningful social innovations.

NOTES

¹ Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) flower is part of the cultural heritage of the tribal communities in many parts of India. The flower is used to make a localized alcoholic drink and other edible products such as jams.

² Patravali is an eating plate used in rural India. The plate is made in a circular shape by stitching six to eight Sal (*Shorea robusta*) tree leaves with tiny wooden sticks.

REFERENCES

- A. Arce and N. Long (1987), *The Dynamics of Knowledge Interfaces Between Mexican Agricultural Bureaucrats and Peasants: A Case Study from Jalisco*, in "Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe", 43, December, pp. 5-30.
- R. Bakshi (1998), *Bapu Kutti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books).
- A. Bruni, S. Gherardi, and B. Poggio (2004), *Doing Gender, Doing Entrepreneurship: An Ethnographic Account of Intertwined Practices*, in "Gender, Work and Organization", 11 (4), pp. 406-429.
- D. Coghlan and M. Brydon-Miller (eds.) (2014), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research* (New Delhi: Sage).

- J. Deshmukh-Ranadive (2004), *Women's Self-help Groups in Andhra Pradesh: Participatory Poverty Alleviation in Action*, (Washington, DC: World Bank).
- R. Dolhinow (2005), *Caught in the Middle: The State, NGOs and the Limits to Grassroots Organising along the US-Mexico Border*, in N. Laurie and L. Bondi (eds.) *Working the Spaces of Neoliberalism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 164-185.
- G. Goel and M. Rishi (2012), *Promoting Entrepreneurship to Alleviate Poverty in India: An Overview of Government Schemes, Private Sector Programs and Initiatives in the Citizen's Sector*, in "Thunderbird International Business Review", 54 (1), pp. 45-57.
- T. Jakimow (2009), *Non-government Organisations, Self-help Groups and Neoliberal Discourses*, in "South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies", 32 (3), pp. 469-484.
- T. Jakimow and P. Kilby (2006), *Empowering Women: A Critique of the Blueprint for Self-help Groups in India*, in "Indian Journal of Gender Studies", 13 (3), pp. 375-400.
- B. Jessop, F. Moulaert, L. Hulgård and A. Hamdouch (2013), *Social Innovation (SI) Research: A New Stage in Innovation Analysis?*, in F. Moulaert, D. MacCallum, A. Mehmood, and A. Hamdouch (eds.), *International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), pp. 110-130.
- V. Kannabiran (2005), *Marketing Self-help, Managing Poverty*, in "Economic and Political Weekly", 40 (34), pp. 3716-3719.
- H. Kumar (2014), *Dynamic Network of Grassroots Innovators in India*, in "African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development", 6 (3), pp. 193-201.
- B. Levesque (2013), *Social Innovation in Governance and Public Management Systems: Toward a New Paradigm?*, in F. Moulaert, D. MacCallum, D. Mehmood, and A. Hamdouch (eds.), *The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), pp. 23-39.
- N. Long (ed.) (1989), *Encounters at the Interface: A Perspective on Social Discontinuities in Rural Development* (Wageningen, Netherlands: Agricultural University).
- N. Long (1992), *From Paradigm Lost to Paradigm Regained: The Case for an Actor-oriented Sociology of Development*, in N. Long and A. Long (eds.) *Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development* (London: Routledge), pp. 16-43.
- N. Long and A. Long (1992), *Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development* (London: Routledge).
- N. Long (2001), *Development Sociology: Actor Perspectives* (London-New York: Routledge).
- S. Marlow and M. McAdam (2013), *Gender and Entrepreneurship – Advancing Debate and Challenging Myths: Exploring the Mystery of the Underperforming Female Entrepreneur*, in "International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research", 19 (1), pp. 114-124.
- F. Martinelli (2012), *Social Innovation or Social Exclusion? Innovating Social Services in the context of Retrenching Welfare State*, in H.W. Franz, J. Hochgerner and J. Howaldt (eds.), *Challenge Social Innovation: Potentials for Business, Social Entrepreneurship, Welfare and Civil Society* (Heidelberg: Springer), pp. 169-180.
- F. Moulaert (2009), *Social Innovation: Institutionally Embedded, Territorially (re)produced*, in D. MacCallum, F. Moulaert, J. Hillier, and S.V. Haddock (eds.), *Social Innovation and Territorial Development* (Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington), pp. 11-23.
- M. Nuijten (1992), *Local Organisation as Organising Practices: Rethinking Rural Institutions*, in N. Long and A. Long (eds.) *Battlefields of Knowledge: The interlocking of theory and practice in social research and development* (London: Routledge), pp. 189-207.
- P. Reason (2006), *Choice and Quality in Action Research*, in "Journal of Management Inquiry", 15 (2), pp. 187-203.
- J. Scott (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
- J. Scott (1990), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
- L. Thim (2010), *Dynamics of Planning Process in the Lower Mekong Basin A Management Analysis for the Se San Sub-Basin*, Dissertation, Bonn Interdisciplinary Graduate School of Development Research (BiGS – DR), Center for Development Research (ZEF), Bonn University.

