Mainstreaming Sc/St Youth – Role of Youth Groups

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Abstract

The World Summit for Social Development, held in March 1995, established the concept of social integration to create an inclusive society, "a society for all", as one of the key goals of social development. In India, social exclusion still persists in different forms and exclusion takes place on the basis of identities like caste, religion and gender. One of the effective ways of bringing in social inclusion will be to channelize the abundant youth power. The major objectives of the study were whether youth are aware of the aspects of social exclusion and if so what do they think about the role of youth groups in the mainstreaming of the excluded youth with specific reference to SC/ST youth. The summary of the findings shared by the groups are presented under two headings – role of youth groups by direct action and role of youth groups by advocacy. As far as direct actions are concerned, youth emphasized on the following actions – strengthening member commitment, training second line leaders, creating awareness about social exclusion, enabling people to gain access to their rights and also to government schemes and programmes, and doing all these things without creating tensions that could turn out to be violent. As far as advocacy is concerned, youth emphasized on lobbying for changes at the system level, policy level, resorting to pressure tactics, accepting the guidance and support from civil societies on networking skills and political lobbying, relentlessly working towards changes in the education system, legal system and work towards social, political and cultural empowerment in addition to material prosperity.

Keywords: Marginalized Youth, Youth Groups, Social Exclusion, Direct Action, Advocacy

Social inclusion is defined as the social process through which the skills, talents, and capacities of people are developed and enhanced so that all are given the opportunity to realize their full potential, and to fully participate in the social and economic mainstream. Social inclusion presupposes the basic rights of citizenship including social, economic, and individual human rights[1]. Social inclusion entails giving respect and recognition to individuals and groups. This does not merely mean treating all alike but recognizing the differences and uniqueness of each person or groups.

Social inclusion underlines the importance of human development of the individual or the group in terms of their talents, skills and capacities. It does not speak about mere inclusion into the mainstream but about the human development of the people concerned, so that they sustain their place in the mainstream. Social inclusion also

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[1] Peter Donnelly, Jay Coakley, *Perspectives on Social Inclusion: The Role of Recreation in Promoting Social Inclusion*, Laidlow Foundation, Toronto, 2002.

entails people engaging themselves in making decisions that matter to them. It must pave the way for people to involve in decisions that would affect their personal, family and community life. Social inclusion must reduce the distance and gaps between people or groups of people socially, economically, politically and culturally. It is not that people live together in a geographical space but live together as equals. Ultimately social inclusion must ensure material well-being of the excluded sections. Otherwise it will remain a jargon to be used indiscriminately. Social inclusion must result in people having material resources by which they will be able to have access to better education, employment, health care and other basic necessities[2] .

Youth

Youth constitute a significant group in society in terms of power and energy. They have always remained a distinct, powerful, potential group in human history and much more visible, and vociferous in recent history. That is the one of the reasons why most of the nations, having realized the potential of youth, have devised ways and means of tapping their energy and directing it towards development of the nation.

Wherever their energy has been channelized into socially useful and constructive activities, it has resulted in prosperity and development. "Youth are the couriers of new ideas and embody the impatience and excitement needed to spur the all-round development of a nation."[3] They are idealistic and so accept new ideas and views without much hesitation. They are also impulsive and in this way generate necessary power to carry out what they consider as important to themselves and to the society. This is the reason why every nation has realized the importance of youth potential.

Marginalized Youth

In this paper, the focus is on the youth of scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) as the marginalized group that has to be mainstreamed through the initiatives of youth groups.

The most commonly marginalized groups of young people in India include young women and girls, rural and tribal youth and youth belonging to scheduled castes. This type of exclusion takes place from a social dimension. There are young people who are excluded from the mainstream because of their physical and mental disabilities and this exclusion takes place from a personal dimension.

Marginalization can be defined as not belonging to the mainstream thereby losing substantial benefits a society is set to offer. Young people are those who are most vulnerable to social exclusion on various reasons such as gender, caste, religion and

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[2] ibid.

[3] Chandra Gowda, M.J., Gowda Rame, B.L., Varadaraju, G.M., "Promoting Village Development through Youth Clubs: A Case Study", *Indian Journal of Social Work*, LII (2),1991, pp. 245-250.

the place where they live in. While social exclusion exists at all levels in a society or community, it is very much felt and experienced when a person is young. As a child one may not be aware of such exclusion in great details and as an adult either one would have internalized it as a fact of life and resigned into submission or have joined hands with likeminded people to eradicate the evil. However, when a person is young, he or she becomes aware of such practices of exclusion but still may nurture a sense of inadequacy about oneself in fighting against such practices individually.

The opportunities that are lost because of exclusion prove too costly in later life for a young person. Youth is all about getting better education, better life skills and better livelihood opportunities. If a young person is going to be deprived of this but instead receive a substandard education or technical training or holistic formation, he is going to lose out in the competition for higher education, an employment opportunity or business. Thus social exclusion is not merely a social phenomenon but a very critical factor for political and economic prosperity of the marginalized.

Youth Groups

Youth have the tendency and instinct to come together for a cause – be it their own entertainment and recreation or welfare services and developmental programmes to others and the neighbourhood. It is this nature that helps in the formation and successful running of several youth groups either spontaneously formed by them or initiated by the governmental agencies or civil societies promoting youth development. While youth contribute their time, energy and resources to the youth groups they too come across intrinsic benefits. Apart from the family background and circumstances, it is the youth groups that provide a major platform for young people to develop personal and social skills which are a key factor in the determination of overall life chances[4].

From social dimension perspective, youth groups provide an opportunity to the youth to critically analyze the root causes of the problems of the society and to not merely respond to the symptoms or consequences. Youth sharpen this skill by sharing, interacting and arguing with others on several issues. Youth groups also provide an excellent opportunity for young people to develop inter personal relationship skills and communication skills[5]. Youth groups also serve as a fodder ground for developing the civic commitment of the youth. Youth develop the urge to do something to their community and respond positively to the social needs of the community. Thus, in nutshell, youth groups transform young people from passive spectators of social inadequacies to active agents of social development and transformation.

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[4] Annik Sorhaindo and Leon Feinstein, *The Role of Youth Clubs in Integrated Provision for Young People: An Assessment of a Model of Best Practice*, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London, 2007.

[5] Jerusha Conner, *The Value of Youth Organizing*, Born This Way Foundation & The Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, 2012.

Methodology

The major questions that underpinned the study were whether youth are aware of the aspects of social exclusion and if so what do they think about the role of youth groups in the mainstreaming of the excluded youth with specific reference to SC/ST youth. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used as a method of eliciting opinions. The FGD was organized in Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu.

The members of the FGD were the student and non-student youth from 4 colleges and 3 civil societies from the Northern districts of Tamil Nadu. Altogether thirty student and non- student youth were chosen from the following institutions: Don Bosco College-Dharmapuri, DRBCCC Hindu College-Chennai, Loyola College-Vettavalam, Sacred Heart College-Tirupattur, Adivasi Soliadarity Council- Ambur, SC-NT-World Society-Ambur and TUDI Movement, Chenglepet.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants of FGD and the researcher relied on the expert opinion of the faculty members of the college and directors of civil societies in choosing the sample. Out of thirty youth, 20 were student youth from 4 colleges and the remaining 10 were from three civil societies mainly working in the mainstreaming of the marginalized SC/ST people. Sixty per cent of the students were male youth and the remaining were females. Most of the student youth (70%) belonged to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The main criterion for choosing these students was their prior involvement in social inclusion concept and activities through the forums that exist within or outside the colleges. The remaining 30 per cent of the youth who did not belong to SC/ST youth were also those who had been actively involved in student out-reach programmes in the college. All the youth who represented the civil societies belonged to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and were involved in the activities as a volunteer or a supporter.

The youth participants were asked questions like whether they are aware of the aspects of social exclusion and if so what do they think about the role of youth groups in the mainstreaming of the excluded SC/ST youth. Before they started the discussion, they were presented with conceptual clarity on social exclusion in India, efforts at social inclusion through policy and programme intervention and the active role played by youth in nation building in different parts of the world. They were divided into two groups with 15 persons in each group. Both the groups had moderators who supported the members to discuss the theme. Both the groups had reporters, who recorded the major points that emerged after discussion and consensus. The groups realized over discussion that there are areas of action where youth groups can directly intervene and there are areas which are systemic in nature where planned active advocacy is to be resorted to. They also expressed their views on what do they understand by the aspects of social exclusion. The summary of the findings shared by the two groups are presented under following headings – Aspects of Social Exclusion, Role of Youth

Groups by Direct Action and by Advocacy. However, in considering the views of youth on the role of youth groups, it must be remembered that purposive sample was used to select the youth of the FGD. So the sample is not representative of the youth from the colleges and the civil societies and their views cannot be generalized to the larger group they represent.

Aspects of Social Exclusion

One of the major aspects of social exclusion revolves around excluded people experiencing poor living conditions in terms of housing, nutrition, clothing and physical safety. People live in slums, rural and tribal areas where they do not have access to primary health centres, quality educational institutions and communication facilities. Either they do not have the economic power to buy or access these facilities or such privileges are not available in those places. Another major area of social exclusion is the inability of the people to participate in the social and political life of their own community. Not that they do not want to participate but are either ignorant of such opportunities or are prevented from doing so by vested interests. As a result, they are unable to take decisions concerning their socio-economic development. They remain silent spectators to the political life that revolves around them. Social exclusion has its impact even more in the cultural life of the excluded people. Their values, norms, beliefs, customs and recreational activities are influenced by the cultural life of the larger population and are very powerfully projected through the present mass media channels, especially the mushrooming growth of satellite channels and the ever expanding film industry. The excluded people gradually lose their cultural identity. All these lead to a low self-image, sense of inadequacy, powerlessness and a psychological sense of alienation.

Role of Youth Groups by Direct Action

The basic task of youth groups is to unite its membership around the strategic objective of mainstreaming SC/ST youth and the marginalized. Ensuring member commitment towards accepting the objectives and carrying out the activities would be the top priority of the youth groups. In addition to this, youth groups must ensure a formal but not a hierarchical structure and able leadership. Second line leaders have to be identified, trained and mentored to enable the group to progress further. With regard to regular activities, youth groups have to be more strategic than trivial, since resources in terms of time and money will be limited for them.

The most important task of the youth groups is to create awareness about social exclusion that exists at the family (e.g. gender) and community level (e.g. caste). This must be given due importance than talking about government schemes and privileges. Social exclusion has wounded the psyche of the people and this can be restored more by empowering oneself psychologically and politically than by merely receiving benefits. The marginalized community must know that it is their right to gain access to the mainstream and it is not a favour bestowed upon them by a benevolent section. The

creation of awareness could be done through street play and other means of alternate media. Mass action has to be followed up with visits to families and schools to ascertain the level of impact of such programmes. Formal and informal leaders of the community have to be informed and involved in this process to make it acceptable to all. Since youth are energetic and impulsive, care must be taken not to create tensions that could be violent.

Enough thrust must be given to creating awareness among the marginalized on their rights sanctioned by the constitution and also how they could claim their rights. This is very important because if people are not trained to act on behalf of themselves, they will develop an unhealthy dependency on the youth groups. Many youth groups have created unnecessary expectations upon themselves and have crumbled under the pressure. In today's context, central and state governments come out with plethora of schemes to woo the people and the community may not be aware of those schemes, eligibility requirements and the procedures to avail the schemes. Youth groups must equip themselves to provide proper communication about the schemes to the people and enable them to utilize such schemes and programmes. This could be one of the important tasks of youth groups in terms of direct action.

Role of Youth Groups through Advocacy

Youth groups must lobby and advocate for changes at the system level, if they want to ensure social inclusion. While direct action by youth groups can bring changes at the local community level and bring cheers to the youth group members, they cannot afford to stop at that level. Unless changes take place at policy level and implemented through legal sanctions, changes are neither going to be permanent nor widespread. Pressure building tactics through advocacy alone can bring lasting solutions and changes with regard to the lives of so many people excluded from the mainstream for centuries. This is not an impossible task but youth groups need guidance and support from civil societies on networking skills and political lobbying. Youth groups are small in terms of their structure, membership and finance and this could be a limitation when it comes to advocacy on system related issues. But they need to know that they have energy and enthusiasm and if they could align these aspects with civil societies with similar objectives, they would learn to be effective agents of transformation for the future.

There are few areas which youth groups could work on in the area of advocacy. The important aspect must be to start with education system. Education liberates not only the oppressed but also the oppressors, if they are willing and if they have an open mind. Youth groups must advocate teaching young students from secondary education onwards about issues of social inclusion, means and methods and the role of every citizen to work towards it. At a very young age, youth must become aware that the progress and prosperity of the society not only revolves around economic development alone but on the social, political and cultural spheres too. Everyone involved must understand

the necessity for the mainstreaming of SC/ST youth and the other excluded groups for society to progress peacefully.

Apart from education system, another area of significance for advocacy would be the legal system. Enforcement of law and order to eradicate discrimination is an important area. Generally laws and legislations are toothless by themselves. They need social pressure and advocacy to act on the ground level realities.

Challenges Faced by Youth Groups

Youth groups not only promise opportunities but also throw challenges. Youth are not only energetic but also impulsive. As a result, if what they have planned does not succeed, they might get discouraged and immobilized.[6] It is possible that they expect quick results for their committed involvement but changes in the community and neighbourhood are not going to happen instantly, especially if they involve changes in the systems and structures that perpetuate exclusion. Any failures or lack of progress must be discussed thoroughly with the youth and in fact they need to be trained to anticipate blocks and obstacles. This is where youth group activities have to be monitored on a regular basis based on agreed indicators and finally evaluated to strategize accordingly.

If the effort to bring in change takes inordinately long time, youth may lose motivation and the will to sustain struggle. This is the time they need to be talked to by the leaders, mentors and the concerned adults. At the same time, adults should serve only as guides and role models and not as instructors.[7] They need to be taught to look at the small gains such as the strengthened group, negotiating skills learnt and the image built rather than looking at only failures. This is where federating like-minded youth groups can play a vital role.

Conclusion

The paper has expressed the opinion of youth on the role of youth groups in the mainstreaming of SC/ST youth. Youth have highlighted role through direction action as well as advocacy. By doing so, they have expressed their interest and willingness to work on the issue at hand. However, the adult members of the society need to support and nurture such attempts however small they are. Youth by definition are those who are navigating their own period of growth and as such have lot of developmental tasks at hand which they have to successfully complete before they move on to the next stage. So they have the limitation of sparing time and space for their own growth and as such cannot be fully involved in social change efforts. Society also cannot afford this, because they need to nurture these adolescents and youth to blossom into adult citizens who

[6] Conner Jerusha, *The Value of Youth Organizing*, Born This Way Foundation & the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, 2012.

[7] Anna Rorem & Monisha Bajaj, *Cultivating Young Women's Leadership for a Kinder, Braver World*, Born This Way Foundation & The Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, 2012.

would care for the society. So the role of youth groups in mainstreaming SC/ST youth does not end with youth. It starts with the mentoring and nurturing of the adults to enable youth to sustain their efforts.

Youth need respect and recognition from the adult society for what they are doing. The freedom and autonomy of the young people have to be respected. Instead of criticizing or suppressing their out of box thinking, adult allies must engage in open dialogue[8]. Young people must be given space and representation to share what they are doing. Research studies on youth volunteers generally have indicated a decline in the altruistic attitude of youth. However, such studies do not fail to mention that whenever young people are involved, promoted, guided or encouraged, they have given their best for a cause. So the involvement of youth groups in the mainstreaming of SC/ST youth is not an issue of youth alone but the larger society.

The actual experience of interacting with the youth during the focus group discussion reiterated the opinion that young people are aware of social exclusion, that they are passionate about ushering in social inclusion and are also aware of how they could contribute to reach that stage. Catching up with the anguish and anger as well as the determination and passion of the youth towards working for social inclusion was perhaps the significant finding of the study.

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[8] Chock Sasha Costanza, *Youth and Social Movements - Key Lessons for Allies*, Born This Way Foundation & The Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, 2012.