

Human Rights as Practice: Dalit Women's Collective Action to Secure Livelihood Entitlements in rural South India

Summary

This study investigates the processes by which Dalit women in rural South India secure livelihood entitlements, understood as protected access to and command over livelihood resources. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in three villages across the state of Tamil Nadu, where Dalit women engage in struggles to secure or protect livelihood entitlements such as housing land or work. Through this study of three entitlement struggles, the aim was to understand how these women organise and evolve collective action strategies to claim livelihood resources in contexts where social exclusion processes frame their actions. Agency in this regard entails the women developing a sense of entitlement to needed resources that is translated into action to secure entitlements. Such actions challenge the structural inequalities that lie at the roots of entitlement failure. Understanding their agency requires investigation of how caste, class and gender mutually construct each other and shape social relations of power within specific contexts. These intersecting axes of difference are expressed in the social norms and practices of formal and informal institutions mediating Dalit women's resource claims. Within this institutional arena, the power dynamics between these women and different state and non-state actors continuously condition and, in turn, are conditioned by the women's collective action.

The first case study presents a successful struggle by Dalit women to secure housing entitlements, specifically housing land in their names, in a general mixed-caste context. Concurrent to, and influencing the course of, this struggle over material resources is a complementary struggle over symbolic resources in the form of temple rights. Both struggles support the transformation of Dalit's 'low' caste identity and disentitlement. The second case study shifts to a semi-feudal context marked by an informal governance system controlled by a dominant caste community. Here, Dalit women cultivators are engaged in an ongoing struggle to secure agricultural land title. This struggle illuminates the interaction between formal and informal institutions, which produces competing notions of rights, entitlements and obligations around which the women must manoeuvre. The third case study examines an unsuccessful struggle Dalit fisherwomen undertook to stop the operation of a shrimp farm in their coastal village and thereby protect their existing entitlements to traditional fishing work, good health and decent living standards. Highlighted are the contradictions produced by the state's macro-economic policies and its obligations and practices to protect the livelihoods of socially excluded citizens.

The framework developed for this research rests on three pillars. One is an entitlement systems approach, which focuses on the structures behind actual entitlement positions and the processes through which rights are operationalised as protected entitlements. This approach, grounded in the political economy of human rights, recognises that Dalit women's non-enjoyment of socio-economic rights stems not merely from *non-availability* of resources, but also from *unequal distribution*. Attention is thereby called to the interactions between different regularised,

institutional arrangements for establishing legitimate claims to resources. These include state arrangements, social institutions and human rights. Power relations determine which rules apply and whose interests prevail in contestations over resources. It is in this context that collective action becomes a legitimate strategy utilised when livelihood needs are not met as a result of entitlement failure.

Secondly, complementing an understanding of how Dalit women secure entitlements is social exclusion, which elucidates the structural and socio-historical causes for durable entitlement deprivation and poverty. Social relations of power and dynamic processes ensure that Dalit women are systematically excluded from access to the economic, political and socio-cultural resources that would enable their participation as equal partners in Indian society. Resource distribution and power configurations pertinent to all three entitlement struggles are therefore mapped in order to understand how Dalit women negotiate multiplex power relations within contexts of exclusion and subordination.

Thirdly, this study uses an actor-oriented and intersectional approach. An orientation towards Dalit women as actors focuses on their subjectivities and agency. Despite structures of inequality, these women always have the ability to use their knowledge and manoeuvre within power relations and other constraints in order to engage in the micro-politics of collectively developing their livelihoods. From this perspective, Dalit women – and not external development interveners such as the NGOs in all three villages – are the driving agents for entitlement struggles. This is because the women's actions are continually redefined and attributed meaning through their interactions with other actors. Intersectionality complements as it deepens this orientation. The complex interconnections between structural axes of difference generate Dalit women's unique position within power relations. From this position, they construct their interests, identities and agency, which cannot be reduced to the influence of one dominant axis.

Through primarily participant observation, informal interviews and discussions with the women, Dalit women's representations and interpretations of their agency are uncovered. This also unearths the underlying meanings, beliefs and values behind entitlements and their actions. These women's exercise of collective agency is examined from three angles: their construction of collective identity as Dalit women entitled to livelihood resources, the discourses they utilise to frame their actions, and the strategies they evolve to secure entitlements. From this emerge the enabling and constraining factors – relational, institutional and contextual – for Dalit women to secure entitlements and transform power relations.

The three case studies of entitlement struggles that empirically comprise this research support an understanding of human rights as practice. They suggest ways to operationalise practical, long-term and sustainable rights-based development strategies with excluded social actors such as Dalit women. These strategies are founded on the indivisibility of rights, where civil-political freedoms of association, voice and movement are prerequisites for realising socio-economic rights, while minimum enjoyment of the latter rights is required to assert the former. They are further based on the idea of power extending beyond the state to its diffusion throughout society and inherence in social institutions and interactions. At their core is context and power attendant collective action based on actors' perceptions and priorities regarding their just entitlements. Collective action occurs in the wider political arena comprising multiple, interacting formal state

and informal social institutions embodied by state and non-state actors. Through exercising their agency to secure entitlements and freedoms, actors then generate discourses constitutive of human rights.

Catalysing Dalit women's agency are external development interveners in the form of local NGOs. Dalit women heading or staffing the NGOs play a critical bridging role as development brokers, influencing the women's social interfaces with the state. They compensate for the women's exclusion from knowledge/power regarding formal institutional processes and politics at the same time as they introduce the women to new discourses on their entitlements and collective power to act. This requires them to simultaneously translate formal institutional processes for the women while shaping the women's demands into viable claims on the state. Given socio-historical models of hierarchical patron-client relations governing village life, however, development brokers often tread a fine line between directing as opposed to facilitating collective action. Moreover, the development discourses introduced by multiple development interveners can be contradictory, shifting focus away from sustained political organising towards the disempowering discourse of service delivery or individual economic empowerment promoted by the state government.

Dalit women's agency is shown to be irreducible to the exercise of autonomous, free will to resist conditions of subordination and pursue one's interests implied by liberal human rights theory. Instead, it is better understood in relation to structural power, in terms of the caste, class and gender norms, practices and discourses as well as political interactions occurring during entitlement struggles. It is these workings of power which produce the women's perceptions of their interests and entitlements, their organisational capacities and different spaces to manoeuvre within social relations, as well as the range of possible actions to secure entitlements. At the same time, Dalit women's agency is grounded in the complexity of intersectional identities and the sometimes conflicting interests they engender, as well as social connectedness and interdependency. These points are evidenced below in terms of women's organisation and engagement in collective action.

In all three struggles, Dalit women's organisational capacity and confidence to exercise voice and agency depend on their forging an independent collective identity and interests as Dalit women. This is achieved through development interveners introducing discursive shifts in the women's positioning within gender and caste relations. An alternative discourse of collective Dalit female power is constructed by reshaping Dalit caste identity in positive terms primarily through the medium of symbolic resources. Interconnected with this is the re-valourising of gender identity through introducing discourses of women's necessity for successful claims, thus delinking from gender norms excluding women from public-political action. At the same time, women's practical actions reveal how they reinterpret development discourses on equality and power as they negotiate a number of barriers to full participation. These barriers include illiteracy, lack of spare time, dependency on their male family members both emotionally and in an economy of survival, and historical patterns of dependency on patrons.

These women's identity-based organisation calls attention to the interconnections between struggles over entitlements and struggles over identity or recognition. This is particularly the case where identity and the social exclusion it produces are integral to determining resource

entitlements through social institutions. Furthermore, entitlement struggles encompass struggles over the meanings attached to women's identities in terms of capacities for voice, political agency and control over resources. Historical relations of caste patronage and interdependency that accompanied Dalit disempowerment, moreover, ensure that struggles over economic resources are struggles for both economic *and* symbolic separation from these relations. Identity and dignity thus have significant and even sometimes overriding influence in determining Dalit women's livelihood priorities, organisation and agency.

Moreover, Dalit women's identification and positioning within intersecting social axes reveal the explanatory limitations of the exclusion/inclusion binary and the automatic linking of exclusion with lack of agency. Social exclusion processes are shown to exclude Dalit women as well as include them on adverse terms. At the same time, exclusion simultaneously produces different spaces for manoeuvre in exercising agency. Existing networks of female solidarity, formed by shared experiences of segregation, exclusion and the caste and gender divisions of labour, support the construction of collective Dalit female identity and agency. Their political exclusion and greater social isolation from patron-client modelled local politics, co-optation via corruption and inter-caste interactions as compared to Dalit men also ensures that Dalit women enjoy greater independence in exercising agency.

Power relations then shape Dalit women's pathways to entitlement in several ways. First, they rely on state institutions as a counter-balance to informal institutions reflecting social norms of disempowerment, patronage relations and dependence. The influence of dominant caste-class norms on formal institutional arenas and the inter-linkages between formal and informal institutional actors based primarily on caste and class, however, constrain the endorsement of Dalit women's resource claims by state actors. Given Dalit women's relative lack of economic resources and socio-political networks, this also produces limited allies among government officials based on Dalit identity or castes without local socio-political ties. Moreover, Dalit women's entitlement struggles play out on an unequal political terrain. Therein their lesser economic and political power compared to other (dominant caste-class) actors obstructs their ability to secure entitlements when these conflict with the state's macro-economic policies and its practices of corruption. The consequences are to entrench Dalit women's exclusion and social inequalities in new ways, with negative implications for caste, class and gender power relations.

Secondly, Dalit women tend to position themselves as working for their family and community development and security due to the dominant caste-class influence over the Dalits' situation of livelihood deprivation and opposition to their resource claims. Though demanding resources in their names, they do not position themselves as opponents challenging gender subordination. Demonstrating the utility of their collective action and investing in female family members both lessens male opposition and enables the women to renegotiate gender roles. Part of this renegotiation involves reproducing the gender division of labour and working around, as opposed to challenging, male control over female sexuality. This is further complicated by kinship norms and intra-gender household dynamics between women, through which gender identity is constituted and compensatory power granted to women. Women's spaces to manoeuvre within power relations in engaging in collective action, therefore, involved both exercising power and reproducing power inequalities. This process yields new if divergent understandings and valuations of women's roles as they pushed at structural boundaries.

Thirdly, the political strategies in which Dalit women engage remain flexible, adapting to the anticipated and actual reactions of other actors. Hence, the women draw upon multiple discourses related to formal institutional norms or different aspects of their caste, class and gender identities in strategically framing their petitions to resonate with state officials and/or counter perceived biases from these officials. This is often accompanied by a wide range of institutional and non-institutional tactics. Institutional tactics such as formal petitions to state officials often reveal to the women the interactions between informal and formal institutional norms and actors, the contradictions within the hierarchical organisation of the state itself and state corruption distorting entitlement systems. All these state practices reproduce Dalit women's exclusion. In response, the women often have to resort to non-institutional tactics such as public protests and direct confrontations with opposing actors in order to push the legitimacy of their claims. The state, however, can use physical violence to reinforce structural violence against Dalit women and silence their voices and claims.

Through exercising their agency and overcoming the constraints within their contexts, Dalit women may then acquire access to resources. This does not necessarily translate, however, into effective control over those resources in their use. At one level, this distinction between access and control emerges through state practices vis-à-vis state entitlement arrangements granting formal entitlement without actual possession of the resource. At another level, development interventions may shape Dalit women's willingness to secure resources in their names as a form of security vis-à-vis their families, but not confront gender inequalities inhering in informal institutional norms on control over resource use or inheritance. This situation, however, has to be understood in terms of the different cultural meanings attributed to different resources and equitable resource shares embedded in social practices such as dowry and old-age social security. Only by understanding these cultural meanings can one then determine which resources offer the best leverage for realising effective access to *and* command over resources for Dalit women.

The research suggests three key, interconnected strategies to ensure rights-based entitlements and freedoms. One is facilitating collective action in order for excluded social actors to secure their prioritised entitlements and freedoms. Second is countering the socio-cultural norms silencing Dalit women and naturalising their lesser access to resources and power. Third is promoting wider institutional reforms that both socially and formally legitimise Dalit women's entitlements and freedoms as well as establish an impartial and corruption-free environment conducive to the women pressing their claims.