



STRENGTHENING CITIZEN LEADERSHIP

The present reality of society is characterised by increasing inequality, discrimination and conflict. The problems of poverty and marginalisation have got intertwined with issues of conflict and security. As voices of hitherto excluded groups of people begin to get articulated, society lacks the mechanisms to channel them into constructive and transformative engagements. Visionary citizen leadership at the grass roots can play a meaningful and constructive role in this context.

In many developing world, the promotion of collective conscientisation and organisation building among women, dalits, tribals (and similar marginalised groups) over the past three decades has resulted in new stirrings of community-based groups and associations. Many of these collectives have come about as a result of the development programmes like promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs) or Sectoral User Committees (e.g. Forest Protection Committees, Water User Association, Watershed Committees etc.). Many more have been promoted by intermediary Civil Society Organisations as new collectives. Many of these have attempted to transform traditional associations into contemporary actors.

The growing demands of local governance through a variety of legislative and constitutional provisions for devolution and decentralisation have also drawn many of these local, informal groups and associations into active roles. These community-based associations have been playing a key role in supporting the new leadership of women, dalits and tribals in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies in India. Their contribution enhances the accountability of the local elected representatives as well as supports a more transparent and participatory democratic functioning by the new leadership.

In recent years, there is an increasing realisation of the role of civil society in promoting socio-economic development. Small, local and informal associations and their alliances are playing a key role in policy reform and implementation from the vantage point of the poor and marginalised. However, the interests of underprivileged groups remain unarticulated unless and until initiatives are taken to organise them and empower them to question the government agencies as well as to engage with them. The interests of the subaltern groups were articulated only when an organisation intervened to address them as a collective and raised their concern vis-à-vis the state.

Citizens are able to act more often when they are part of a collective. A neighbourhood organisation, a local union, a youth group, a village committee are all examples of various types of collectives. Individuals who get associated with such collectives, who have access to such formations, who have experience of participation in organisations are able to sustain their engagement and activism.

Institutions at any level involve more than purely individual efforts. They embody some kind of “collective action” in which the interests, resources, ideas, and ideals of many person are

brought together...Similarly the benefit from the institutions tend to be “public goods” things of value to persons besides those immediately engaged in the activity.

The growing democratisation of traditional power relations in civil society and the failure to create a rational basis for generating new leadership through formal political institutions are at the heart of the increasing authority vacuum in Indian politics. This is where the leadership of visible citizens can make a significant difference. Citizen activists can build the bridge – between citizens and the state. Leadership of citizens is exercised when they act to build society and improve governance. Recognition, visibility and promotion of such citizen leadership are the keys to this. Citizen leadership is also exercised when they enable other citizens to act - when they promote citizen activism in society and polity (Kohli, 1991).

Understanding Citizenship and Citizen Leadership

The term ‘citizenship’ has been discussed, defined and understood at different point of time in the political history. One can find different traditions in citizenship thoughts through out the discourse. While some of these thoughts have supplemented the existing thoughts, others have given rise to inherent polarity. These polarities are many a time competing with each other, which needs to be considered while defining citizenship. This is especially true in Indian context.

In the Western context citizenship emphasises individual choices. It is considered that individuals act ‘rationally’ to advance their interests in the society. This emphasis on individual choice is based on the faith that the state will provide necessary protection and welfare provisions in exercising the individual choices. However, it does not recognise the fact that individual choices are restricted by the inherent structural inequalities in the society. In Indian context individual choices are also conditioned by collective choices of community. In a hierarchical society the choice and interest of the powerful is often projected as collective community choice. It is a fallacy of community. In Indian context the community and the individual have to be considered together. Collective communitarian living is part of individual living also. Being part of the society a person should create conditions and opportunities for self-development as well as for the common good and welfare of the entire community with a particular focus on poor and marginalised.

Rights and obligations are at the core of citizenship. Citizenship as ‘rights’ is understood as formal status granted by the state. Individuals are entitled to specific universalised rights enshrined in law. Citizenship as ‘obligations’ is understood as political participation of all citizens as duty.

Rights are conceived as *political* (e.g. right to vote, right to form association), *civil* (freedom of speech, liberty of the person), *social* (not to be discriminated against on the basis of caste, class, religion or gender and equal access to basic services like health, education etc.), *economic* (protection of private property, equal access to employment and sources of livelihood) and *cultural* (protection and preservation of traditional culture). It is a matter of

choice for the individual to claim and exercise rights. Some of them are formalised in law while others are not. The role of state is to protect citizens in exercising their rights. Many argue that it is not enough. Exercising choice or claiming rights requires the resources, power and knowledge. Rights to the protection of property and livelihood mean a little if claiming such rights requires sufficient resources, power and knowledge to fight against powerful interests in formal political arenas. This is particularly so when powerful interests are portrayed as ‘common interest’ against the ‘individual interests’ of landowners and community members.

The institution or the person against whom the claims are made influences the outcomes of claiming rights. Thus the other side of the rights coin is an obligation to respond and be held account. Since the processes of claiming rights are inherently political and are played out as struggles between the interests, power and knowledge of differently positioned actors, the poor and marginalised citizen who are most disadvantaged in relations of power and resources are those least likely to be conscious of and able to assert their claims to rights.

While citizenship is bestowed to a person by the state, in a democratic set up state derives its legitimacy from the citizens who voluntarily allow themselves to be governed by their elected representatives and if citizens collectively refuses to offer the legitimacy the state loses its identity. So there is a relationship between a citizen and state.

The state could be defined as people organised for governance within a definite geographical territory. A nation is a body of people who possess some sense of a single communal identity, with a shared historical tradition, with major elements of common culture, and with a substantial proportion of them inhabiting an identifiable geographical unit. Nation-state describes a context in which the whole of a geographical area that is the homeland for people who identify themselves as a community because of shared culture, history and probably language and ethnic character, is governed by one political system. The modern state is limited by national frontiers. We are members of the state within whose frontiers we are born and we can change our state allegiance or nationality only with the specific permission of the state to which we wish to belong.

To summarise, it can be said that citizenship means ‘full membership of a community’. The membership entails participation by individuals in the determination of the conditions of their own association without any discrimination on the basis of caste, ethnicity, religion or gender. Citizenship is an over arching civic identity produced by, and productive of a sense of belonging to a particular nation-state. Citizenship is a status, which bestows upon individuals equal rights and obligations, liberties and constraints, powers and responsibilities. Citizenship is always a matter of belonging to a community. In this sense, the citizen is always a co-citizen, somebody who lives with others. The citizen in a democratic society is a person who has rights and duties. The first right is that of establishing the law; the first duty is that of respecting the law.

A citizen may be regarded as a person who enjoys social, political, civil, economic and cultural rights, who is part of a nation-state and society and who has certain rights and obligations. An active citizen should be aware about the reality, be willing to work to change the reality, be striving for common public good and be promoting collective efforts in their own community

Leadership in the community context could be understood as a process of influencing and motivating people for bringing positive social change in favour of the marginalised sections of society. Leadership is that humanistic quality through which a person tries to fulfil the needs of the community by securing its cooperation and by establishing credibility. A citizen leader is an individual who has the ability to represent, to provide direction and to seek acceptance of a particular section or group. Furthermore, a leader has a direction, necessary energy and ability to influence for achieving common public good (desired social change). Therefore, in the process of promoting citizen leaders, the attributes of citizenship and leadership should be considered together. A good citizen leader should be an active citizen and should have the ability to shoulder responsibility.

The relationship between individual leadership and the collective is a dialectical one rather than hierarchical. The collective enables the nurturing of and provides grounds for ensuring the public accountability of leadership. It implies transparent and democratic decision-making within the collective, nurturing inter-personal and inter-associational relationships, honest sharing of how resources are mobilised and utilised and an appraisal of performance in relation to the stated objectives of the collective. The leadership is viewed as an interactive process with emphasis on intermediation capacity. It implies that the leadership would be able to play key roles bringing additional resources (information, material, expertise, fund etc.) from 'outside' agencies and ensuring the effective use of internal resources. It also means ensuring informed participation of individuals and different interests groups within the collective.

Citizen leaders are expected to play a variety of roles. However, the following two sets of roles are of prime importance.

1) **Society Building**

The first important function of a citizen leader is to contribute towards building a society, which promotes norms and values, related to associative and inclusive life. Citizen leaders must aspire for a society, which promotes equal justice to all the citizens. A society, which does not allow any person to be discriminated against based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, gender or age. Such a society can be achieved if citizen leaders play three important functions.

(a) *Facilitating Social Mobilisation*

It includes mobilisation of the poor and marginalised for collective action. Individual action is important in society, however, it may feel powerless in the face of powerful interests of

advantaged sections in the society. Collective action and collective empowerment are powerful tools to change fundamental structural differences, injustice and discrimination in the society. The purpose of social mobilisation and collective action may range from engaging in self help construction work in a village or neighbourhood (like building a road or cleaning of ponds) to exercising rights over natural resources (like protecting forest or common property resources) to large-scale protest activities (like protest against acquisition of agricultural lands).

(b) Overcoming Social Exclusion

The society in its present form is deeply stratified and hierarchical. The structural and other forms of inequalities based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and age reinforce social exclusion. The resources, knowledge and opportunities in mainstream society are denied to the poor and marginalised. One of the functions of citizen leaders is to facilitate the poor and marginalised in accessing resources, knowledge and opportunities.

(c) Managing Differences/Divisions

In a democratic society plurality should be seen as an asset. However, when society is fragmented across hierarchical stratification it may lead to discrimination against and exploitation of the poor and marginalised that are at the bottom of the hierarchy. In both cases conflicts around interest and priority are inevitable. One of the functions of citizen leaders is to manage and resolve these conflicts within the community through negotiation and consensus. Citizen leaders must be sensitive enough to understand that the poor and marginalised feel powerless in such conflict situations unless an external facilitation process helps their interest to surface.

2) Engaging Governance Institutions

Governance is defined as the structures and processes of public decision making for mobilising public resources for the common public good like health, education, drinking water and other service provisions. Several public institutions are responsible for decision making related to the governance functions of a society. The citizen leaders must be aware about those public institutions and how their decisions related to common public good affect the lives of citizens. They should not only become aware about these structures and processes but also actively engage in decision making so as to espouse the interest of the poor and marginalised. The citizen leaders can engage governance institutions in the following three ways.

(a) Amplifying Voice

For generations the powerful people in society suppress the voices of the poor and marginalised. In order to make the governance institutions responsive to the needs and aspirations of dalits, tribals, women, children, person with disabilities, their voices must be

mobilised so that the decision makers can hear them. The citizen leaders should be able to amplify the collective voices of the poor and marginalised to get access to and control over resources, which support their livelihood, to get access to justice and social services.

(b) Engaging in Negotiation

In order to bring about changes in society, changes in the fundamental power relationship are absolutely necessary. The desired development outcomes cannot be achieved without altering the power differentials between dalit and non-dalit, tribal and non-tribal or women and men. The development outcomes cannot be sustainable with a massive power gulf between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. Any alteration in the existing power relationship would require a process of negotiation between two parties. Experience shows that external facilitation always helps the poor and marginalised in such negotiations with a view to changing the power relationships. The citizen leaders should act as external facilitators in such negotiations. They should encourage, mobilise, educate and build capacities of the poor and marginalised to negotiate with the powerful. The citizen leaders must understand that such political negotiations may involve conflicts. Therefore, these conflicts must be resolved by engaging in dialogue with the powerful.

(c) Enhancing Credibility

Years of exploitation, deceit and discrimination have made the poor and marginalised sceptical and frustrated about political leadership and governance institutions. In order to win the heart of these citizens, the citizen leaders must earn credibility in the community. This credibility can only be earned when the citizen leaders actively support the struggle of the poor and marginalised in amplifying their voices, negotiating with the powerful, overcoming social exclusion and fighting discrimination and mobilising their views in decision making processes and structures. The citizen leaders must earn a reputation in the community as “whatever this person says, also does.”

The citizen leaders should also earn a good reputation in the eyes of representatives from governance institutions. It can be earned through personal attributes like honesty, punctuality, seriousness, understanding and sensitivity. The citizen leaders must be taken seriously by the political leadership and officials and seen as individuals dedicated to the cause of social change.

Society building and engaging governance institutions are cyclic in process and are based on knowledge, attitude and the skill of citizen leaders. So in order to perform these roles we require different individuals or even one person who can perform multiple roles. In addition to this a leader should have clear vision/direction, for example, what is the basic purpose of organising regular SHGs meetings? Are they meant for economic development only or are they also providing a forum for discussion on other social issues emerging within the society? Further, how can these meetings be organised in such a way that the excluded sections of society like the disabled, the disadvantaged (widows, dalits, tribals, old aged, minorities etc.) find a space to voice their views, along with the process of society building.

Active citizenship not only involves rights but also engaging with public institutions and reforming society. With some exceptions, very few citizens are participating in society building or interfacing with the governance institutions. Citizens are by and large sceptical about participating in development efforts or claiming their rightful place in governance institutions. It is true that there are numerous barriers, which inhibit participation of citizens. Many citizens are grappling with every day problems – poverty, livelihood, or lack of awareness and information. Active citizenship can overcome these barriers. Practicing active citizenship, especially by extremely disadvantaged and marginalised groups, requires systematic learning opportunities to create the confidence and the necessary capacities required to play this role effectively.