

CASE STUDY

THE MUTEDNESS OF A GROUP OF LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIAN STATE OF ODISHA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SKILL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES OF THE STATE

Parthasarathi

*Department of Physics, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India
parthasarathi@mac.du.ac.in*

Grishma Kumari

*Corporate Communication, NTPC, Vindhyachal, India
grishmakumari6@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study utilises muted group theory to understand the impact bureaucratic structure has on local entrepreneurs when policymaking is influenced by dominating groups, viz the corporate lobbies. Muted group theory is used to define the characteristics of decision-making to favour a few at the expense of a group of individuals who have the relevant technical expertise but lack their say in the policy formulation of the state. The premises of the theory focus on the lack of underrepresented voices present in policies, structures, and organisations. To gain clarity on the experiences of these entrepreneurs, a thorough case study is presented and analysed on the process of the muting of a class of local entrepreneurs and its impact at the local and national level. The findings in this research indicate the importance of representation of local elements in the decision-making process in bureaucratic structures to accommodate the concerns and aspirations of the masses and to highlight the adverse impact of mutedness of entrepreneurs in the progress of the society.

Keywords: muted group theory, entrepreneurs, bureaucracy, power structure, corporate lobbies, skill development, government policies

Introduction

Muted group theory echoes across all cultures and societies and specifically targets groups of marginalised sections of people. Although the original theory explicitly focused on communication between women and men, it has found application across multiple socio-economic groups transgressing every section and sub-sections of the society. Muted group theory identifies problems within the status quo that enable the silencing of underrepresented groups and offers ways to address the issue (West & Turner, 2010). Ardener (2005) emphasised that muting by dominant groups through control of dominant discourse is reinforced through and entrenched in various social spaces. These spaces include prominent organisations emphasising a structure of power and engaged in policy formulations where voices of the affected local populace go unnoticed or unheard. Muted group theory focuses its attention on the lack of voice of underrepresented groups, as well as resistance and silencing (Kramarae, 1981). Four main premises are derived from the muted group theory. Firstly, the members from different groups have varying experiences that alter their perceptions of the world. Experiences are often interpreted differently for them by others within an organisation (Kramarae, 2005). Because dominant and sub-dominant groups are afforded different experiences, they perceive the world differently (Wall & Gannon-Leary, 1999). The dominant group, however, is privileged to create and define terms. These

dominant and sub-dominant groups operate as “simultaneities,” though there may be movement between membership in variously dominant groups and subdominant (Ardener, 2005).

Secondly, each society privileges some groups over the others (E. Ardener, 1978; S. Ardener, 1975, 1978). Such privilege is manifested when those in power determine the dominant discourse of what society deems is appropriate (Meares, et. al, 2004). There are fewer opportunities for subordinate groups to voice their viewpoints or to challenge and advance their counter-narrative of the policies put forth by the policy-makers under the influence of dominant groups. Thirdly, it's rather difficult for the underrepresented group to get their voices registered in the public sphere if it contradicts the discourse of the dominant groups (Meares, et. al, 2004). These muted groups are constricted to have limited say in the socio-economic domain and are forced to adjust their mode and style of communication to enable them to be heard as part of the dominant discourse. Muted group theory focuses on the way language defines and shapes experiences and therefore determines which facets of social and individual meanings and behaviours are recognised and respected (Allison & Hibbler, 2004). Lastly, resistance and change are possible under certain restrictions (Meares, et. al, 2004). But it is rather difficult to surmount the barriers erected by the dominant groups particularly if they are positively aligned with the policymakers at the local level or control the communication channels including the media. This implies that muted members of the group who may have a viewpoint do not find any platform to express themselves for the fear of backlash from those who are in power (Kramarae, 2005). Barkman (2018) while studying the communication between women prisoners and volunteers in California prisons, highlighted the asymmetry in the perception of issues of the dominant and sub-dominant groups. Green (2019) studied the impact of bureaucracy, power, and structure on the experience of a muted group of black graduate students and suggested ways to mitigate the adverse impact on such students.

The alienation of the underrepresented subordinate groups from the decision-making process by the deliberate actions of dominant groups have been investigated by several researchers. The critical communication pedagogy acknowledges fifteen social and cultural forces present in all power negotiations (Dannels, 2014). Deetz (1992) described the process of distorting or muting a section of people as well as eliminating some types of claims through discourse. Therefore, it can be concluded that policies created by those in power or positions of authority may have excluded subordinate groups to benefit the majority dominant groups even if it has an adverse impact on the local and regional populace. Thus, the abuse of power can lead to the oppression of subordinate groups.

In this paper, a thorough case study is presented to demonstrate the muted ness of the group of local entrepreneurs through the misuse of power by the bureaucracy under the influence of the dominant group, viz., the corporate lobbies. Further, its implications on the skill development of the local populace are enumerated and its wider implications on the society and nation's growth are put forward.

Research Questions

- **RQ 1.** It is well established that the disadvantageous section of the population can be muted via the use of language and vocabulary. Is it possible to mute a section of educated youth with adequate resources and demonstrated technical capabilities by the dominant group in connivance with the local bureaucracy through the use of technocratic jargon and policy alterations?
- **RQ 2.** Can communication inequality created by the dominant groups' viz the corporate lobby, prove to be a major impediment to the amelioration of backward class in any society? Does it play itself significantly to defeat the policies put forward in action for the betterment of the poor and the backward section?

Methodology

In this paper, a detailed case study is done to study the policies of the skill development programme implemented by the Government of Odisha to carry out the skill development of scheduled tribes' youths in backward districts of the state.

Case Study

The local entrepreneurs were imparting Skill Development Training under the Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub-Plan (SCA to TSP)¹ Scheme to the Scheduled Tribe² (ST) beneficiaries in various districts of Odisha (Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Baripada, Raigangpur, Karanjia, Udla, etc) as per the guidelines contained in letters issued from time to time by the competent authorities of Government of Odisha (GOO). These institutions that acted as Industrial Training Centres (ITC's) were private Industrial Training Institutes (ITI's) established by the local youths/entrepreneurs in their respective backward districts of Odisha. They were engaged in carrying forward their assigned task of skill development diligently resulting in augmenting the skill proficiency of ST youths leading them to become employable and securing them employment throughout the state. These ITC's institutes were allowed to provide training facilities to the ST beneficiaries as per the notifications/government guidelines issued from time to time dated 04/09/2010, 20/07/2011, and 30/09/2015. The Skill Development Training Programme was implemented up to the year 2015-2016 through such ITCs by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency³ (ITDA) in Odisha as per the National Council of Vocational Training⁴, Government of India (NCVT) norms to make the poor ST's self-employed under SCA to TSP scheme.

It is pertinent to mention here that the ITC's functioning in the state were imparting vocational training facilities to the poor ST unemployed youths since the last 15 years on being permitted by the NCVT, Government of India as well as the ST&SC Development, Minorities and Backward Class Welfare Department, Government of Odisha⁵. They thus possessed a good track record in implementing the skill development programme in their respective districts.

But, suddenly, by the impugned guidelines dated 22/3/2017 it was decided by the State bureaucracy in ST&SC Development, Minorities and Backward Class Welfare Department, Government of Odisha in-charge of implementing the said Skill Development scheme to reverse the existing system for reasons best known to these bureaucrats. It was adjudged that the training facility shall be implemented through Project Implementing Agency (PIAs) empanelled in Odisha State Finance Development Corporation⁶ (OSFDC) Limited and/or Odisha Skill Development Authority⁷ (OSDA). It is worthwhile to mention here that these PIA's were educational corporate entities mostly operating from outside the state. Because of such decisions, the ITC institutes, which were not empanelled under the OSFDC and/or OSDA were deprived of imparting training to the ST beneficiaries for the year 2016-17 and 2017-18. Thus, the bureaucracy with a single stroke of the pen was able to jeopardise the functioning of these ITC's, which left the local entrepreneurs at the mercy of the unscrupulous PIA's who had no institutional presence in these districts nor had any intention to invest in the said skill development schemes. Thus, several of these ITC's were closed which brought the entire regime of skill development to its knees.

It is pertinent to add that the Chief Secretary, GOO had in 2011 called for a meeting to take stock of the Skill Development Training being implemented in the state. A review meeting on said Skill Development Training taken by the Chief Secretary, GOO on 24/5/2011. In this meeting, it was decided to following action points i.e.:

- Formation of committees for inspecting the ITIs and ITCs,
- Release of advertisement for empanelling of Vocational Training Providers (VTPs) including ITIs and ITCs for Modular Employable Skills (MES)

- A committee consisting of Secretary, Labour and Employment, Secretary, ST&SC Development Department, Director Employment Mission, Director Technical Education, and Director, Horticulture was formed to select a list of MES to be imparted through the VTPs.
- A committee was formed to look into the quality of ITIs and ITCs including their existing infrastructure facilities and the quality of trainers. It was a three-member committee comprising technical experts drawn from Industries, Government, and District Administration.

From the minutes of the proceedings of the aforesaid meeting, it is quite conspicuous that before taking any decision on the Skill Development issue, the matter should have been placed before the committee consisting of the members/departments, as decided in the meeting and after the decision of the committee had arrived at, the same should have been acted upon.

Further, it is a matter of record that these institutes/ ITC's had been running successfully as per the government orders issued earlier and there was no such allegation against them either from any of the beneficiaries as per their feedbacks or from the competent authority i.e. NCVT as well as the Government of Odisha. Hence, the ITC's institutes did not violate the guidelines for imparting training facilities to the beneficiaries or had acted in a manner which was prejudicial to the interest of the poor ST beneficiaries. This is reflected in the release of all funds by the concerned Project Administrator, ITDA as training cost in favour of the ITC's after carrying out all necessary inspections. Further, after completion of the training period, the State Council for Technical Education & Vocational Training, Odisha⁸ (SCTE&VT) which is the assessing authority granted the certificates in favour of the candidates who completed the training programme.

Hence, it is obvious that the decision to exclude the existing ITC's by the ITDAs, for the year 2016-2017 forced some ITC's owners to approach the Hon'ble Court in WPC No.16865/2016 which came to disposed of by order dated 27.09.2016 with the direction to the Collector, Keonjhar to dispose of the grievance of the petitioner within a week from the date of receipt of representation. The mala fide intention of the bureaucracy, in this case, can be established as the Collector failed to carry out the orders as per the direction of the Hon'ble Court. Rather, the district administration of Keonjhar district went ahead and allotted candidates to PIAs for the training programme on 27.10.2016 for the academic session 2016-2017. Instead of implementing the HC order, the authorities came with new government guidelines dated 22/3/2017 which virtually took away the valuable right of ITC's institute to arrange training programmes. In the aforesaid order, only PIA's empanelled under OSFDC and OSDA were entitled to carry out the said training programmes. Further, the ITC's were not allowed any reasonable time or opportunity to get themselves empanelled under the said OSFDC and OSDA, which was outrightly illegal, arbitrary, unreasonable, discriminatory, and contrary to the policies of the government for a level playing field. It is obvious that the same was done to benefit the PIA's which were large corporates who were eyeing to establish their foothold and corner the large sums of money that was allocated for the skill development programmes without investing a penny in these backward districts.

That according to the said order dated 22/03/2017, the Govt. in ST/SC Development Department had empanelled 47 PIA's through OSFDC Ltd. This list of 47 PIA's was drawn out of the list prepared way back in the year 2010-2011. Neither new empanelling of PIA's has been done by OSFDC after 2011-2012 nor the performance of these 47 PIA's was sought to be examined till date and as such the intention of showing undue favour to these PIA's is apparent. While issuing the government order dated 22/3/2017 utmost care should have been taken either to allow the existing PIA's to conduct vocational training as was being done as per earlier government circular or the OSFDC should have been directed to publish an advertisement to complete the empanelling process of those PIA's which are waiting to be empanelled to impart training programme. Similarly, OSDA has neither published any advertisement to get the existing PIA's empanelled under the said organisation nor was sponsoring candidates to the ITC's to arrange training programmes.

These 47 empanelled PIA's did not have the required infrastructures in the rural localities/local areas. As a matter of fact, they are dependent on the existing local institutions or were involved in creating dummy institutions in the district localities having the inadequate infrastructure to carry out

their activities. Thus, the very purpose of the scheme to augment the quality of skill development is frustrated. Besides, there were several instances where the ST beneficiaries were forced to undertake skill training outside their home districts against their willingness. The performance of these 47 empanelled PIA's has not been reviewed to date. On the other hand, the authorities are allowing the said PIA's to continue their activities without examining their performance annually thus resulting in the poor quality of the training for ST beneficiaries.

Thus, the entire structure of skill development has been jeopardised by the state bureaucracy with the sole intention of favouring the few corporate entities. These new guidelines have failed to impart any additional quality to the skill development regime of the state. Rather the ST/SC unemployed youths of these backward areas could not get training due to lack of current orders. In the meantime, the Skill Development and Technical Education Department⁹ (SD&TE) and Planning & Convergence (P&C) Department, Government of Odisha¹⁰ has recognised the downturn in the skill development programmes after the new guidelines were implemented. It has thus favoured its implementation by the ITC's vide letter no 1757/SDTE dated 21.03.20 & letter no 5008/P dated 06.05.20. But the state bureaucracy has turned its head in the other direction and allowed the new regime to be implemented to favour the corporate lobby. It is evident from the letter (Ref:18838/SSD) dated 2/11/2019 issued by the ST&SC Development Department, GOO, that the bureaucracy was itself in the doldrums over the policy needed to undertake skill development training for the tribals to ensure better livelihood opportunities for them. This suggests that there was no clarity in the policy formulation after the Skill Development regime was suddenly altered in 2017 to suit the PIA's.

Further, the ST&SC Development, Minorities and Backward Class Welfare Department, Government of Odisha instead of taking stock of the collapsing Skill Training Programmes in the state is coming out with new initiatives to disguise its failures and with the sole intent to shield the PIA's who have proved disastrous for the state. They came out with a 'new initiative' in form of "PRAYASH" vide letter (Ref: 10/7/OTDS/Project/18/2019) dated 11th November 2020 where it was announced that the said department has signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU's) with 33 PIA's to impart skill development in these backward districts. With this initiative, the department again showed its ill-intent to keep out the experienced ITC's out of the skill development process. Rather, inexperienced PIA's with little or no infrastructure available in hand to efficiently carry forward these training programmes were hand-picked on frivolous grounds. This has established beyond doubt that the state government agencies have shown undue favours to the corporate PIA's at the expense of local entrepreneurship and played with the future of local ST Youths.

Facts Established in the Case Study

Following facts are established in the said case study:

- That the local entrepreneurship was systematically obliterated to make space for the corporate entities who were from outside Odisha with no proven track record in skill development programmes at the local level. Further, no systematic analysis was carried to ascertain their performance in the role of skill development.
- This impacted the quality of skill development imparted to the youth and thus frustrated the very essence of change in the policy of skill development post-2017.
- There was no attempt by the policymakers to alter the course of skill development policy even when it was amply conspicuous that the new system in place was a complete failure. Any suggestions offered by the Member of Parliament or state departments concerned with skill development to restore the policies followed before 2017 were ignored.
- There were no articles in the press and the vernacular or the national media highlighting the high-handedness of the bureaucracy who were in charge of the skill development programme in the state. Further, the political class barring few exceptions were conspicuous by their silence on the issue. There were neither any debates on the floor of the Legislative Assembly nor were unstarred/starred questions raised in the house to corner the incumbent government on its

lackadaisical approach to skill development programme which had affected thousands of ST youths and jeopardised their skill development and employment opportunities.

- In this age where the Government of India is aggressively promoting self-reliance among the skilled and educated youth through its flagship schemes like ‘Stand-up India’¹¹, ‘Startup India’¹², ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’¹³, ‘Mudra Loan Scheme’¹⁴, etc, the policies of GOO were acting in the exact opposite direction, which systematically obliterated local entrepreneurs in the backward districts of Odisha who had toiled to establish themselves to create institutions for the amelioration of the ST populace of the region. This was done intentionally to favour a few corporate entities who came from outside the state and had no institutional presence to make any marked difference to the skill development programmes being implemented in the state.
- The reversal in policy-making deals a severe blow to the state and central government initiatives to promote self-reliance among educated youth through promoting entrepreneurship. It also impedes the ‘Skill India’¹⁵ campaign of the Government of India to promote skill development especially among the disadvantaged section of the society.
- It also adversely impacts the optimum utilisation of local manpower and other economic resources to accelerate the growth of backward areas which erects roadblocks in decentralised efforts of development.

Conclusions

With the above study, the following conclusions are in order:

- The case study conclusively proves that the less dominant groups even if possessing the technical capabilities with a proven track record but who have no say in policy-making can be muted by dominant groups who effectively control the course of policy-making and the communication channels through their economic might.
- It can thus be inferred that any attempt to extend the hegemony of the dominant groups might have adverse effects on society and impede the efforts of the government to ameliorate the condition of the downtrodden and the underprivileged section of the society. Thus, the progress of the state and the nation as a whole can be hampered by its acts that may result in the muting of capable but underrepresented groups. This also concentrates powers in the hands of a few individuals which does not augur well for the effective democratic functioning of the nation.
- Further, it can be stated that the various dominant groups collude and realign themselves to counter another section or group which has the necessary resources and skills to make an impact on the functioning of the socio-economic and/or political system if they do not suit the interests of these dominant groups or challenge their dominance in the society.
- The Muted Group Theory stands vindicated in the current case study which proved beyond doubt that the dominant groups in alliance with the policy-makers can mute a section of educated youth with adequate resources and technical capabilities via the use of technocratic language and vocabulary. It also reinforces the views put forth by Kramarae (2005) that the underrepresented groups cannot counter the dominant group for the fear of backlash from these influential sections who have control over the political system, bureaucracy, and the communication channels. Hence, RQ1 is fully justifiable.
- It was concluded beyond doubt in the present study that the dominant group, viz. the corporate lobbies were successful in obliterating the voice of the local entrepreneurs, which could not muster enough support from the political class and/or the media to initiate any discussion on the unfair and unjust treatment meted out to them by the application of arbitrary policy changes by the state bureaucracy. This has put brakes on the skill development initiatives of the government thus impacting the future of thousands of ST youths in the state. It has also doomed the local entrepreneurship arduously cultivated through decades of toil who were muted and were left out to fend for themselves and often led to suffering at the hands of PIA’s. Thus, communication inequality created by the dominant groups’ viz the corporate lobby, proves to be a major impediment to the self-reliance of the youth of the state where even the educated are

reduced to 'Muted Group' incapable of articulating their grievances. Hence, RQ2 stands validated.

Endnote

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