Gendered Reconstruction of Language: An Action Research to Transcend Space

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Abstract
The paper tries to explore the role of language in determining spaces occupied by women in everyday lives. It is inspired from an ongoing action-research in a Kondh-ādivasi village, Kirkalpadu in Odisha, India. In the dominant development discourse, language is associated with preservation of endangered language or empowerment through language. Beyond these, is the discourse of language as a structure, with the hegemonic quality to organise lifeworld in a specific manner. This rigid structure leads to an experience of constriction of space for women. The action-research is with a group of young and unmarried women (aged 15-25). During daytime, these women are either in the agricultural field or in the bari -the backyard of the house whose rooms are linearly arranged one after the other ending with the kitchen followed by an open space called bari which is an intimate and gendered space- where they are not easily visible. The experience of restriction in mobility and fear of moving out of the village alone is justified with the argument that the place and the men are not good. These women, who have dropped out of school early to contribute to (surplus) labour requirement in the household, want to learn English to be able to read signboards when they are on the road, to fill forms at a bank and use mobile phones to communicate with their romantic partner(s). But the incapacity to have within one’s grasp the province of language and the take the mobile phone to the kind of requirements marked by the above-mentioned impossible transactions with space restricts them to the bari. The paper concludes by seeking to explore the possibilities of learning and reconstructing languages which takes into cognizance the gendered experience of women and the desire of women to cross the borders and occupy spaces restricted to them.

Keywords: Action research, gendered experience, language, space
I. Introduction

In the dominant development discourse, language is associated with either preservation or conservation of endangered language (for example, the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) instituted by Ministry of Human Resource Development (Government of India) in 2013 with the objective to document and archive the country’s languages which have become endangered or likely to be endangered in the near future) or empowerment through language (for instance, SHGs or NGOs working on enabling empowerment of women through education). Beyond these two discourses is the discourse of language as a structure, with the hegemonic quality to organize ‘lifeworld’ in a particular manner. This perceives any other form of activity that does not prescribe to the prevalent structure as either deviant or forbidden. This hegemonic quality, among other effects, also leads to an experience of constriction of space for women. Women are forbidden from ‘reaching’ spaces, especially public spaces and spaces dominated by men. This paper seeks to make a movement in the direction of understanding this constriction of space in the lives of women through the play of language. How does language affect the psyche of women to restrict us from reaching out to the world? How does it assist in internalizing the gendered nature of places and accept them as a norm?

The development discourse view the young and unmarried women as poor, rural, backward and victims of underdevelopment which prevents them from realising their full potential. Government schemes focus on providing education to the girl child. But there are no schemes aimed at tackling the deep-rooted patriarchal orders of the society that does not allow these women to access education. Patriarchal systems are as much reasons for their underdevelopment and inaccessibility of education as much as illiteracy.

The following section gives a context of the field setting where the action research is based to establish the nature of the gendered space in the village and experience of the constriction of space by women. The next section tries to place the work in the larger discourse of development by charting out the critical and significant theoretical approaches that mark the making of the discourse of gender in development. The section that follows gives a brief description of the

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1 Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, launched in 2015 by the Government of India, is one such initiative whose objectives include i) prevention of gender biased sex selective elimination, ii) ensuring survival & protection of the girl child, and iii) ensuring education and participation of the girl child. (Source: [http://www.wcd.nic.in/bbbp-schemes](http://www.wcd.nic.in/bbbp-schemes))
gender system in the village Kirkalpadu through labour processes and education which gives a detailed description of the gendered experiences of the women. The concluding section of the paper explores the role of language in producing meaning systems in the society and raises questions on the possible potential of reconstructing languages to transform gender system through action research.

II. Context and Setting

The paper draws from nine months of immersion\(^2\) in the village Kirkalpadu. It is a small village located in Rayagada district of Odisha, India. According to the people of the village, it consists of about 100 people and 22 households\(^3\). The Kondha adivasi build their houses in a specific manner. The rooms of the house is linearly arranged one after the other beginning with a small open space in the front like a verandah and ending with the kitchen followed by an open space in the backyard called bari (in Odia). There are two sets of worlds operating simultaneously in the village. One that is visible from the verandah of the house and another that goes on in the bari. From the verandah, one can see women carrying water from the hand pumps to their houses, going to the fields with 2-3 sets of handi on their head, one on top of the other, containing food and water, children playing on the road, people going to take bath, men forming groups and chatting and young boys coming in and going out of the village on their bikes. Women, especially young and unmarried, are hardly visible on this side of the village. They appear here only with a purpose. The other world is the world of the women that can be experienced in the bari. The bari is an intimate and gendered space (Niranjana, 2001) where women sit and talk to each other freely and aimlessly. Food is cooked on chulha (stove made from mud) in the bari throughout the year except during the rainy season. It is usually cooked by the unmarried daughter or the newly-married daughter-in-law of the household. The houses are built next to each other with very little or no distance between two houses. The bari of the houses are separated by small fences. Women talk and share food and secrets across the bari.

\(^2\) Immersion is used as a methodology in action research which marks a difference from field work. Immersion involves living amongst people and understanding their context by experiencing it. This experience forms the basis for arriving at a research problematic. The basic difference between immersion and field work is that while the former leads to the research problematic, the research problematic leads to the field site in case of the latter.

\(^3\) According to Census 2011, population of Kirkalpadu is 91 and consists of 20 households (Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).
while cooking or during leisure time. Men are hardly to be seen in the *bari*. In this space, they are free and do not find the need to furnish reasons to exist in the space.

The development discourse view the young and unmarried women, who are school dropouts, as poor, rural, backward and victims of underdevelopment which prevents them from realising their full potential. Government schemes focus on providing education to the girl child. But there are no redemptive measures for the drop outs or programmes to tackle the deep-rooted patriarchal orders of the society that does not allow these women to access education. Patriarchal systems are as much reasons for their underdevelopment and inaccessibility of education as much as illiteracy. They use their mobile phones from the *bari* in an attempt to communicate with the world outside (mostly relatives or romantic partners). Often, they sit in groups, make phone calls and talk over the phone in groups, each of them taking turns in speaking while the others helping in taking the conversation forward with their suggestions. They desire to meet these people in person but they cannot move outside the village alone (to be discussed in detail in the section on Action-ing Research). They also want to send messages from the mobile phone to the romantic partner(s). But the incapacity to have within one’s grasp the province of language and take the phone to the kind of functionings (Sen, 2000) marked by the above-mentioned impossible transactions with space restricts them to the *bari*. The *bari* is also the space where they feel free and secure. These women can be found only either in the *bari* or working in the agricultural fields. The sex/gender system (Rubin, 1975) hides the *adivasi* young woman in the *bari* and the development discourse hides the gendered experience of the *adivasi* young woman behind the veil of illiteracy.

### III. Discourses of Gender in Development

“Women in development” (WID) is understood as the integration of women into global processes of economic, political and social growth and change. Under WID, the place of women in various areas of the economy was studied separate from that of men for the first time. The recognition that women’s experience of development and of societal change differed from that of men was institutionalized and focus for research particularly on women’s experiences and perceptions were accepted and legitimized (Rathgeber, 1989).

The argument for economic ‘productivity’ of women was powerful during WID and it was expected that investing in women would give ‘economic’ returns. In fact, this idea was
perpetuated in a way, that women’s need for ‘development’ was not the actual concern, but development’s need for ‘women’ for economic productivity. Women were identified as the tools to achieve development (Miller & Razavi, 1995). “WID units” were set up, with running women-only projects, however the idea behind this approach to augment ‘productivity’ of women was done strategically and economically as such, by implementing policy through women centric projects that reaches all and is profitable to the entire community. As the nature of these programmes was primarily instrumental, ‘women only’ projects did little for the ‘needs’ of women as such. Because of the focus on productive contribution of women to the economy, women’s needs of welfare got ignored in the Basic needs approach too and ‘development’ became a burden.

With a critical review of the economic understanding of development and the model of economic growth, modernist and capitalist theories of doing ‘development’, “Women and development” or WAD critiqued the lack of understanding the structural inequalities (primarily class) within which women’s lives are placed and “the relational nature of their subordination”, and why women do not/cannot have access to resources (ibid). It questioned the lack of WID’s understanding of the economic productivity system which was used to push for economic progress in women’s lives but failed to see the inequalities and socio-economic exploitation that it creates. WAD pushed for a structural transformation and change for a wider reach of developmental policy and suggested the “importance of power, conflict and gender relations” (ibid). WAD, even though it offers a more critical view of women’s position than WID, fails to undertake a wholesome analysis of the relationship between patriarchy, differing modes of production and women’s experience of subordination and oppression. The WAD perspective assumes that women’s position will improve if and when international structures become more equitable.

With WAD and early beginnings of “Gender and Development” (GAD), the importance was placed in the term ‘gender’ than woman⁴, so as to be able to encompass women’s lives and experiences more wholly taking into cognizance children, men, class, race, gender relations, power inequalities etc. and not so much on generalizing and homogenizing. ‘Gender’ is understood as a process where identities of men and women are socially constructed by

⁴ WID was anyway facing critique of focusing only women in ‘isolation’, so it is important to notice the insertion of ‘gender’ in the language of work on women’s issues.
acquiring “locally-defined attributes of masculinity and femininity” (Kabeer, 1994), (Kaushik, 2013).

GAD focused attention on the social relations of gender, questioning the validity of roles which have been ascribed to both women and men in different societies (Rathgeber, 1989). GAD suggests attention to women’s ill health and drudgery of domestic labour, and perhaps fulfilling short term goals (‘practical needs’, such as providing for health benefits) and setting up of long term goals (‘strategic needs’\(^5\)) for gender equality, to be ways to address the problems that women face in different contexts.

The paper tries to place the work within the discourse of gender and development as it questions the role of language in shaping the social relations of gender and validating gender roles in the society but it also seeks to move beyond and raise questions on possibilities of transformation of the gender relations through reconstruction of meaning system in languages.

IV. Gender System in Kirkalpadu

A. Labour

Gender system cannot be isolated from the class processes of production, distribution, appropriation and receipt of surplus labour. Sex/gender system (Rubin, 1975), and (surplus) labour focused processes, gender oppression and exploitation of labour are constitutive of one another (Dhar & Dasgupta, 2013).

The experiences with the 9 young and unmarried women in Kirkalpadu showed that they cultivate family land as unpaid labourers, encroach and farm upon undulated government land, work as daily wage labourers on other peoples’ lands, at construction sites, brick production units, sewage cleaning sites, and do domestic labour inside the household. The physical labour performed by these women on an average day can be classified on the basis of two aspects-type of labour as a) domestic labour and b) non-domestic labour and type of remuneration as a) wage and b) non-wage. This can be disaggregated as: a) domestic wage labour, b) domestic

\(^5\) According to (Molyneux, 1985), practical gender interests arise from the roles women have to play out of the sexual division of labor, can be either short term or long term like care and education of children, adequate food supply, family responsibility, community well-being. According to Molyneux, this can lead to motivate women to take ‘collective action’. Strategic interests (needs) arise from the unequal access of resources and power to women as a social category and has the potential to bring change in the existing order of things.
non-wage labour, c) non-domestic wage labour, and d) non-domestic non-wage labour. Table 1 illustrates the different sites where the disaggregated sets of labour can be seen to be performed.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of remuneration</th>
<th>Type of labour</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Non-domestic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage</td>
<td>Domestic labour in other peoples’ household like cleaning, washing clothes and utensils.</td>
<td>Labour performed in other peoples’ fields and at construction sites or factories, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-wage</td>
<td>Domestic labour performed in one’s own household or in a relative’s household.</td>
<td>Labour performed in one’s own (owned or encroached) land.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The approximate time spent on a day in domestic wage labour is 1 hour, domestic non-wage labour may vary from 6-8 hours, non-domestic wage labour is 6 hours, and non-domestic non-wage labour in one’s own field is usually 7-8 hours. This data was collected through group discussions and participant observation. Table 2 gives us the wage earned and time spent in working on an average day in case of each of the disaggregated category in Table 1.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wage earned (in rupees)</th>
<th>Approximate time spent on an average day (in hours)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>50 a month</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-domestic</td>
<td>100-120 a day</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-domestic</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These women mainly cultivate to produce paddy, ragi, beans, pigeon pea, tomato, brinjal, corn, etc. for largely self-consumption and consumption for the family. They also play the most important part in producing cotton- sowing seeds, carrying water for mixing with fertilizer, weeding, harvesting cotton, and clearing off the remaining plants- which is then sold to the Telugu middlemen in exchange for cash which is appropriated by the father or the mother. Upon working on other peoples’ land they earn wage in cash which is either directly given to the parents, or is handed over to the parents by these women themselves, or in very rare cases they keep it with themselves. They keep no or very little (hardly Rs. 100) cash with themselves for their own personal use and most of the times have to ask for money from parents.

On the basis of share of labour performed inside the household, these women can be disaggregated into four groups:

a) who has to do all the household chores including cooking because she is the only daughter or the elder daughter who has to be prepared to be a good daughter-in-law;

b) who has to do all the household chores except cooking because there is a daughter-in-law at home who should be doing the work of cooking;

c) who has to do all the household chores except cooking because she is not old enough to prepare her to be a good daughter-in-law; and

d) who has to do the cooking to be a good daughter-in-law in future, but receives help in other household chores from younger sister or mother.

All women (young and unmarried, married, old) cultivate family land and look after the household. They work in the fields as unpaid household labour with men doing the minimal work of ploughing, that too with tractors, nowadays, and grazing cattle; women thus work both
within the perimeters of the home and in the public sphere. Since these women are unmarried and are considered too young, they are often kept away from decision making processes. These women have little or no control over the produce or their earning. It is the older woman or the male members who travel far to sell the produce and these women are again confined to the perimeters of the field and the *bari*. Apart from the crops mentioned above, some families also cultivate sunflower. Food crops are kept for self-consumption, and the excess is sold in the market, both local market (village level) as well as local-global market (district and block level; see (Chakrabarti, Dhar, & Cullenberg, 2012)). The produce from the land, cash earned from the sale of cotton and wage earnings from working in other peoples’ land or encroached land are largely appropriated by the male head of the household.

Thus, the study has helped us see the decentered and disaggregated nature of the economy. It has also given us a sense of the processes of performance, appropriation, distribution of surplus labour in Kirkalpadu and the overdetermination of gender and labour (Dhar & Dasgupta, 2013).

While an unmarried, young woman is oppressed by men, she is also oppressed by the elder women in the household (mostly, mother or mother-in-law). At other times, she becomes the oppressor who oppresses the younger sister. The oppressed become the oppressor and vice-versa depending on the context and the situation. Women occupy both the positions of the oppressor and the oppressed. This is as opposed to how mainstream development discourse has imagined women as only a victim. Hence, oppression emerges in complex and contradictory forms under the label of ‘woman’. Women do not form a consistent and uniform category. There are women within the category of ‘woman’ and the conditions and the circumstances in which they negotiate with their lives everyday address the question of their being.

B. **Education**

These young and unmarried women are either school dropouts or have never been enrolled. The primary reason to drop out of school was to meet the (surplus) labour requirements in the house. Some of them cite reasons like they were not encouraged enough to pursue education, they did not know the importance of education and so on. On the basis of formal educational status, they can be classified into four groups: a) 4 of them received formal education till class

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6 By mainstream development discourse, I mean institutions such as World Bank.
5, b) 2 of them received formal education till class 7, c) 1 of them received formal education till class 10, and d) 2 of them have never been enrolled.

The girls are prevented from continuing with their studies when parents decide there is need for (surplus) labour requirement and these girls obey the decision of the parents even if they want to continue with their education. Very early in life, they understand that the *adivasi* life depends on- as they say “If you do not work a day, you do not eat the day”. Whereas, most of the young boys drop out of school early due to lack of interest in studies and unwillingness to stay away from homes. They hardly contribute to labour requirements in the house even after dropping out and staying at home. Instead, they spend the money earned by the family in buying mobile phones and motorbikes, spend most of the day outside the village roaming around idly with friends or playing volleyball.

The developmental initiatives, interventions and the welfare state programmes and policies view the *adivasi* lives as backward, traditional, underdeveloped, and marked by economic poverty, illiteracy, and material deprivation alone. Embedded in such a point of view, the gendered experiences, turning points, trajectories and life events fail to attract much visibility and voice. The paper builds upon the gendered experience of women that take us beyond rather simple formulations of non-attainment or non-accessibility of education, illiteracy, dropping out of school and extend the discourse to include the curbing of desires and goals of these women, and limiting them to confined spaces inside the village that follows the gendered experiences. The paper does not propose to abandon the discourse of illiteracy, non-attainment of formal education or belittle the importance of economic questions related to these. Rather the effort is to foreground what goes unnoticed- questions related to gendered experiences, desire, respect, life beyond material interests etc. -in the excessive focusing upon education that easily qualifies as a “developmental issue”.

“I wanted to be a doctor. I loved to study science. Science was my favorite subject. It would have looked so nice to see a name plate with my name as Dr. S.P. (Sabitri Praska) outside the house, isn’t it? To be a doctor was my goal in life. To be able to serve and look after the sick and helpless people. But that could not be materialized. I had to stop going to school after class 7 when my parents said I

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7 The schools are government’s residential school where students are provided food, accommodation, books and other facilities for free. They come home only for 2 months a year.
should rather work to earn more so that everyone in the family can be fed well. I did not object to the decision they took for me because however much I may want to study and become a doctor, the truth of our lives is that we can eat only if we work. Now I have no goal in life. Nothing. Now it’s only about staying alive, doing agricultural work and becoming old.”

- Sabitri Praska, 15 years old, Kirkalpadu

“There is a difference between educated and uneducated people. One can distinguish between the educated and the uneducated even by looking at the face. They talk differently, they walk differently. The educated speak very little whereas the uneducated speak a lot. The educated respect people more than the uneducated. The educated is also respected by others. When someone asks me if I can read this, I have to say that I don’t know. But if I learn the language, I can tell that I know and I can read it. That will earn me respect.

I want to read the sign boards on the roads or the buses so that I can go to places alone and be more confident.”

- Amalu Urlaka, 23 years old, Kirkalpadu

“I had to stop my studies after class 10 as my father said that I have studied enough and should work at home and in the fields now. I wanted to continue my studies, learn as much as I can and be a better human being. My brothers were sent to schools in Bhubaneswar. But they never had any interest in studying and ran away from there making excuses of sickness. They do not do any work here either. I want to go to school and then to college but I cannot pester my father to send me to school because what he has decided for me is my fate and I accept that.”

- Aralu Praska, 21 years old, Kirkalpadu

V. Action-ing Research
‘Action research’, in this work, is understood as a process of writing of righting wrongs. It is reflective writing on the reflexive processes of righting wrongs. It can be understood as i) engendering a process of transformation, a process owned by communities in which the process of transformation is being initiated through some kind of catalytic activity by the researcher, ii) documenting the process in its infinite complexity and contradiction, iii) generating somewhat abstract learnings and explanatory frameworks on transformation out of the experience of transformation for the community and the development sector at large. To be concise, action research is about a) researching, b) actioning based on research findings and the identified problem, and c) researching processes of action (Dhar, 2015).

The paper is inspired from the action research undertaken in the village Kirkalpadu with the young and unmarried women in the village. After conducting group discussions with these women and analyzing the narratives that came up during the discussions and conversations, we decided to sit together every second night after dinner on the pretext of “meeting” to learn languages. I taught them English and Hindi while they taught me Odia and Kuvi. We met with an agenda to learn languages from each other but we learnt a lot more than just languages. Sharing a bit of oneself in every meeting, we came together to discuss our pain, body, desires, ambition, sexuality and opinions. We created a space for learning and unlearning of languages, a space for co-learning languages in search of understanding and making sense of the organization of the world around us and rethinking the meanings and value systems attached to words in languages. This also created a space for intimate conversations, speaking words which are forbidden for women to even utter and having discussions about them.

Kuvi is the adivasi language of the Kondha which has no script. It belongs to the Dravidian group of languages and has considerable resemblance with Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam in grammar. The language has no implicit connection with Odia though several Odia words are used in Kuvi because of close interaction between the two settlements. Learning Kuvi is important to understand the socio-political and especially cultural system prevalent in the community. Language gives access to understand the structural composition and organization of lifeworld of the community.

The prevalent structure of language in Kirkalpadu, which is used to express and transmit the meaning and value systems that determine permissiveness and non-permissiveness, does not

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8 The preposition with defines the position of the researcher with respect to engagement in the field and the work. The research is not on the women or about the women. It is with the women where the research problematic is reached at and identified with the women and not imposed on them by the outsider.
allow young women to step out of the village alone as they say that for a woman to travel alone “ee jaga nihi-aa-eh” (literally translated as, this place is not good). The statement indicates that women are vulnerable and should be confined to the houses and fields. Here, the phrase nihi-aa-eh (meaning, not good) has value judgements attached to it which is formed from the experiences of these women, the experiences of women from and around the place and the stories they have heard. There have been incidents of rape and murder of women, mostly young and unmarried, in nearby villages and forests. The phrase “not good” is loaded with a hoard of meanings including danger, insecurity, fearfulness, boundedness, and even shame. The women say that this is how the place has always been. This, for instance, determines the social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to women and to men, affects the way they think, behave and act and shapes their being and the society.

The paper is an attempt to explore the possibilities of questioning the existing sex-gender system by learning languages and reconstructing the meanings associated with words taking into cognizance the gendered experiences of the women. For instance, can the phrase nihi-aa-eh come to mean something else such that we (the 9 women and I) do not think about ourselves as vulnerable or become fearful but instead it instils confidence in us to think about how the situation can change? How can we travel to places without nipping our confidence off in the bud as well as considering the situation? How can we inspire each other to attempt to fulfil our desires? Can the meanings attached to certain words change incorporating the gendered experiences of women? In the space for co-learning that we have created, we talk and share our everyday lives and experiences with each other. We learn and unlearn the meanings of words used in the everyday in Kuvi and English. Discussions help us to understand and realize the meanings we attach with words and raise questions on them. As we come together to co-learn, unlearn, reconstruct and share, there is a transforming of gendered realities and relationalities. The action research work attempts to connect the gendered experiences and relationalities, the social and the psychological, the developmental and the experiential, the evental and the everyday.
References


