

Lending Voices to the Marginalised: The Power of Narratives as Alternative Sociological Discourse

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Abstract

The preoccupation with theorising and esoteric epistemology tends to shift attention from the lived experiences of many groups that are on the margins. Looking at the world from their perspectives and chronicling their life stories can lead to a radical scholarship of praxis that challenges many established notions of the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’. There has been a kind of overemphasis on ‘consistency’ in many sociological discourses in the process of ignoring what may be termed as ‘commonality’. I argue that the narrative model humanises knowledge and takes sociological discourse closer to reality.

One of the critiques of the narrative model is that it is ‘subjective’ because it tends to focus on lived experiences which cannot really be reported or studied with a sense of detachment, an attribute that is considered critical for sound research. This position needs to be questioned. In fact, narrative-based discourses open new vistas for understanding, questioning and resisting inequality. Narratives are often rejected as storytelling and without a sound methodological and theoretical base, but my premise is that narratives can provide a strong basis for reconstructing and revisiting our theories and methods. Sociological discourse on issues of subaltern identities and the challenges of those living on the margins is incomplete without using the narrative method. By taking cues from my research experiences with forest dwelling communities in the Western Ghats region of Karnataka, I have tried to show how research can change perceptions and practices and lead to transformation.

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Introduction

Sociological discourse is a term that is generally associated with serious academics. I often wonder whether the inability to use abstract, grandiose language in discourse, itself is considered a sign of marginalisation. In fact, there is a divide between what is considered 'academics' and 'writing and speaking for the masses'. But the point that often gets sidelined is that 'social and cultural reality and social sciences themselves are linguistic constructions' (Brown, 1990). Dominant discourse paradigms in sociology are generally established as the only acceptable theoretical framework within which sociological studies are located.

Since the power of discourse lies in its ability to provide legitimacy for certain kinds of knowledge while undermining others, set certain standards which are often imposed on us both in terms of language and content and put pressure on us to take certain positions, we have to ensure that discourse recognises varied points of view. The premise taken by post-modern thinkers that 'truth and knowledge is plural, contextual and historically produced' gives us the context in which the need to locate alternative discourses could be discussed. However, one needs to be careful about treading on a mono-discourse model, even if it is viewed a counter theoretical strand. Knowledge sources are multiple, but only a few have a claim to authenticity. Though we are aware of the fact that knowledge is culturally and socially constructed, we do not recognise those sources of knowledge considered 'naïve', 'populist' or 'grassroot'. Such discourses come within the periphery of 'subjugated knowledge' or 'low-ranking knowledge' because those who possess such knowledge are those who remain in the margins of the fortress that have been built around serious and scholarly discourse. Neither the people who possess knowledge considered common sense nor the ways in which that knowledge is created or transmitted come into the domain of serious discourse.

My understanding of the concept of 'discourse' is rooted in Foucault's delineation of discourse as 'ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them'. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). Foucault sees knowledge as power and when standards are set for presenting knowledge in a certain 'form' and a 'content' that is pre-decided, it ceases to be power and becomes enslavement. He held that 'expert discourses established by those with power and authority can only be countered by competing expert discourses. In such a way, discourses can be used as a powerful tool to restrict alternative ways of thinking or speaking. Knowledge thus becomes a force of control' (Giddens, 2009, p. 96).

My argument is that discourses in social sciences cannot adopt a monoculture model. As Wallerstein (1997, p. 21) observes 'Social science disciplines were in

fact overwhelmingly located, at least up to 1945, in just five countries—France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and the United States. This is true, despite the global spread of social science as an activity, the large majority of social scientists worldwide remain Europeans. Social science emerged in response to European problems; at a point in history when Europe dominated the whole world-system. It was virtually inevitable that its choice of subject matter, its theorizing, its methodology, and its epistemology should reflect the constraints of the crucible within which it was born'. Alatas argues that 'promoting thinkers in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and also Europe and North America, is to contribute to the universalization of sociology. Sociology may be a global discipline but it is not a universal one as long as the various civilizational voices that have something to say about society are not rendered audible by the institutions and practices of the discipline' (2011, p. 52).

The Need for an Alternative Sociological Discourse

This brings us to the question of why there is a need for an alternative discourse in sociology. Alatas (2000, p. 1) looks at 'alternative discourses' as a 'collective term referring to attempts at social science theorizing and conceptualization in Asia and elsewhere that emerged as a result of dissatisfaction with mainstream Euro-American-oriented models, research agendas, and priorities. It distinguishes the legitimate quest for alternative discourses from nativistic trends in the social sciences'. The following four grounds on which he argues for an alternative discourse in all social sciences, applies to sociology as well, and I quote:

- There is a Eurocentric bias in that ideas, models, problem selection, methodologies, techniques and even research priorities continue to originate from American, British and to some extent, French and German works.
- There is little generation of original ideas in terms of new theoretical perspectives or schools of thought or innovations in research methods.
- There is a general neglect of local literary and philosophical traditions. This is not to say that there are no studies on local literature or philosophy. The point is that these traditions remain as objects of study and are not considered as sources of concepts in the social sciences. Furthermore, they are rarely studied by social scientists.
- The above problems exist within the context of intellectual imperialism, that is, the intellectual domination of the Third World by the social science powers (United States, Britain, France and Germany) (Alatas, 2001. p. 51).

The need to develop alternate discourses in sociology has long been felt and expressed by many thinkers. Jha (2005, p. 404) argues that 'it is imperative that we should recognize the relevance of the ignored regions and the ignored sections of a region or regions in sociological investigations'. Pertierra (1997, pp. 10, 20) recognises the role of indigenised social sciences as a weapon in neocolonial struggles as long as the social sciences 'act as the counter-point between the state and society' as opposed to becoming an 'instrument of the state's colonization of civil life'.

Alternate discourses are those which are informed by local or regional historical and cultural practices and experiences which are expressed in stories, folk art

forms, oral histories and indigenous knowledge (Sinha, 1998). Research studies that use qualitative methodologies are heavily dependent on chronicling people's lived experiences, which actually lead to their inclusion and empowerment. Narratives are among the most powerful channels of alternative discourse in sociology, and in the next section I have tried to show how this model could actually be used in sociological research.

Narratives as Alternative Discourse

The underlying thought in this work is that studies using narratives per se have remained a subterranean area in sociological discourse. Our preoccupation with esoteric epistemology has left us with few options in obtaining a true understanding of the lived experiences of many groups, and this is especially true in the case of those living in society's margins. Many sociological discourses tend to dismiss the narrative model as 'storytelling' and consider it a very easy method to adopt. Notwithstanding the limitations of stories or oral histories, it cannot be denied that narratives open up new realms in the knowledge domain. Narrative is generally not treated as a generalised, abstract or theoretically heavy concept. Since many leading sociological discourses are silent on the effectiveness of narratives, the most pervading perception in discourse analysis is that narratives cannot be taken as serious knowledge sources.

Narratives are essentially social constructions of knowledge. Since the discipline of sociology is interested in communities and groups, and their life stories, narratives which construct these experiences, actually give meaning to what otherwise would be dismissed as inconsequential events. A narrative as a distinct genre is one of the many interpretive approaches that has been used in sociology, gender studies, psychology and many other human sciences (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

The term narrative inquiry or narrative analysis emerged as a discipline from within the broader field of qualitative research in the early 20th century (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry uses field texts, such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artefacts) and life experience, as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 98–115).

Erol Işık (2015, p. 103) highlights the linkage between narratives and sociological theorisations. To him 'sociology and narrativity have become interrelated in terms of revealing the voices of the subjects as they talk about their experiences. We can be informed about the subjects' point of view as well as their interpretations'. The real nature of the society could be more effectively understood via narratives, which are constantly reconstructed. The different spheres of knowledge in sociology require us to get involved with the ways in which people narrate themselves and others. In other words, 'because (a) narrative texts are packed with sociological information and (b) much of our empirical evidence is in narrative form, so that sociologists should be concerned with narrative' (Franzosi, 1998, p. 519).

Traces of the use of narratives as a method of sociological analysis can be seen in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki (Stanley 2010). One of the most lucid expressions of support for narratives can be seen in the writings of Bertaux (1981) who dwelled at length on how life stories should be used by social scientists. In his writings on the theme of sociological writing Bertaux criticises both the ‘scientific form that the quantitative empirical discourse invariably takes’ and the ‘philosophical form of abstract theoretical discourse, both of, which to him was “obsolete” and represented a dull style of writing’ (p. 43). As a solution, Bertaux suggests that sociologists should adopt a different form of discourse namely ‘narration’. Briefly, he argues that sociologists should tell stories. He frames this method of narration primarily as a matter of the style of ‘writing sociology’, whereas 30 years later the idea tends to focus more broadly on ‘doing sociology’.

It is not that sociology in India has used narratives in any of its discourses. The field method is essentially dependent on narratives of participants. Narratives have the potential to create a methodology that is ‘empowering, inclusive and collaborative’. Sociology offers a wide terrain for narratives, but its veracity can always be contested. Values, such as multiculturalism, pluralism and notions and practices of equity, rights of those deprived of basic human rights, must find spaces in sociological discourse. I would also like to add that alternative discourse has the power to bring social change because it promotes a ‘different way of thinking, talking and writing’. It is in this context that narratives as a discourse mechanism assume significance’.

Narratives especially have the power to discern the lived experiences of people in the margins. Since the voices of the vulnerable do not generally form part of mainstream discourse, narratives which construct their life truths are a formidable conduit to understand the complex interplay between their social situations and dominant development paradigms. In the following section, I share my experiences of working with people in a remote forest region where narrative methodologies were able to unfold the story of the multiple faces and layers of marginalisation, and how with the help of the participatory research technique local communities were able to chart the path of their development.

Narratives as Representation from Margins: Experiences from Western Ghats

A study carried out by a team of researchers from India and Canada, of which I was part of, used narratives as the primary mode of reaching out to an entire region, the largest in the state of Karnataka, but completely marginalised because of its ‘location’ and ‘linguistic distance’ from the language spoken by the majority population in the state, that is, Kannada. In addition, there was a sense of alienation that people of this region experienced because of the growing divide between themselves and the forest, which has been the main source of their livelihood. The growing pressure on the forest because of the expansion of resort economy further added to their sense of being marginalised.

The region to which I am referring to is a taluka called Joida in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. Situated on the borders of Goa, this region has been constantly marginalised, so much so that even today it does not find a place in many maps of Karnataka state in spite of being the largest in the state in terms of geographical area. When our research with women in the region looking at the role of women in forest development programmes started 20 years ago, there was resistance, anger and of course a sense of disbelief, that is, becoming increasingly visible in many studies relating to communities in the margins because there is a divide and distrust between the people and those who go there as external interventionists or people who are only 'studying' and not 'doing'.

How was this team able to make the dent in a region that was change resistant, linguistically alienated and culturally closed to alternate ways of thinking? Since I was the protagonist who had dared to tread an unknown path, I had to think of breaking the barriers between 'them' and 'us', and the only way in which this research could move forward was by talking to people, listening to them and winning their confidence. It was only when narratives about their real-life situations started unfolding that our understanding of marginalisation reached new levels. Coming from an urban world in which the 'forest' mostly gets romanticised, the stories of their loss of livelihoods and everyday struggles created a new canvas for understanding and analysing marginalisation. The discourse models that we generally use in sociology seemed to leave us with a sense of emptiness and left us with more questions than answers.

At this point of time, it is necessary to at least briefly answer the question 'why our research team went into this area and what our research questions were?' We were reviewing the role of women in a participatory forest management initiative of the state called Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) programme and trying to identify the reasons for the virtual marginalisation of women in this programme. The JFPM was seen as a state response to people's resistance to being excluded from forest management, and when an institutional framework was created to operationalise the programme, women were virtually absent from the agenda. They were given a token representation in the Village Forest Committee, the institutional mechanism of JFPM. When we started our work in the region, we realised that three women were chosen as 'women's representatives' by men who did not even inform them that they were on the Committee. In fact, they chose such women who never attended meetings, or even if they attended did not speak. The typical feeling among most bureaucrats and the local community was that 'women were ignorant, silent and incapable of giving any meaningful inputs' for taking JFPM forward. In fact, when the community elders learnt that our research was mainly examining the role of women their ire turned against us.

Since women did not speak to strangers either because of a linguistic barrier or taboos against mingling with them in public spaces, a rich source of data was either lost or shut off. Even if they attempted to speak, their talk was dismissed as 'story telling'. This is also the typical attitude of the dominant discourse model, which fails to recognise that stories could contain a wealth of sociological information (Erol Işık, 2015). One of the reasons for women's experiences and perceptions being ignored in mainstream discourses is their inability to communicate

in a textual language. Women in our field locale experience a sense of dual marginalisation because they do not generally speak to strangers and cannot speak in Kannada, which is the language spoken by majority in the state of Karnataka. Most women in the region speak Konkani primarily because of a Goan origin or being home bound for most part of their lives. In our team's very first visit to the village of Deria, which became the focal point of our research, the village headman ordered the women to go inside their houses and prevented them from entering into any form of communication with us. Though they meekly obeyed him, it was evident from their reaction that they wanted to speak to us. But the linguistic and cultural divide blocked, at that point of time, what otherwise would have been a very revealing narrative. However, over a period of time, our team was able to connect with the women, and when they began to speak, what unfolded was a narrative that contained rich sociological data that exposed the multiple layers of marginalisation that were actually blocking women's participation in forest management.

The ice finally broke when a local youth, who had a college degree and who was home from his work as a cashew farm labour in Goa, arrived on the research scene and explained to his community elders how our research could be a means of countering the sense of alienation they were experiencing both from the forest and the forestry programme because the information which it would generate would serve as an empowering tool. He was also able to impress upon the local community and women, in particular that it is very critical for them to participate in the forestry programme, ask questions, seek answers, share experiences and chart their development paths. When women opened up and began their narratives, many local realities came to light, the first being the otherwise 'invisible' role of caste and class barriers in blocking the JFPM initiative itself.

One of the truths that dawned upon us was that marginalisation is not to be treated as a homogeneous category. There are layers of marginalisation within each group identified as marginalised. As people began to realise the inclusive intentions of JFPM, the existing socio-economic hierarchies began to play their part. Upper castes, in general, men in particular and upper-caste women more particularly opposed this programme. The opposition was to the sharing of spaces in the decision-making process. Combating marginalisation is basically about sharing spaces with those who have remained outside the ambit of change. Since the policy did not make any distinction between women of different groups, upper-caste women did not want to be part of this programme and share even physical space with women from other groups. The upper caste is a huge landowning class, and many women from tribal communities and castes in the lower rungs of the hierarchy work as their farm labour. They were reluctant to attend meetings or participate in discussions because it would mean breaking hierarchies. The subtle ways by which discrimination gets reinforced came to light only when women's narratives revealed its existence.

Women started speaking to the research team only when the local youth to whom a reference was made earlier began to act as the translator. Most women in the marginalised communities had never gone to a formal institution of education, and hence the only language which they could use for communication was the

mother tongue. Even if a few of them had gone to a school, it was to a Marathi medium school and not to a Kannada or an English medium school because their education was not considered a priority issue. In a patriarchal social structure, familial obligation was seen as their life's ultimate goal, and the need to orient them to the language of public discourse was never felt. They felt excluded from the public domain because of their 'linguistic vulnerability'. Even the few who tried to speak in a public space were silenced because they could not communicate in Kannada, which is the state language. Since women did not speak or were not allowed to speak, the gender dimension to the forestry programme was totally lost. The example that I am giving below will only uphold this point.

The JFPM programme created forest plantations in which commercially viable species were planted by the Forest Department. The policy ordained that proceeds were to be shared between the Department and local communities. Though the choice of the species was to be decided through a consultative process, in most cases it was a bureaucratic decision that had made the choice. Pesticides were liberally used to keep insects away from the teak and acacia plantations. The impact of such a decision on food resources in the region was not really assessed as people were excluded from decision making. In such a social scenario, it was not surprising that nobody spoke to the women or allowed them to speak. This was a typical case of hegemonic officialdom intersecting with patriarchy.

It is only due to the interventions of the research team that women started attending meetings and speaking up because they were encouraged to speak in their mother tongue. When their stories and experiences started unfolding, the forestry programme got very insightful inputs, many of which are now incorporated into the programme. The sense of worthlessness which was forced on women gradually began to recede because their voices were heard, and their perceptions recognised relevant. A number of interaction meetings between local communities, forest bureaucracy, state administration and people's representatives were organised to break the silence and create the space for the local community to share their stories.

It was in one such meeting, encouraged by the research team and also the forest official, a woman stood up to speak. When she began to speak in Konkani, a man in the audience called out to her and asked her to speak in Kannada since it was the language of the state. She immediately replied and I quote 'I never went to a school or into a public space and hence had no opportunity to learn Kannada. I have always lived in the forest and the forest does not differentiate between Kannada and Konkani. So allow me to speak in my mother tongue. What I am now going to say has serious implications for the forest, our food resource and safety of women and girls in our region'. What she went on to narrate opened up critical questions to which no attention was hitherto paid.

The woman went on to say that because of excessive use of pesticides, the aquatic wealth of the region, which was the main food resource for the poor, was being destroyed as water sources were being polluted. As the distance between the water bodies and dwelling places increased, women and girls had to walk longer distances into the forest interior in search of food, and this exposed them to threat of sexual abuse at the hands of passers-by. When access to their traditional sources of food was cut, they had to buy food from the nearby markets.

Yet, another insight that was provided was that contracts for collection of Minor Forest Produce currently being given to outsiders who had neither any knowledge nor concern for the forest was actually causing enormous damage to the forest. She urged the forest officialdom to issue permits to local communities because not only would it address a livelihood requirement but also ensure that the forest would be sustainably used. This is the strength of the narrative discourse mode.

When women began to ask questions, negotiate their demands and voice their concerns because their stories and experiences were heard, they developed a sense of identity which is very essential for leading a meaningful life. They also realised that by participating in the research process, the knowledge generated would actually enhance the quality of their lives. Information sharing by the research team, which can happen only in the narrative research mode, opened up many choices to women to look for alternate ways of bettering their living and working conditions. Women's entry into the public space resulted in the formation of Self-Help Groups, holding regular interactive meets and meeting people's representatives to demand better infrastructural facilities and livelihood options. When women began to speak, the inhibitions that held them back were gone, and they started participating in trade fairs by exhibiting locally grown vegetables and preparing traditional foods for guests and visitors in homestays. This gave a sense of economic independence, and today they are investing on their children's education and working towards creating a better future. For an entire group that was silent for years, the freedom to 'narrate' their life situations and stories changed the very course of their life.

Narratives as Social Action

I conclude my article by echoing the sentiment that narratives lead to social action because they give us access to the lived experiences of people and also their felt needs. In this sense, narratives are both process and product (Polkinghorne, 1988). At the community level, there is a close connection between talking and action. In the social realm, 'talk as social action' is defined by social constructionists and post-structuralists as 'discourse' (Arvay, 2002, p. 118). Epston and White (1992) in their work with aboriginal communities in Australia used the narrative methodology to locate the indigenous skills and knowledge that had been subjugated by the dominant culture, from the stories that they shared and used the same for community development interventions. The experiences of our research also fall into this domain.

The analysis of narratives can no longer be considered a soft tool of sociological discourse. It has emerged as a formidable knowledge source that has the power to combine theory with action.

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