CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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Marginalized people, such as people with disability, people with stigmatized identities like sexworkers, people with stigmatized ailments such as leprosy, mental illness and HIV, Dalits (particularly manual scavengers among them), eunuchs, tribal people, widows, urban homeless people and prisoners and many others, have remained the most invisibilised people India, perhaps as elsewhere in the world. What is rendered invisible is not just the personalities of these marginalized people, but their life sustaining strategies, experiences, creativity and worldview as a whole. What engendered this cruel situation has a lot to do with changing conceptions of society, man(human), development and man’s relationship with the world, polity etc.

While each society in some era or the other has invisibilised one or other these categories and treated them with contempt and disdain, no society has dumped all of them into the invisible zone like the modern contemporary society. If ever they received some attention it was one of condescending and charitable nature that subsumed the contempt and disdain in the same virulent form as ever. This was further compounded by what even the most revolutionary reformists had theorized. Speaking as they did under the shadow of modernity they only affirmed the invisibilisation processes, for they championed the very modern values of productivity and social usefulness that marginalized these unfortunate individuals. Marxism and liberalism are examples of this line of thinking.

However one significant voice that not only visibilized and actively sided with the marginalized, but made work with them a first condition for social engagement was that of Mohan Das Gandhi. It was he who, with this typical spiritual overtones, declared that God is with the poor and marginalized and went even further to announce that God himself being that very poor person.\(^1\)

It was in Gandhi’s ideas and action one finds scope for recognizing people for what they are and celebration of the very principles that are anti-thesis to modern society - values such as femininity, non-productivity, etc. it was with the strength of such perspectives that one can hope to visibilize the people condemned into the dark tunnels of society. This research is an effort in that direction.

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\(^1\) Gandhi writes “Daridranarayan is one of the millions of names by which humanity knows God who is unnameable and unfathomable by human understanding and it means God of the poor, God appearing in the hearts of the poor”. Young India, 4-4-29, quoted in *Truth is God*, Compiled by R. K. Prabhu

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One glaring aspect of the marginalized groups’ life strategies that has been unconscionably invisibilised is their sense of agency expressed though their collective and individual actions. While this research pays due attention to the individual, micro life strategies of the poorest, its primary focus would be privileging their collective expression of agency.

**4.1. Statement of the Problem**

Poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon, which manifests itself in a dense range of overlapping and interweaving economic, political and social elements. These include economic deprivation, assetlessness, low income levels, hunger, poor health, insecurity, physical and psychological hardship, social exclusion, degradation, discrimination, political powerlessness and disarticulation and erosion of dignity and well-being. It may be transient, as during sudden natural disasters, or chronic and persistent over time.

Both among planners and academics, there has been considerable preoccupation with defining and measuring poverty. Chambers et al (1989) distinguish between poverty defined to cover a range of economic, social and political conditions of deprivation, and what professionals actually measure in their assessments of poverty. They argue that the latter are measures not of deprivation in many of its aspects, but only one or two elements of income and consumption. They find that this grave lapse is not merely an academic failing; it also has serious implications for policy. Policy instruments are themselves designed to address poverty mainly as narrowly defined by professionals, to the fatal neglect of its larger and complex social and political dimensions, and of the aspirations of the poor. They persuasively argue, on the basis of empirical research, that the actual aspirations of the poor are for “survival, based on the stable subsistence; security, based on assets and rights; and self-respect, based on independence and choice” [Chambers et al 1989:13].

In mainstream Marxist literature, poverty is conventionally defined predominantly in terms of expropriation of the legitimate control over the mode of production of the working classes by the exploiting classes. It is seen to be the result of the fact that the producing classes do not own the assets of production, such as land and capital. In contemporary literature, poverty is frequently understood in terms of the lack of control not only over land, but also forests, water and mineral resources.
There are other approaches as well, such as those that view poverty and marginalisation in terms of social exclusion and discrimination. However, none of these definitions adequately address questions such as say why those excluded in particular ways may or may not be as badly off economically as some but there is something specific to that marginalisation that results in a structured and continuous denial of rights.

It is important, both for purposes of understanding and for designing both policy and social and political action to construct a careful definition of poverty or marginalisation, which encompasses the profound powerlessness, voicelessness, neglect and abuse of most vulnerable groups in society. In any society, there are several groups of unseen and unheard people who constitute the ranks of the most marginalised and vulnerable sections of society, and who are in profound ways voiceless and powerless. They have distinct problems that render them especially dependent on external societal or state support to enable them to live a life of even minimal dignity and self-reliance, but such support is rarely available to them. Therefore, they are almost completely marginalised from mainstream social, economic and political activities, and even discourse. They also lack any kind of political organisations and voice, as a result of which they rarely figure in any political manifesto or action. Such most marginalised people include the disabled, mentally ill, leprosy patients women and children in institutions, sex-workers, street and working children, undertrials, the destitute, the homeless, drug addicts and alcoholics, people living with AIDS and the uncared aged.

4.2. Premises

This study organizes itself by basing its analysis on the following premises. These premises are derived from the general trends reported by global level studies of poverty. Such studies have been listed in the review of literature Chapter of this study as well. These assumptions are also informed by the theoretical underpinnings delineated in Chapter III: Theoretical Framework for Understanding Marginalization, preceding this Chapter.
4.2.1, Premise 1

One major premise that this study seeks to establish is that the basic power that is the right of every human being, by the virtue of being human, is the right to control one’s own destiny. When we talk of equity or basic human rights, it may be usefully understood in terms of one’s right to exercise control over one’s own destiny, subject to the limits exercised by nature, by God or external forces beyond human control, and by the rights of other people. Radical existential philosophy maintains that every human being is ultimately what he or she chooses to be. However, for one to be human in this way, one has to have the freedom to choose.

The barriers to a person’s capacity to exercise legitimate control over her own destiny, would possibly most frequently arise from economic deprivation, lack of control over the mode of production, lack of assets, low income and consumption. But it may also result from social and political barriers such as of attitudes to gender and socially stigmatized castes. In the case of disability, it may be thought that failure to control one’s destiny results from physical disabilities that are beyond human control. But if the social attitudes to the disabled are enabling, and artificial physical, social and psychological barriers are overcome, the same disabled person with the same physical disabilities can exercise significant control over her life.

In any society of more than one person, it is impossible to consider power so defined, in terms of the ability to control one’s own destiny, without also considering one’s ability to control the system of governance. This is what we describe as ‘voice’. The premise here that individuals and groups can exercise power over their own destinies, partly to the extent that they have greater voice, or in other words, to the extent that they can exercise some kind of control over governance.

This study therefore intends to proceed from a careful construction of a definition of poverty or marginalisation in terms of powerlessness and voicelessness, to an examination of the response of the formal and informal institutions (or modem and traditional) such as family, community, religion, caste and state in contemporary India to some significant deprived groups.
4.2.2. Premise 2

The second premise is that the more powerless and voiceless is a particular group, the greater the impact of social institutions (both formal and informal, or modern and traditional) in further strengthening this powerlessness and voicelessness. In general, the paramount response of these social institutions of different kinds to the most vulnerable groups is of utter indifference and neglect, condemning all but the most gifted, resilient or fortunate among these people to sub-human survival in the outer margins of society. They live their lives out in streets or behind walls, without the opportunity to share in mainstream public life.

4.2.3. Premise 3

The third premise is that over a period of time as impoverishing and marginalizing processes become most oppressive, there is a greater likelihood of a gross reduction of poor to their mere working bodies. Here one sees the most alarming trend of extreme poverty pushing the poor to move from exchanging the labour of the body at the cheapest rate to exchanging/risking the body itself for survival.

4.2.4. Premise 4

The four and final premise is that faced with a wide range of forces that deprive them of their personhood and rupture their sense of connectedness by forcing them to become mere laboring bodies, the poor have evolved many strategies for regaining and retaining their personhood. Although, they have to confront monstrous socio-cultural-political forces that reduce them to half-human, if not sub-humans, the poorest and marginalized show enormous amount of creativity and imaginativeness in dealing with those meaning-denying forces. These strategies of meaning-making are termed as coping strategies.

After elaborating on these premises, this research study concludes by arguing for a caring society and state, which consistently, sustainably and on its own initiative, provides protection and support to marginalised people in such a way that it is deeply sensitive to their needs and aspirations which enhances their dignity and self-reliance and above all which enables people to exercise legitimate control over their own destinies.
4.3. General Objectives of the Study

To understand the forms and contexts of marginalization experienced by the impoverished people and their modes of coping with the conditions of marginalization using Gandhian framework and suggest ways out of marginalized existence

4.3.1. Specific Objectives of the Study

1. A careful definition of poverty or marginalisation, deriving inspiration from Gandhiji’s vision, which encompasses the profound powerlessness, voicelessness, neglect and abuse of most vulnerable groups in society.

2. To document the special vulnerabilities and experience of marginalization of selected most disadvantaged groups in India: the dalits, the disabled, sex workers, homeless and beggars in Madurai.

3. To identify the different institutions, agents and processes of marginalization experienced by these vulnerable groups and describe their impact on the marginalized.

4. To arrive at a careful elaboration of the agency of the vulnerable and marginalized groups and enumerate the variety of coping strategies deployed by them to deal with marginalization.

5. To suggest and conclude, using Gandhian ideals and building upon people’s narratives, strategies and guidelines for action for the creation of caring society and state.

4.4. Area of Study

Urban Madurai was the area of study. We have chosen Madurai since it is in a liminal state between modernity and tradition and more significantly, it lies at the intersection of rural and urban worldviews and characteristics. It is said that the daytime population of Madurai city is remarkably higher than the nighttime population. This is because, on a given day, some significant percent of daytime population is a floating people from neighboring villages moving into the city for a variety of purposes and pursuits, and leaving after dusk, thereby lending such a strong rustic character to the city. Moreover in a globalising time every location seems to be
exposed to the same set of socio-cultural and political forces. And Madurai is no exception. David Harvey, the post-modern geographer argues that in post-modern world, there is an implosion of geographical space and time. Any place in the world is any other place in the world, thanks to almost the same socio-cultural forces impacting any bit of geography on this planet (Harvey. 2009). In a similar vein, it can be said that the study of any part of India will reveal the play of same forces at the macro level.

4.5 Sampling Procedure

The study has engaged in collection of life histories of selected marginalised groups such as Dalits, Disabled, Homeless Beggars and Sex Workers at the rate of fifty stories each amounting to 200 life-histories. The purpose of life histories collection was to build an understanding of the issues of poverty, marginalisation, exclusion, deprivation and injustice, primarily from the raw material of the experiences and perceptions of the people living through these conditions. In other words, by listening to their voices, this research hopes to gain a range of invaluable, and new insights, about what people living in these conditions are actually experiencing, seen from the lenses of their own perceptions. They also provide the researcher with insights into their coping mechanisms, how they view external players and forces as well as the social actors with whom they interface on a day to day basis; what are their aspirations, and if and how they feel these aspirations can be actualised.

The respondents have been chosen on the basis of:

1. The expression of the four key issues - Chronic Hunger, Experience of Injustice and oppression from formal and informal social Institutions, People who faced exclusion and deprivation from social system and Corrupt and Arbitrary Governance in terms of perception of people living in poverty;

2. Peoples' experiences in dealing with voluntary sector actors, and regulatory, development and welfare institutions of the government; and their perception on the contribution of these government and voluntary sector institutions to their current condition;
3. Peoples' perceptions of the necessary changes required in aspects of their lives and facilitating institutions to overcome poverty and deprivation;

4. Peoples' responses to poverty, deprivation and injustice, necessary action initiated by them and their perceptions about supporting factors and obstacles in their attempts to overcome their condition.

Some of the important issues that the life-history collection intends to capture and incorporate are:

- **Factors**: What got a certain sections of the people there - hunger, oppressive and unjust institutional contexts, exclusion from social systems, corrupt and arbitrary governance?

- **Processes**: How did they get there?

- **Dimension and Distribution**: How many and where are they?

- **Characteristics and manifestation**: What is the current situation?

- **Necessary conditions for change**: What will get them out?

- **Coping and Agency**: How do they cope with these extremely difficult circumstances?

To get to the respondent directly the NGO contact were used extensively. Madurai city has many NGOs working with the groups such as the ones chosen for this research. These NGOs have enough experience and expertise to help identify the cases for the study. From among the people they work with, the NGOs were requested to identify the cases, (particularly from among those categories of population that needed prior relationship and identification, such as People with disability, Dalits, child labourers and Sex Workers) that conform to the conditions of marginalization elaborated above. After analyzing the cases, the ones that would demonstrate experience of multiple marginalization were purposively chosen.

Besides these, the researcher had directly approached the certain category of people who were willing to talk. Such people include beggars, homeless and street children and rickshaw pullers.

Hence the sampling procedure adopted was intuitive purposive sampling.
4.6. Methodology

This research is interpretative in nature and orientation and uses ‘Listening’ both as a tool and attitude in collection of data.

The interpretative turn in Social Sciences particularly in sociology, has gained much ground and many votaries in the last decades. This does not believe in quantifying human experiences into discrete and fragmented data under the pretext of being scientific. Our distrust of pure scientific method arises from Gandian suspicion of all sorts of cognitive notion of truth, since Gandhi believed in experiential notion of truth. Strengthening this argument, Akeel Bilgrami writes, “...truth for Gandhi is not a cognitive notion at all. It is an experiential notion. It is not propositions purporting to describe the world of which truth is predicated, it is only our own moral experience which is capable of being true. This was of the utmost importance for him.” (Akeel Brigami, 2003, p. 4164.). It is in the same Gandhian spirit this study privileges listening as the predominant attitude of the researcher in collecting data and interacting with people.

This research firmly believes that listening is an act of humility. It can be humbling too. However listening in the everyday life circumstances of the poor is weak act, a practice condemned to be followed by the poor, marginalized and the oppressed. Normally it is women in relation to men, Dalits (the most oppressed caste in India) in relation to the non-Dalits and children in relation to adults who were forced to cultivate listening as a skill. In a scaled up version, even the larger social science research agendas only reiterated listening as a weak act or act of the weak by compelling the respondents in the research exercises to fit into the designs evolved in circumstances alien to the ‘respondents’.

Tempered with the Gandhian spirit, our commitment to situate the act of listening at the heart of this research exercises arises from the compelling necessity to transform the otherwise weak act of listening into a radical act. It is precisely because of this commitment the researcher suggests that development researchers hold listening as a cardinal value in most of the development research exercises. By taking up the weak act of listening, this research wants to humble ourselves as well as to translate that into a radical act.
1. Listening is a radical act in the development research primarily for it calls for repositioning of social actors. It presupposes altering and restructuring social relations and interaction patterns, first in the domain of research and later, by extension, in the domain of wider society.

2. Listening is a radical act in research exercise for it is done not so much for confirmations of the researchers’ opinion, but for refutation. This has to be read in the background of how participatory approaches have been used by many development agencies and researchers to confirm their frameworks rather than radically challenge them. The boring uniformity of conclusions arrived at by Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) studies about the perceptions of poverty across the globe, despite the expansive multidimensionality, only buttresses our argument that, if they had been conducted with listening as a value they would have led to the breakdown of many paradigms on poverty rather than presenting them as manageable data. If numerous studies of our on poor have merely confirmed that “here is one more poor person who is starving”, that would be tantamount to an ornithologist declaring that she has found “another crow that is black”. Philosopher of knowledge Karl Popper would argue as to how our modern-day scientists are suffering from a particular form of neurosis due to which they get nervous when anything or any event that breaks down the regular occurrences of the natural phenomena they are researching. They declare them as background noises and discount them from readings in experiments. They are “insignificant happenings” that cannot have any relevance for the research. Since then they are never “listened to” by the rest of the members of the scientific community, who are engaged repeating the experiments only to confirm the existing paradigms. This is because, Popper concludes, they are engaged in confirmation research rather than refutation research (Popper, 1969).

Only when the paradigm is held in doubt will we be engaged in refutations research. And only when we look for falsifying cases that would challenge our time-honoured paradigms, will we start listening to even the minutest of the noises. There commences a creative humane falsifying research. It is humane because the moment the existing paradigms are kept in doubt, the certainty
and arrogance arising out of holding on to them steadfastly, disappear. And as persuasively argued by Zygmunt Bauman, violence abates. Bauman says that many destructive mass murders such as Holocaust have happened because the perpetrators believed in the axiomatic character of the paradigms they believed and obeyed. They did not hold their paradigms in suspicion not even for a second. Listening was dead there (Bauman, 2001).

By the same token we can argue that much of the development violence indeed has been the outcome of such certainty cherished by the development agencies. Even when the flexibility of such wisdom is admitted by the development professionals, at the end of every round of PRA, or other qualitative research initiatives, the wisdom gets only solidified further, except for some elementary changes on facts and points of view. The paradigm shift itself has not occurred in the very conceptualization of poverty. What has occurred instead is the expansion of the definition to include very many qualitative aspects to it. Listening was dead there too.

3. Listening is a radical act in another count too. When ‘listening to’ we witness the evolution of stories narrated with the desire for coherence, arguably for the first time in the lives of many poor. Yet it is not a charitable admission of the story to take shape. It is a very natural outcome of listening, even when there is no conscious intention meant for it. This is very crucial because the act of listening subsumes or ought to be subsumed by different conception of humans as storying persons. Indeed it is a different ontological reality we posit to human being in line with many narrative analysts. It is to these aspects we turn our attention now.

4.7. The Reasons for Using Life-Stories

Human beings live storable lives. It is in the act of storying they find their essence. By rephrasing the classical Marxian phrase we can say “Humans are essentially storying animals.” In this research too the researcher believes that, more often than not, the evolution of these stories is a joint exercise between the researcher and the person listened to. The fact that a storable life can be grasped by the poor has a radical potential to transform people into humans. But the initial reluctance or even inability to coherently narrate their stories of life in many of the poor person the
researcher met only suggested that there was a breakdown in their self-conceptions as humans. The arguments of Veena Das (1990), in her excellent essay on Bhopal Gas victims, that the absence of narration in the lives of the humans signifies the breakdown or disorganization of their personal selves are very relevant here. When trauma strikes, narratability is the casualty. And the return of the story to the persons is the moment of triumph of the person over the objective history, because by recuperating a story of ourselves we personalize the historical time and space as ours own. Listening can create those triumphant moments for others whose stories were never organized before. Yet listening should not be construed as a charitable act by which the restoration of humanness in the poor through their recovery of storiability is a gift from the researcher to the poor. In contrast, listening has to herald an authentic meeting between authentic people as R.D.Laing (1990) would propose.

The astounding fact that listening ends up constituting the humanness in the other, is very important for it can radicalize PRA methods themselves. The extraordinary or proclaimed sensitivity to people’s way of world-making notwithstanding, PRA methods have not seen the poor as ‘storying’ persons inasmuch they saw them as ‘speaking’ persons. The total reliance on the poor people’s self-chosen modes and ways of revealing information could not still help PRA methodologies to overcome their obsession with information in whatever forms they came - be it stories, diagrams, or answers to interviews. This has not enabled the poor to construct an ordered narration of themselves, as they only saw themselves as information-provides under howmuchever democratic or enabling environment it happened. The unintended breakdown of stories that was recurrently produced by even the sincerest application of PRA methods, failed to restore the essential human quality, namely as storying persons. It could also be attributed to the failure of the PRA to transfer the foundational values guiding them to the people it studied.

Thus by foregrounding listening as a value, this research aspires to turn the research exercise into a joint human enterprise. In this, humans emerge as storying individuals. Stories themselves can be an extraordinarily significant source of details in retrospect, because stories of the poor are invariably enmeshed in history. This calls for a little more elaboration.
4.7.1. Stories as Histories

C.W. Mills (1959, p.2) in his book Sociological Imagination, talks very evocatively about the birth of sociological imagination at the intersection between an individual’s biography and the history of the society that individual belongs to. Juxtapose this to ethnographers’ understanding of folk narratives wherein the confluence of the history in its luminous presentness, occurs with the past of the mythic recited, even when that recital looks highly personal. What we get is a renewed understanding of stories as rich documents about the persons narrating them as well as the society that person belongs to. In a research done among the traditional singer women in Tamil Nadu who sing the lamentation songs Margaret Trawick (1991) found that in singing wailing songs, the poor woman continuous to infuse her personal grief into an otherwise publicly acceptable content of the songs. She called it narrative isomorphism to suggest how personal can be public and public can be personalized. They are situations in which the personal narrative tends always to carry the traces of the history of the society and this has been well documented in anthropology.

Characterizing life stories not merely as personal narratives, but as narratives of wider social context Kothari (Kothari and Hulme, 2003, p. 4) writes, “Crucially individual stories draw upon collective imaginations and themes as they must, since life stories are inevitably located in the social context of meanings, languages and institutional and national cultures. In this way the storied self becomes inserted into collective narratives.” Not only that, there are extremely critical energies to be found in the stories as Kothari (ibid, p.4) argues, “The life stories can also illuminate those aspects of people’s lives that are not normally revealed and in so doing, provide a valuable critique of development policy ...

This understanding helps us to derive immense amount of inspiration to see the stories of the people not simply as personal accounts of themselves, but as carriers of history of the society at large. Essentially listening is an important component of sociological imagination, for it impels the researcher to see multiple meeting points between individuals’ biography and public history (Mills 1959, p.2). Not merely that, but a radical act of listening also helps us to appreciate the meaning-making strategies of the people who creatively personalize what is a public experience. By doing this we consummate the authentic relationship by centering human agency of the poor,
apart from facilitating the constitution of mutual humanity of both actors - the researcher and the narrator. It is in this context, we prioritise listening, not so much to dehumanizing piecemeal information, but to humanizing stories.

These apart, the choice of life stories as the source of data has been guided by the inherent merit of the life stories as briefly hinted in the figure above. We refrain from elaborating on them as much of the merits of collecting life stories and the series of positive or critical effects it could have on the development debate and wisdom have already been elaborated extensively in the related literature (Slim and Thomson, 1993).

4.7.2. Listening in Participatory Approaches

The very purpose of bringing the act of listening to the centre-stage of the development research is tempered by two critical discomfitures the researcher has with the current modes of researching in development practice.

Firstly, research in development sector has been conceived of as an independent activity set apart from on-the-field development engagement one has with the people. At best, development research can only qualify and inform such engagement, even while maintaining its aloofness from development practice. This, in essence, boiled down to mean that research itself is not a development practice in its own right. Furthermore, whereas the conclusions of the research may call for transformation, modification and alteration in development practice and seldom in the behavioural aspects of the development practitioners, the research enterprise itself does not warrant such radical transformation in behaviours, attitudes and dispositions on the part of the researchers.

This was because, for long, research in development sector was done by experts in quantitative techniques who hailed from outside development sector. While the experts’ findings called for changes in the development practice, the experts themselves went out of the research exercise unchanged. What is even worse, for these expert researchers’ another engagement in research only confirms their certainty about the infallibility of their knowledge and techniques. Both the researcher and the research do not listen to or learn from what such intense engagements with people might tell. Against this, therefore, we envisage a research exercise that in itself is a development practice calling for the involvement of development practitioners and
development actors rather than experts on the one hand and subsequent transformation in their own development practice and engagement with the people with whom they work, on the other hand.

The researcher’s second discomfiture is with the way even some of the alternatives have failed to live up to the promise they showed initially. The arrival of action research gave tremendous optimism as it aspired to establish research as development action in its own right. It brought into currency refreshing new tools and methodologies which promised to make research itself a transformative development action leaving both the researchers and the researched significantly changed in its wake - behaviourally and attitudinally. Central to such research endeavour are the participatory approaches and tools. However much of the criticisms leveled against many participatory methods point to the fact that while listening to the voices of the poor by deploying focused group discussions or interviews or even other PRA tools, the act of listening was given as much significance as perhaps notes-taking, prompting and other such gamut of acts that formed part of application of PRA methods. Listening as a cardinal humbling act has always got drowned in the midst of these other ‘technical acts’ - whether instinctual or cultivated. In fact, the root cause of a host of problems associated with participatory methods concerning their having been used predominantly for assessing the needs of the poor; legitimating the end of the agencies and actors who primarily applied it and; their lending themselves easily to be mastered and monopolized by big donor agencies and so on and so forth, can be traced to the absence of the art of listening as a governing value, or to its reduction to a marginal instinctual act in the process of relating to the poor.

During the last three decades so much of participatory exercises have been conducted in the development sector to persuade a critic to pithily remark that there will be only few rare groups of people who would not have been PRAed (Green, 2003). It can be even pointed out that in the same period almost all the development organisation have taken to participatory approaches, so much so that they have become a mandatory part of project life cycles and even institutional style. But a highly self-reflexive exercise on the part of these organisations to asses the extent of internalizations of the cardinal values such as ‘participation’, ‘equality’, ‘mutual learning’ etc that govern participatory approaches has rarely been undertaken. By the same token, the marginal presence of these cardinal values in the everyday life
circumstances of the poor who have been repeatedly subjected to PRA initiatives, not only point to the inequal structural relationship between the local people and the PRA experts but can itself be an indication of the failure of the development practice.

We wish to argue that despite reasonable claims of participatory methods to remain proximate to the lifeworld of the poor in making choices about tools, such as diagrams, use of native objects, narrations etc., the sustained application of them in the development practice has only reduced them to techniques, instead of translating into values. We believe that it is because the prevalent modes of undertaking participatory methods and tools have not paid close attention to an anthropological understanding of the values and logic that govern the speech-acts and interaction patterns among the local people (Green, 2002). The swift and uniform application of many of the participatory tools among a diverse range of communities across the globe without ensuring their relevance and acceptance for the members of the communities has only meant that many of the crucial native social acts and logic have been lost sight of. Listening is one such value and act finding recurring salience among the poor but has been grossly converted into a marginal act in the practice of participatory methods.

4.7.3. Participatory Methods: The Promises Unfulfilled

The trends mentioned above suggested that ‘listening’ may become a radical act. Yet even while the three decades of experiences with participatory research attest to many instances of poor people speaking, the marginalized voicing and the oppressed inscribing their presence in the research practices, the evidences to clinch the arguments in favour of ‘listening’ are sadly far fewer, if not rare. It can be concluded that all these assertions and speaking on the part of the poor have happened in environments in which listening was so much absent as only hearing was present. Hearing is essentially a charitable act and not an equalizing or empowering act like listening. Hearing is always a selective act too. As argued by many critics of PRA, the researchers and the agencies that used participatory initiatives have done so as to hear what they have always wanted to ‘hear’ and confirm for legitimating their own agendas. Echoing this Ruggeri Laderchi (2001, pp. 5, 6) writes as to how participation and participatory methods have become compatible to support the market oriented economic paradigm when it should have challenged it in reality. She mentions “the developments in participatory research have been described as ways in which the
participatory research agenda has been co-opted for instrumental ends by new converts [such as World Bank], while the extent to which the consultations have been participatory has been questioned.”

The application of various PRA techniques across the globe though has thrown light on the differential and multidimensional experiences of the poor, the striking similarity and uniformity of such pluralistic experiences of the poor in different regions and nations call into question the fundamental assumption and notions that guide data collection. Is it because the processes of dissemination of PRA techniques onto various development professionals and practitioners encourage only singular mode of conceptualizing poverty as deemed fit and relevant by powerful institutions and forces that are not even geographically located in poor countries? Or is it just that the development practitioners ask the same questions everywhere despite deploying myriad of techniques and tools? The answer is certainly not the global solidarity of all the poor in the world, nor surely the singularity of their experiences however multi-layered may they be.

If poverty experiences of the poor have acquired somewhat seamless uniformity and consensual standardization, it does not mean that, in reality, the poor people’s lives are such, but it means the triumph of the manageability-of-poverty anxiety on the part of the agencies who applied these methods. This is corroborated by a recent analysis of the PPA documents conducted in Africa as a prelude to the largest ever PPA exercise undertaken by any one person or agency namely, the World Bank’s Voices of Poor study. While the study enriched our understanding of the poor and poverty, what was ultimately presented themselves were highly selective information that suited the larger interest of the sponsoring organisation. “The preliminary PPA document had noted certain themes that have not been highlighted in the main overviews of PPA results. However what is perhaps more striking is what is missing even from the expanded list. There are a range of other issues for poverty analysis that seem important a priori but are notably absent in the first round PPAs. The selectivity at various levels due for example to pressures on writers of country synthesis reports to highlight findings that have immediacy for policy makers or the indirect influence of the strategies policy framework adopted by the World Bank on the way themes are organized” (ibid, p.9)
Indeed much of the development knowledge doubled the strength of their arrogance using participatory research methods, because of their inherent amenability to such instrumentally and politically-motivated selectivity - people in margin could only confirm the belief systems of the development agents, their refutations are regarded as background noises. This, we propose, is the result of ‘hearing’. What is needed is a movement towards ‘listening’.

4.7.4. Poverty and Beyond

If we aspire to radicalize the otherwise weak act of listening in this research exercise, it cannot happen in the absence of radicalized conception of poverty. We may have to make very clear as to what is the operational notion of poverty we use in this research. It would be fair to say that there was a certain degree of predetermination of specific conditions of poverty under which the people the researcher collected stories from lived. These conditions were both hypothetical as well as ‘educated guesses’ based on our previous experiences of working with people - many of which were highly personal encounters with individual people living in such conditions.

Operationally this research is taking poverty to mean ‘impoverishment’ in that poverty is an outcome of a range of impoverishing processes. Unlike the term poverty, which imputes the culpability for being poor to the impoverished people, impoverishment locates the problem in the structure of social, economic and political relations into which the impoverished are forced on inequal terms. This accounts for our agreed parameters for the listening contexts centering around conditions, rather than on the traits and attributes of being poor. The researcher was cautious not to end up describing the poor, but only the conditions that surround them. Doing the former would have only strengthened already solidified notions of who the poor are.

The researcher is very uncomfortable with the tendency in many poverty studies to describe poverty by describing the poor. Those studies end up constructing a personality of poor while attempting to understand the phenomenon of poverty. This manner of locating poverty in the personality of the poor tends to posit poverty as the personal problem and failure of the poor. This also imputes an element of passivity to the poor as the essential agents of their own poverty. The researcher firmly believes poverty is much more than starvation and whole panoply of attributes given to it.
Poverty studies also have another tendency, which the present research wishes to distance itself from, i.e., solidification of poverty as a ‘thing’ in itself as if it is an objectified reality outside that can be singled out and attacked*. As much of the development practice and wisdom is aiming at constituting a ‘thing’ called poverty, it tends to hold every experience of the poor as contributing to such constitution. Even the most challenging and against-the-grain experience of the poor, though may shake the complacency of the existing ideas on poverty, does not fundamentally uproot the edifice on which such existing wisdoms were erected. This objectification of poverty results in treating poverty as the disease to be instantly eliminated whereas it is only a symptom of the prevailing socio-economic political relations in the society.

The clarion call given by many critiques of development ideology that one ought to move beyond a thing called ‘poverty’ and problematise the wealth-making practices of rich will go unlistened to as long as ‘hearing’ for confirmation dominates development research. It is the researcher’s belief that listening to the poor is one such exercise, wherein we held forth our conception of poverty for falsification. We do not know how far we have moved forward in the terrain beyond objectified poverty, but the present research is willing to allow that challenge to be posed to the prevailing conception.

4.7.5. Why the Most Marginalised and the Poorest?

In choosing to listen to poor and the most marginalized among the research can aspire to offer two crucial corrections. One is our discomfiture with participatory poverty assessments or PRAs, that have excluded from their ambit those categories of the populations characterised as the poorest even by the poor themselves. Despite the best intentions of these methods to privilege the local voices, they have often excluded the most marginalized among them, namely widows, disabled, mentally ill, beggars, homeless. Here it is instructive to appreciate the conclusions arrived at by Mick Moore and others who have reviewed the whole range of participatory studies done hitherto. They conclude, “It is reasonable to infer that there is often a wide diversity of views and understandings about the causes of poverty among the poorest people themselves. We are not very well informed about that, partly because it is the very poorest whose voices are the least likely to be heard in any investigation. A great deal of experience indicates that the very poorest people tend to be under-represented as respondents in any kind of research unless very conscious efforts are made include
them.... It is very likely that the voices of the very poor that we do hear are rarely those of the sick, old, disabled, shy, shunned or inarticulate.” Even in those cases wherein they have been included, the specificities of individual experiences that could have high critical potency have been lost due to the inherent bias of the participatory methods to work with groups and present a seamless, consensual perceptions of the groups, albeit the plurality of such perceptions. Life story approach and the intense listening it presupposes, take as closer to the individual experiences of his/her situations and brings refreshingly critical input even into the conclusions arrived at by PPAs or PRAs.

Even when focusing on the excluded groups we should be more concerned about the conditions that prevail around the impoverished people - conditions that push them into poverty, sustain them and conditions that would get them out eventually, than describing the persons themselves. These ought to be realised under non-negotiable cardinal values - listening, relating to the impoverished because it is fair in its own right, being the most crucial among them. Instead of arriving at standardisable, measurable and conclusive understanding on poverty or even poor persons (in the development literature one would find inexhaustible descriptions of poor and poverty), we aspired to listen to the multiplicity of the impoverishing process as narrated by the poor.

Our commitment to listening to people so as to collect their stories must also influenced by some of the strident criticisms of existing modes of conceptualizing poverty. It can be argued that the resurrection of multidimensionality and plurality of experiences of poverty experiences from the invisibility to which they have been condemned till now, are the outcome of not those quantitative surveys or even the PPA exercises but of some sensitive minds meeting with the invisibilised poor in purely personal encounters. It is these chance occurrences that have triggered more extensive and deeper exploration of the conditions of invisible people in a much more systematic and formal manner. Listening to poor persons’ stories should similarly be born out of such optimism to restage and reenact such chance occurrences in a systematic and formalized manner. That explains why in our collections of stories they should be more number of people who would have been missed by even the most sensitive PPA initiatives so far - there are many beggars, sex workers, disabled, mentally ill, prisoners, leprosy patients, street children, HIV/ AIDS patients religious
mendicants, eunuchs and many others not visible to the noblest poverty researcher. It is in these personal encounters with invisibilised people we can learn about the extraordinary intensity of lives lived, creativity exercised in restoring dignity to them.

4.7.6. The Co-Authored Stories

Eventually the stories collected in the manner described above will sure turn out to be predominately about two important aspects. Firstly it will be about how their being in conditions of poverty is not their making or personal failure, but traceable to conditions and processes external to them over which they have least or no control. Secondly it will be about how they are coping with/in these impoverishing situations creatively, dignifiedly and courageously, though most such life strategies have often been criminalized, contemptuously treated and unrewarded by the wider society.

It will be certainly stunning to find out the refreshingly equalizing potency of entering into listening exercises and collaborative authoring on poverty in the process of conducting life story collection. Much against many other extractive research exercises that vested primary authorship (including the analysis) in the researcher, we have to seek to retain the authorship predominately with the impoverished people. It will be startling to discover what the impoverished persons choose to discuss, highlight, and what they choose gloss over.

4.8. Tools of Data Collection

The study is multi-disciplinary, spanning social policy, philosophy and anthropology. Correspondingly, the methodology for the study has combined elements of each discipline. Anthropological case study/life history methodology was used to build up case studies to capture the experience of each deprived group. The elements of philosophy and social policy derived more from a critical study of the literature.

More specifically this study draws upon the qualitative research methods and techniques for primary data collection. Such methods included

- Life histories collection,
- Participant observation,
- Personal interviews
- Focused group discussion
The collection and use of life histories, though may look unusual and new, suit the Gandhian spirit with which this research has been carried out. Life-Histories as tool of data collection are informed by strong qualitative orientation in social sciences. Much of anthropological and recent social science research, coming as they are in the wake of strong challenges posed to so called scientific quantitative research, have started adopting intensely experience-centric and meaning-centric tools such as life-histories. Although so much has been written about the limitation of science in taking us to the truth, it is very significant to recall what Gandhi has written in this connection. He says, “I never reject a scientific truth that has been established.

But you should also note that in the realm of science what has come to be accepted as truth today is not unlikely to be proved as untruth tomorrow. Sciences founded on deductions are always bound to suffer this basic imperfection (Alter, 1996: p.317). We cannot regard it as absolute truth (Gandhi, 1958-8, Vol.59 :43). In a research done among the traditional singer women in Tamil Nadu who sing the lamentation songs Margaret Trawick (1991) found that in singing wailing songs, the poor woman continuous to infuse her personal grief into an otherwise publicly acceptable content of the songs. She called it narrative isomorphism to suggest how personal can be public and public can be personalized. They are situations in which the personal narrative tends always to carry the traces of the history of the society and this has been well documented in anthropology.

Characterizing life stories not merely as personal narratives, but as narratives of wider social context Kothari (Kothari and Hulme, 2003, p. 4) writes, “Crucially individual stories draw upon collective imaginations and themes as they must, since life stories are inevitably located in the social context of meanings, languages and institutional and national cultures. In this way the storied self becomes inserted into collective narratives.” Not only that, there are extremely critical energies to be found in the stories as Kothari (ibid, p.4) argues, “The life stories can also illuminate those aspects of people’s lives that are not normally revealed and in so doing, provide a valuable critique of development policy ..

This understanding helps us to derive immense amount of inspiration to see the stories of the people not simply as personal accounts of themselves, but as carriers of history of the society at large. Essentially listening to and collecting life-histories is an important component of sociological imagination, for it impels the researcher to
see multiple meeting points between individuals’ biography and public history (Mills 1959, p.2). Not merely that, but life-histories also help us to appreciate the meaning-making strategies of the people who creatively personalize what is a public experience.

Much of the qualitative observations and ethnographic research has involved extended field work approach, whereby the researchers had spent an extended period of time in the field to get a 380 degree understanding of the life circumstances of the marginalized people and understanding of their sense of deprivation and identity.

4.9. Mode of Analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative data collected in the form of life-histories, the researcher has adopted a two-stage reading of the life-histories to cull out the necessary passages that support the premises. Essentially it is agreed that the stories, though amenable to derivation of insights, are finished works of art in their own right. Thus, the researcher has largely read the stories for what they essentially are, namely, comprehensive account of human lives. A thorough reading of the stories with a passion, intensity and open mindedness, with which we normally approach any finished work of art, permitted the researcher to see and sense significantly overarching experiences and dimensions of poverty. Certain gross reductions, emotions, anguishs and triumphant demonstration of meaning-making, coping and humanity-affirming acts struck us very forcefully. The researcher enumerated the reflection on these stories in retrospect to look for the patterns of experiences and impact of poverty in individual stories.

However in the first stage of reading the researcher did not just look for dominant patterns or numerically preponderant instances only. Indeed doing so would have unjustly relegated one-off facts and acts found in the lifehistories as mere aberrations. Contrarily, the researcher recalled even those singular facts and acts and treated them as holding possibilities of even fulfilling quantitative criterion of numerical massiveness, if we had expanded the universe and range from which lifehistories were collected. From this the researcher moved on to the second stage, which involved several laps of reading the individual stories with the clear purpose of evidence-collection. In the process of completing this stage of reading, where stories were regarded as stories-as-data, the researcher subjected the stories to multi-layered reading. In other words, endowed with an understanding as to what aspects to look for
in each story, the researcher went back to reading nearly 200 stories many times over. To put it arithmetically, with nearly four themes to guide, namely, reduction of poor to labouring-bodies, institutional impoverishment, their dignity-affirming acts and poor’s understanding of redemption, all the 200 stories were read four times over. This was effectively equivalent to reading 800 stories.

This the researcher did principally to avoid missing out on one aspect of life-in-poverty, when looking for another aspect. However for all practical purposes the stories were read more times than even the figure cited above, since certain singular insights found in one story impelled the researcher to look for the same in several other stories. This, the researcher thought was best way to pay tribute to the intensity of lives lived by the poor in these stories. It was also to confirm our commitment to treat the stories-as-artworks in their own right.

Each lap of reading was done while meticulously recording the poverty experiences into elaborate matrices. These matrices eventually helped the researcher to map trends, cite evidences, and capture processes, thereby leading us to elaborate on them to ultimately constitute chapters presented in the following pages.

4.10. Limitations of the Study

i) The researcher faced many limitations in terms of gaining access to the inner world of the people-in-poverty. Since they are the most vexed people there was lots of distrust of strangers. Thus, NGO contacts were used to getting proximate with people-in-poverty. This meant that the study could be conducted with people who were willing to allow themselves for discussion. However, due care was taken to see that this did not affect the quality or expansiveness of data obtained for the study.

ii) The researcher also faced a limitation regarding the gender sensitivity sometimes. The issue of marginalisation of Dalit women and atrocities committed on them is a rather delicate one and needed careful handling. Although the researcher was very sensitive to this, the need for restraint was felt sometimes while drawing out information from the respondents. The researcher had to put the ethics of the field research before the objective of the information gathering and so they could not get a complete case study in a few cases.
iii) NGOs had been working with some of marginalized groups selected for the study. But some life-histories had to be collected from people not having been worked with by NGOs. Researcher had to work really very hard to build proper rapport before initiating any study. This meant enormous delay in data collection.

iv) The whole process has raised unnecessary expectations among the community people. Despite the best effort of the researcher to present the purpose of the research honestly such expectation had affected the study to some extent.

4.11. Chapter Plan

The Chapterisation Plan for this study is as follows:

Chapter -I : Introduction

Chapter - II : Review of Literature

Chapter - III : Theoretical Framework for Understanding Poverty and Marginalisation

Chapter - IV : Research Design and Methodology

Chapter - V : Forms and Institutional Contexts of Marginalisation

Chapter - VI : The Embodied Poverty and Human Agency

Chapter - VII : Suggestions and Conclusion