



WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SOUTH ASIA: A PARADIGM OF SUBORDINATION

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Abstract:

Entrepreneurship is the human intellect in action. It is such a highly valued characteristic of humankind that in the absence of it a few things new could have happened. Gender dimension of entrepreneurship, however, like any other discourses on socio-economic space of women-men continuum, manifests the same personal and collective dichotomies and hierarchies which the debate on development fails to address satisfactory.

This article discusses the issue of women entrepreneurship in an ideological frame and aims at the exposition of the reality of the social, economic and policy environment of the market economies like those of South Asia which not only influence and shape the change but also provide for the stability of the unequal and inequity oriented status quo.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship; Empowerment; Social Demand and Supply of Entrepreneurship; Social Autonomy; Class; Gender & South Asia.

Introduction:

Entrepreneurship is the most dynamic factor of production which does not only determines investment and output dimensions of an economy but also carves the formal contours, shape and structure of an economic system. It is significantly akin to talents of creativity and innovation lying deep within the attitudinal dispositions and functional behaviour of mental faculties. That is why it is highly related with distinct thinking and dreaming followed by actions to realize the dreams. It can also be described in terms of organizational competence of an individual to mobilize and channelize different resources, human and non-human, to actualize goals related with installation and running of enterprise, business and commercial profits via surplus value appropriation and establishment of an economic empire of ceiling-less heights. It is an unstoppable spirit of the mankind.

The word 'entrepreneur' comes from a thirteenth century French verb, *entreprendre*, meaning 'to do something' or 'to undertake'. Entrepreneurship in normal parlance is taken as the "capacity and willingness to develop, organize and manage a business venture along with any of its risks in order to make a profit" (Business Dictionary.com). For example opening a shop or installing a factory are acts of entrepreneurial capacity and competence. Hence it comes with inherent components of innovation and risk. An entrepreneur is the one "who organizes a business or develops an idea and takes responsibility for its operations, its profits and its risks" (Randy Duermyer: 2015).

Entrepreneurship is in the genes of a person and it is created by the environment also. Hence the formal and informal learning, influences, education and training etc. become immensely important. Entrepreneurial competence has much to do with social autonomy, political ethos and economic resource base apart from personal traits of an individual. It is this socio-economic reality which must be counted as a critical factor for any discourse on women entrepreneurship (Ikpe et al., 2011; Lazo, 1995) in any developing economy, more so in India.

The feminist approach basically highlights two environmental factors i.e. the women are subordinated and discriminated against because they are women and happen to women, and to be there in discriminatory subordination is not their choice but a chance factor. Martha Nussbaum (1999: 54), for example, laments that “[W]omen belong to culture. But they do not chose to be born into any particular culture”... “The contingencies of where one is born, whose power one afraid of, and what habits shape one’s daily thought are chance events that should not be permitted to play the role they now play in pervasively shaping women’s life chance. Beneath all these chance events are human powers, powers of choice and intelligent self-formation. Women in much of the world lack support for most central human function, and this denial of support is frequently caused by their being women.

Women Entrepreneurship:

Discourses on women entrepreneurship are intimately related to women empowerment, as they are the body persona of feminism, organizing a quest for equity, equality, liberty, emancipation, fullest personhood etc. for women across cultural and national frontiers. Federation of Indian Women Entrepreneurs (FIWE) has 15000 individual members and 28 member associations across India, with 60 percent being small scale enterprises, 5 percent large firms and 35 percent micro enterprises (homepage www.fiwe.org: 23.2.2015). applauds women entrepreneurs as the “women who have broken away from the beaten track where demands at home, family oppositions & cultural inhibitions, have led to lack of support, resources and opportunities, are now exploring new vistas of economic participation with all new vigor”...“to do something positive” (Agrawal, 2015). Viewed in this perspective women entrepreneurship is a corollary of feminism and gender emancipation movement. This is also a part of the feminist revolt against the established patriarchy and that all pervasive male biology that exclusively tends to extend itself to all social, economic and political spheres of life including physical control over the female persona. Women entrepreneurship is a powerful response process to end the ‘internalized subordination’ of women (Malhotra et al., 2002: 1).

Twenty first century is an era of cross frontier expansion of capitalist mode of production via global market-ism. Knowledge based industry and service sector have become the engines of growth. Outsourcing, home based corporate services, virtual markets, putting out production, export competition, wage-pressure, wide spread poverty, high rates of unemployment for educated and technical labour etc. are many dimensions of change in production and business structures. The so called ‘tertiarization’ of economies is also an indication of change in the direction of wind. There is a talk of ‘flattening’ of Philip’s curve in the wake of global integration of labour and product markets (Kuttner & Robinson, 2008), and “The reserve armies of labour cannot anymore be considered just ‘national’, they should instead be seen as part of a ‘global’ reserve army of labor” (Azad & Das, 2015: 42).

In the context of poor societies and economies, like South Asian ones, women entrepreneurship is considered as a dependable strategy for poverty alleviation and socio-economic inclusion of women and their families. Instead off remaining unemployed or majorly unemployed self-employment is a better alternative to get productively engaged, albeit at a survivalist footing. Instead of directly subsidized consumption assistance productive capacity building of the needy persons is a better policy option (UNIDO, 2003). It is widely held that “the emergence of entrepreneurship in agriculture and allied sectors can propel population into self-sustaining individuals, who in turn can catalyze the development of economy” (Kaur & Singh, 2013: 64).

According to UNIDO (2003: 12) “the policy and institutional framework needs to be conducive to encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives. Human capabilities and the right institutional framework are necessary conditions for entrepreneurship to flourish.” The need, therefore, is to focus on:

“Strengthening the public administration to make the regulatory and administrative environment more conducive for rural and women entrepreneurs.

“Human resource development for increased competitive entrepreneurship, technology absorbing capacities and women’s control over asset management.

“Development of the policy advocacy and the collective self-help capacities of rural and women entrepreneurs.” (ibid: 12).

Afrin et al (2008: 169) saw social barriers and other inhibitions compelling women to sit idle at home instead of going to work outside. Hence they supposed women entrepreneurship as a positive step for self-help, self-employment, home business and so on. While applauding the micro credit assistance for rural women borrowers in helping them to ‘survive’ and learn financial, managerial and group or team skills they opined that “financial management skills and group identity have significant relationship with the development of rural women enterprise in Bangladesh” (ibid:169). However women enterprises being mainly home based are typically found engaged in contracted works with low levels of earning. (Abbas, 2012).

The emergence of women entrepreneurship in a society depends mainly on economic, social, religious, cultural and psychological factors (Habib et al., 2005). To develop rural entrepreneurship in a developing country like Bangladesh main activities such as stimulatory, supporting and sustaining activities are beneficially required (Rahman, 1999; Katz, 1991).

Women Empowerment:

The idea of power is at the root of the term empowerment. The “concept of empowerment has been tied to the range of activities undertaken by and for women in different areas” (Anonuevo, 1995: 4). Feminist experiences are culture and place specific existential realities and to have a grasp of the diversities “one should not gloss over the differences of the conditions of women as a result of specific economic, political or socio-cultural factors” (ibid:4). Female empowerment is best captured by and revolves around Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Gender Development Index (GDI), the two broad indicators of gender empowerment and equality (HDR: 1995). Empowerment is a long term process of giving power to those who have historically been deprived of it. It is about the change in favor of those who exercised little control over their lives and other factors. It is to give them control over resources like financial, physical and human, and control over ideology as beliefs, values and attitudes (Sen, 1998).

Supply and Social Demand for Entrepreneurship:

Economic theory presupposes that like any other factor of production (i.e. land, labour and capital) the supply of entrepreneurship is also price sensitive, and determined in a market framework. That is to say that the supply of entrepreneurship is a positive function of its price that is the risk and uncertainty adjusted profit, termed as productivity equivalent, while the demand for entrepreneurial services will be inversely related to its price. Of course, the proposition assumes a perfect competition market as well as a *ceteris paribus* constraint. In terms of Marshallian cross the economic model of entrepreneurship can be described by the help of figure 1, ahead.

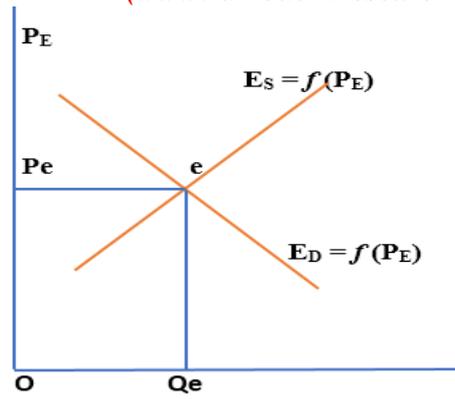


Figure 1: Entrepreneurship Market

The diagram depicts the theoretical argument of neo-liberal economic consensus that, other things remaining the same, supply of and demand for entrepreneurship will be in equilibrium at e where the two schedules meet each other. The intersection e determines that Q_e will be the equilibrium quantity of entrepreneurial labour supplied and demanded at P_e price level. This paradigm, which in itself is embedded in market mechanism, predicts that market behaviour is a determinant of amount of entrepreneurial resources with the expansion in investment and output opportunities. As the markets expand so should the quantum of enterprising talent. Hence with rising and sustainably high rates of economic growth the volume of entrepreneurship pool, to take the argument to a logical conclusion, must rise at a higher or at least at a growth corresponding pace.

However, there is a sharp contradiction between the theoretical argument and the practical reality with respect to quantum of entrepreneurial action in India, especially in the context of high growth scenario, market system and highly skilled large pool of young talent. We may look for the possible answers in the shape and slope of entrepreneurial supply and demand schedules. What we did in figure 1 above was the conveniently drawn forms of these curves. By virtue of its very nature entrepreneurship of high order cannot be found abundantly distributed in any society. Associated risks, resource requirement, socioeconomic conditions and policy environment also have control over entrepreneurial supply. If we take into account the inflexibility and inelasticity of entrepreneurial supply the above shown diagram can be revised as figure 2, ahead.

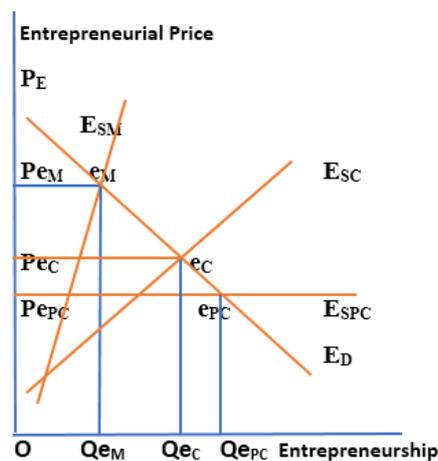


Figure 2: Supply of Entrepreneurship

We have factored in the rigidity inherent in entrepreneurial supply curve which takes an inexplicably inelastic form. Supply of entrepreneurship in a less competitive or non-competitive market, E_{SM} curve, takes a steeper form characteristic of conspicuous presence of opportunity rents in the entrepreneurial markets and continuing in the long run. It means higher cost of output to the society coupled with lower output and reduced welfare level. To say in other words, the established business flourishes by virtue of non-competitive market structure in entrepreneurship segment. But their gain, which is in excess of normal wages and profits, is the loss of the society in general. Had the supply curve of entrepreneurship been E_{SPC} (perfectly competitive entrepreneurial supply) instead of E_{SM} (monopolistic entrepreneurial supply) the price to society would be P_{PC} and the availability at Q_{PC} which imply a higher level of output, at a lower costs. In terms of welfare it translates into positive gain by reduced price and increased output availability.

Whatever be the reasons for it but a severe implication of inelastic supply curve of entrepreneurship E_{SM} translates into sustained presence of deep inequality and wide spread poverty and near poverty of the masses. It is in this context of economic injustice and inequity that the availability and the supply of entrepreneurs assume vital significance and policy imperatives.

That the realized supply of entrepreneurship is rigid and inelastic for men and women populations is self-evident from the aggregates of educated and non-educated unemployment, dominance of wage-labour and other dependent labour for both the males and females. In case of women and girls, low rate of work force participation and high rate of unemployment also indicate towards a more acute deficit of women entrepreneurship in India.

Policy Environment:

Business environment plays a greater role in the exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities by women entrepreneurs in that it poses a challenge that is largely out of control of women entrepreneurs (Ikpe et al., 2011) in a country. Despite the possession of all personal attribute for exploitation of entrepreneurial options the environmental constraints like lack of credit and societal discrimination may hinder the enterprising spirit of women in developing countries (Shastri and Sinha, 2010). Instead of policy texts, it is more important to see where the policy thrust is in action. While commenting on *business and regulatory environment for women and rural entrepreneurs UNIDO (2003: 13) argued that:*

“Compliance with complex regulatory requirements and dealing with bureaucratic webs are relatively more expensive for rural entrepreneurs than for urban and larger enterprises. Cumbersome and centralized bureaucracies often lead to lengthy licensing processes and costly operations of rural businesses. They may thus discourage entrepreneurial activity. The public administration in rural areas has relatively weak capacities to implement policies and to maintain conducive framework conditions for entrepreneurial initiatives. The action of local authorities is often based on a vague understanding of what to regulate and how to regulate. It can result in arbitrary exercise of regulations.

“Rural and women entrepreneurs’ understanding of regulations as well as their capacity to identify unjustified application of the regulations are weak. Institutions and agents to arbitrate disputes are scarce in rural areas. For women entrepreneurs, the constraints are often exacerbated by laws and regulations that explicitly discriminate against them. Furthermore, the gender-sensitivity of

many officials in rural areas tends to be more heavily influenced by the local tradition than in urban areas”.

Actualization of entrepreneurial behavior is subject to multiple dependencies existing in economic, social, political and policy environments (Afrin et al., 2008). Therefore, manifestation of women entrepreneurship (E_w) in Indian reality can, in brief, be represented by the following identity:

$$E_w \equiv f[(T \equiv T_1 \times T_2) \times (SA \times ERB \times PE) \dots \times (U)]$$

Where, by T is meant the product of aggregates of personal traits and attributes, T_1 represents born entrepreneurial traits; T_2 stands for acquired traits; and SA, ERB, and PE refer to social autonomy, economic resource base and policy environment respectively; while U denotes all unexplained variables. Herein incidence of women entrepreneurship is supposed to be directly related with social autonomy and resource base of women, and the overall policy environment as well as with born and acquired set of entrepreneurial traits of being creative, innovative, enterprising and risk taking. Social autonomy is taken as the freedom of making and actualizing a decision by a female without social fear and frustration. Resource base refers to the exercisable ownership and control over the financial and instrumental means of production. Terms T_1 and T_2 are self-explanatory and emphasise the role of both hereditary and ecological factors. Nonetheless it has to be kept in consideration that born qualities, too, need a nourishing and nutritional environment to grow and fructify. Acquired traits represent totality of living ecology and human development process, especially, relating to girls and women.

It is a matter of truth that great entrepreneurial narrations of success emerge and thrive in the impugned context. For example Apollo Hospital Group is successfully run by the sister quadruple; Ms. Swati Piramal leads her parents (Nicholas Piramal, Piramal Enterprise) business; Vinita Gupta, Shaina Chauhan, Shobhana Bharatiya, and Vinita Bali are enterprising leaders of their concerns namely and respectively, Lupin, Parley Group, Hindustan Times and Britannia. Beautician Shahnaz Hussein is class apart. She has raised a whole industry at organized level. Middle class women have got lots of opportunity in beauty parlour, boutique, private tuition, hobby and yoga classes, insurance and mutual fund business, supply chain distribution etc. Doctors, health care specialists, chartered accountants, outsourcing experts etc. also make a successful category of women entrepreneurs. Self-help groups, home-business, primary processing units, rural schooling etc. exist in large numbers and provide opportunities for exemplary performance of one's acumen.

Nevertheless, it is also a fact, probably a bigger fact, of life of South Asian and other third world economies in particular (and the developed world as well without exception) that the female entrepreneurship in high echelons of corporate and big business is less typical of truly independent character and more representative of proxy women entrepreneurship, via the institution of family bourgeois and other networks. Daughters and wives of big business houses in India are not really free entrepreneurs on their own. Most probably they are 'proxies' and substitutes of different orders. To assign parallels they are as akin to women Panchayati Raj representatives as their fathers and husbands are akin to *Pradhan pitas* and *Pradhan patis*! This is a phenomena which supports our hypothesis of 'under root' women entrepreneurship, and calls for real in place of nominal.

Given the scenario, however, the need of our times is to create a de-gendered entrepreneurship environment, a co-effort coupled with a humanitarian envisioning,

where social space does not get overpowered by economic chauvinism in the fashion of male chauvinism over female's world.

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