

Learning and Rethinking Language through Gendered Experiences

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

Keywords : action research, gendered experience, language, space

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