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Should Participatory Research be taught in a University?

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*Keynote address delivered at a seminar on
"Participatory Research Methods" organized by PRIA along with
Mysore University at Mysore on 23rd September 2003.*

Routes

I am honoured to be here this morning. The University of Mysore has a very long tradition of significant political work, academic work, intellectual work going back to nearly 100 years. All of you have been involved in teaching and research in various faculties in the University. Some of you are practicing development in the field. I am grateful to you Prof. Indira, Prof. Dongre and your team for providing us an opportunity to share what has come to be known as Participatory Research. It is not often that we talk about Participatory Research. It is more often we practice Participatory Research, so when this opportunity came about to talk about Participatory Research, in this audience of learned practitioners, researchers, teachers of research, professors of research, I am not sure where to begin. In addition, the task of inaugurating a workshop at this time has been placed on my shoulders but I guess Dr. Indira has already inaugurated the workshop.

In the tradition of Participatory Research, it will be in place for me very to tell you very quickly where I am coming from because that will help you to understand my views, my perspectives. I come from an area known as Kanpur, Lucknow and Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. I grew-up in a family of generations of teachers. I grew-up after independence, that will give you an idea of my age. My first professional degree is in Electronics Engineering from IIT Kanpur and my second professional degree in Management from IIM Calcutta, and I taught at IIM, Calcutta for a while before I went to do my PhD in Organisational Behaviour in US. I came back during the period of emergency (1975-77) to understand why India continued to have rural poverty. And in the course of pursuing my fieldwork for PhD, as all PhDs would require, for the first time, I encountered rural reality in southern Rajasthan working with tribals of that region through an intermediary voluntary organisation called Seva Mandir. It was that experience which had a profound impact on my understanding of research, my understanding of knowledge and its use in promoting a just and humanitarian society. Since then, I have been predominantly a practitioner and PRIA as a voluntary

organisation, inspired by the philosophy of Participatory Research, began 22 years ago. And that is where most of my professional career has been spent. This introduction is not by view of the honors I received and the accomplishment I have made, but to situate my comments on the meaning and possibility of Participatory Research in contemporary context.

It may be unnecessary in this audience, but let me trace my understanding of the history and evolution of research in social sciences. Research is a systematic process of understanding reality. Research is expected to produce new knowledge arising out of this systematic process of understanding reality. In today's context, the output of research is seen in the kind of printed book or document. Knowledge in today's context is equated with printed word, preferably in a book or internationally referenced journal. How did we get there? How did we reach this stage? If I briefly look at the history of sciences, starting point is in the realm of natural sciences. Natural sciences began to get systematized as sciences around the time of industrial revolution in Europe. Natural sciences had already acquired a status, a methodological clarity and its process of certification of new researchers when the rise of social sciences began nearly 150 years ago in their contemporary form.

History

In the early years, social sciences had to struggle to justify being science. Researchers involved in pursuit of Physics, Chemistry, Medicine began to challenge those who were calling themselves 'Sciences' studying social phenomena. In order to, therefore, retain the status of science, early promoters of social science, nearly 100 years ago or more, began to adopt both the norms and the tools of natural sciences. In order to compete with natural sciences, in order to justify the status of social sciences, early researchers pursuing the study of social phenomenon in a systematic manner nearly 100 years ago, began to adopt a 'scientific character'.

In this, they followed two cardinal principles which had by then already been enshrined in the pursuit of natural sciences.

The first principle was the principle of ensuring rigour, removing bias and therefore, creating an objective basis of study of social phenomena as if you are studying molecules and atoms. In order for social science research to acquire the rigour, it acquired, knowingly perhaps unknowingly, wittingly perhaps unwittingly, the mantle of being objective and neutral. In pursuit of objectivity, social science research focused on empirically produced evidence. Empiricism as we all know comprises of two activities. One is observation and collection of data and another is analysis and interpretation of data. Empiricist approach to social science demanded that the tools of analysis be logical and rational. It was meant to demonstrate that one set of data about social reality, when interpreted by two different researchers, would yield 'identical' results. This was the basis on which natural sciences had acquired their status 200 years ago where similar experiments performed in Germany could be repeated under similar circumstances in Ireland and identical results could be found and reported in scientific journals.

As social sciences began to pursue this approach of objective, neutral, logical and rational empiricism, over the decades they got organized in thematic or sectoral disciplines which we all belong to these days -- Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Social Psychology, Economics, Political Science, etc. These discipline-based organisations of pursuit of social science over the decades also began to be become 'method-bound'. So in Sociology, survey methods was promoted; in social psychology and psychology, experimental research was carried out. Participants observation became an important method in pursuit of Anthropology. As disciplines, emerged, they created partial and limited approaches to the study of social phenomena. As disciplines became method-bound, they also approached the study of that partial social phenomenon within the limits of those methods.

Over the last five decades, in particular, after the Second World War, social science research has also become an enterprise. This research enterprise has systems and procedures of regulating, and controlling and legitimizing “acceptable” research, of training future researchers, of certifying who can do research and who cannot, and of defining appropriate methods of communicating new knowledge, largely through publishing in the form of books or disciplinary referenced journals. Attendances in Conferences, promotions in academia and scholarship for research became built in incentives for pursuit of the research enterprise as we have come to recognize over the last five decades. This is known to all. I am repeating it here largely to point out that in this rise of research enterprise, which is addressing systematic study of social reality, there are certain gaps that have either being ignored or in adequately addressed.

Gaps in Social Science Research

I want to start with the epistemological gap. Epistemology is about the science of knowing. How do we know we know? As you can see in the evolution of social sciences following the route established by the natural sciences, study of social phenomena became confined to logical and rational analysis of observable facts. There are two assumptions in the statement that I just made -- logical and rational analysis of observable facts.

The first assumption is that we can only study that phenomenon which we can observe. The second assumption is that we can produce a logical and rational analysis of those observable facts. What is then the problematic in this approach to social science research? The first problematic is that “facts” about social reality depend on the process of observation. They do not exist independent of observation; depending on what colour of glasses we use to observe reality, we will observe some facts or not observe some others. This morning coming to this Conference centre, one of us in the car observed the new construction in Mysore; another one in the car observed continuation

of slums and continuing poverty in Mysore. Same journey, same car, two observers, two different "facts". Therefore, the epistemological critique of social science research began to question that observation of facts could not be argued to be an objective exercise, irrespective of the different frame and the value system of the observer. Because of the framework and the value system of the observer, it selectively observes so-called 'facts' about any given social reality.

The second aspect of this epistemological critique is that logical and rational analysis is the only way to generate knowledge from facts. This epistemological principle ignores two other natural human principles of producing knowledge. One which has come to be known as 'action as the basis of knowledge'. And I am sure that you are aware of a very large discipline that has emerged in the last 50 years called 'Action Research'. You act on a given reality in order to learn about that reality. Modern teaching of research methodology in many management disciplines talks about action research as a method of analyzing reality in organisations and institutions. So action as a legitimate mode of knowing got ignored by the epistemological domain that was established by the logical, rational approach. Logical, rational approach relied essentially on 'thinking' as the mode of knowing while action-research began to argue for action as a mode of knowing.

There is a third dimension to the epistemology-- a dimension, which has been most profoundly talked about by phenomenologists -- a discipline that grew out of a combination of social science pursuits. Phenomenologists argue that 'feelings', 'emotions' as a way of knowing are equally legitimate sources of data and analysis of a social reality. Phenomenologists were supported in this by those who study and build new knowledge of social reality through pursuits like art and culture, through music, through poetry, through drama. It is not uncommon in our tradition to use music, poetry and stories as basis of knowledge about the society of that period. Therefore, the epistemological gap that social science research created by blindly following the logical,

rational empiricist paradigm of natural sciences resulted in squeezing out of other two legitimate modes of knowing practiced as human phenomenon throughout history -- one where action is a basis of knowing and another where feelings is a basis of knowing. Some marginal work by those who pursue action-research gave some legitimacy to the former and phenomenologists gave legitimacy to the latter. Now this is the first gap that came about in the social science research.

The second type of gap that I want to briefly illuminate is what I am calling methodological gap. As disciplinary divisions in pursuit of understanding social reality occurred in various disciplines like sociology, psychology, social psychology, economics, political science, etc., each discipline came to be associated with a particular method. Not only the framework to pursue the study of social reality but also methodological tools available to pursue that study became increasingly discipline defined and bound. Debates occurred about the relevance of quantitative methods as well as qualitative. Debates also occurred whether inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of social phenomena should be encouraged. You are, I am sure, quiet familiar with the debates and may have even participated in them.

The question of methods is to link it to the modes of knowing, and that which legitimized knowledge. Simply stated, if knowledge is what is produced through use of empirical evidence collected by professionally trained researchers and communicated in printed word, if that was all knowledge was all about then how do we explain knowledge gained through practice. A piece of knowledge, which till very recently was ignored, and I will give you two examples. Ecological knowledge of good agriculture and forestry practice gained over centuries and generations of practical work by ordinary farmers and tribals was ignored still ecological debate nationally and internationally gained some visibility 15-20 years ago. Now it is acknowledged practice even in the forestry department that you cannot rely only monoculture on, you cannot rely on chemical fertilizers only. What was happening in Punjab, Haryana, and

Western Uttar Pradesh in the 'green' agriculture belts is the same phenomenon of declining yields per hectare. What has happened to monoculture transplantations is the declining carrying capacity of the soil and indiscriminate consumption of water resource. This ecological wisdom, this ecological knowledge, these principles of practice were (still very recently, till 20 years ago, rejected as "unscientific". Now they are at least being acknowledge, if not followed. Another arena is the rise and growth of health care medicine in contemporary world. Herbal medicine and use of 'health' foods was practiced its knowledge was evolved over generations and applied for healing purposes, for curing purposes. A knowledge that systematically got ignored, decimated, unfounded, and labeled as 'unscientific' 100 years ago by the arrogance of Allopathy, has come back even in those societies where Allopathy as a medical science reached its pinnacle 50 years ago. It takes a pharmaceutical firm these days to market garlic pills or turmeric leave or coconut oil.

If knowledge was limited to that product which is captured in the printed word, produced through empirical observation and analysis of professionally trained and certified researchers, if that was all knowledge was all about, these two aberrations from ecology and health could not be explained. And their contemporary pursuit by the same disciplines of rigorous research could not be explained. So what I am pointing out to you is the presence of a parallel stream of knowledge in our society, perhaps in all societies which was knowledge developed through practice, through experience, communicated and transferred through oral traditions, without necessarily being captured in printed word. Popular knowledge, as it came to be called, was the basis of practice in many aspects of human endeavor which shaped social reality.

The second element of methodological gap that I want to bring to your notice is what has come to be called the expansion of tools of gathering and analyzing data. If each discipline has a particular method which becomes the only way of approaching reality, it limits the kind of information we can get and therefore, the kinds of interpretations of

reality we can make. Over the years, therefore, quantitative methods of data collection have been supplemented with qualitative. It is no longer a debate between quantitative or qualitative, it is perhaps increasingly quantitative and qualitative. Over the years, experiential ways of communicating knowledge, information, elements of data have been tried and accepted. When women's movement began to gain ground, they had a slogan, this slogan I am sure all of you are familiar with "personal is political". What was the essence of this slogan? The essence of the slogan was that if women are experiencing domestic violence at home, that area of investigation, of study is legitimate, and not out of bounds. Till very recently, even courts could not enter that arena of study because it was called 'family' domain. Most early findings of domestic violence came through methods which enabled women to "enact" their experience -- either role-plays or popular songs or stories or even art. The identification of phenomenon for study happened when more emotive, feeling based methods of data were utilized. There is now a whole discipline of feminist research which not only questions theoretical constructs but also the methodological aspects of creating new knowledge about phenomena that relate to women's reality. Till very recently, similar point has come out in relation to children's reality. Historically, children's reality was understood only from the eyes of their parents and adults. But as examples of abuse of children came about, even the research agenda for these things began to take shape when children used emotive, expressive methods of communicating what they were going through. The focus group discussion, a questionnaire survey, would not have yielded data that such a problem did exist. So the methodological gap that today faces social science research derives from method boundness in collecting data that has come to be associated with each of the disciplines. So perhaps we could be exploring how multiple methods of gaining information could be developed, practiced and taught.

The last and perhaps the most profound critique of dominant social science research is what I call political gap. As I mentioned in my brief enumeration of the history of evolution of modern social science research, as social science research began to ape and

blindly follow the norms and methods of natural sciences, it perhaps began to assume that there was only one truth in social reality, waiting to be discovered. And as all of you know by experience, and it has been adequately analyzed and reported, no social reality has one absolute truth. All truth is relative to the condition of that reality, but also relative to the researcher's own frameworks and methods.

If we accept these trends then social science research produces new knowledge which serves some interest or the other. It is not useful in the way it projects new knowledge. Most of the time, social science research and researchers accept their own neutrality and perhaps pretend that they are developing absolute truth, but the truth. But there is an underlying political economy of knowledge production and use. Political economy asks the question: whose interests are likely to be served by that new knowledge? Who finances and controls the use of the new knowledge? How decisions about what to study and how to study are made? This set of questions, which I am calling the political economy of knowledge production and knowledge utilization, have been with us as researchers for long time. These are not new questions, but these are questions which are uncomfortable questions. These questions suggest to us that if social science research believes that it is producing absolute truth then it is likely to serve the interest of status quo.

The social science research is pursued on the basis of what funding is available for what type of research questions. It willingly and unwillingly served the interests represented by those funding sources. Social science research is only carried out because the 'kings and rulers' and political elites nationally or internationally believe that something is worth studying, then it will serve their interests of 'controlling and maintaining the status-quo.

In our context, in our history, this is not new. Brahmanical order centuries ago was based on the premise that some were qualified to produce and interpret knowledge in a

language which only some could use. Brahmanical order created not only a distinction between intellectual and manual labour but also placed it on a value scale that intellectual labour was superior to manual labour, that only some human beings are actually endowed with the faculty for intellectual labour. This framework which has been in recent times questioned by dalit scholars, by those who are working for the emancipation of scheduled castes, just as feminist research challenge the notion that women's knowledge was not legitimate, knowledge even if it was expressed through stories, and songs and poems. Therefore, the political question in today's context is: does new knowledge serve the needs of those who are have-nots? Does new knowledge contributes to social change and transformation or only maintenance and perpetuation of status quo?

Participatory Research

These three sets of issues, the epistemological question which basically said, how do we know? The methodological questions, which focused on the kinds of tools available for data collections, and the political questions, have been the bases for describing in a tentative and practical way what began to be called participatory research when first time the label was used in 1976- 1977. What did participatory research imply in its early formulations? It basically said, don't ignore popular knowledge; do not abandon knowledge generated through practice; do not negate emotions and actions as modes of knowing; develop tools, methods which could generate data in a research process where action and feelings are treated as legitimate modes of knowing, legitimate epistemological bases. Do take the new knowledge to those from whom we are collecting information. Can we share the findings with the so-called "objects" of our research? Do they have even a right to know, the possibility to know, what we have discovered after we have gathered data from them? In participatory research, it is possible to have multiple uses of the same research enterprise -- a use that researcher would publish an article and another use that the community makes, from where the data was gathered -- by using new knowledge to integrate in their own action for

improving their situation. Could that use of knowledge which community makes be given some legitimacy, some importance and not just the printed word which the researchers use for communicating new knowledge?

This was the beginning of participatory research and in this beginning, various disciplines came about -- educationists, adult educators, social work people, sociologists, architects, management people, economists, foresters, community organizers, literacy workers, women organizers, gender studies, ecological studies primary health care -- a lot of people drawn from a variety of sectoral or academic disciplines began to experiment with these. There was a moment in mid 1980's, largely led by British initiative, Dr. Robert Chambers came to India and experimented with lot of tools which began to be known as PRA (Participatory Rapid Appraisal) methods; more recently they are called PLA methods. In mid 1990's, Dr. Robert Chambers who was promoting PRA across the world in the previous 5-6 years went to Indonesia and he came across the reality which forced him to review his works. The same PRA methods which he had evolved were being used by Indonesian military to suppress local initiatives by the people; he then realized, going back to the political aspects that Participatory Research was raising in 1976-77, that methods, tools of data collection, per se are not the answer. But where you frame those methods? Where you use those methods? Where you paste those methods which are important? So one of his recent books, I like the title of the book, the subject matter is more or less what I described to you "whose reality counts, who counts reality"?

For a long period of time there have been three types of social science research. Even in our academia and I am sure all of you are familiar with it, may even be involved in it. The first and the most dominant form is research on people..... research on institutions, research on others, is the dominant one. The reality is treated as objective, the researcher is in pursuit of new knowledge, those who provide information are objects and, therefore, the researcher completes the work, types the report, publishes,

gets reward in the form of a degree or promotion and goes on. The second, which is a partial modification on this is called research for the people. And this is what PRA methods in the early period became - a whole bunch of outsiders came, got people involved in collecting data, took the data back, analysed it outside the reality and prescribed solutions. It had an element of paternalism, it had an element of disbelief in the ability of local people to analyse their own reality and it was mostly driven by contract research which had been increasingly funded by international development enterprise since mid 1980s. What participatory research began to say and continues to say is, can we bring in an element of research with people. While we are doing research for them, preferably not research on them, can we also do research with them? Participatory research has been saying, continues to say and demand that our research be with people, where multiple outcomes of new knowledge can be seen as legitimate, not just production of a new book or write-up but also sharing that new knowledge with those from where data has been gathered so that they could use it for their own actions. An element of research with people, can it include the agenda of the local people they may feel relevant? Can it include their issues for analysis? Subaltem studies began to do it 20 years ago. But Subaltem study only included the framework. The methods and tools remained in the hands of professional researchers. So can social science research enterprise in our university and academic centers encourage research that creatively amends itself so that there is a component of research with people?