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The Story of PRIA : An Experiment in Participatory Action Research

During the first International Forum on Participatory Research held in April 1980 in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, I had met with Orlando Fals-Borda and Myles Horton. It was about a decade ago that I had read about Action Research as a student of management; it was about five years ago, as I struggled with my Doctoral dissertation data-collection in rural India that I had learnt about Participatory Research through Budd Hall and Paolo Freire. The regional networks of Participatory Research, with support from the International Council for Adult Education, had begun to have a dynamic of their own. Ljubljana was our first real encounter at international levels.

My own practice in India at that time focused on building participatory educational opportunities for trade union organizers, rural animators, literacy instructors and youth leaders of indigenous communities in India. I had begun to feel that my experiments with Participatory Research, and its applications in social empowerment, were getting stunted because of absence of a conducive institutional framework. I made a visit to Highlander Centre in Tennessee later that year (1980), and became friends with John Gaventa and Juliet Merrifield working with Myles. Dave Brown had been my Guru during the doctoral days, and had just then returned to Boston after spending a year with us in India.

Along with four other colleagues in India, I started PRIA whose mission, then and now, is to promote the practice of Participatory Research as a contribution to knowledge-building and social transformation. Lofty as these ideals were, I really did not know how to proceed and what to do. But it was clear to me that I would use knowledge as vehicle for empowerment. Thus PRIA began to emerge as an epistemological intervention, in generating "knowledge from below". During 1981, the Government of India was bringing in a new legislation to regulate access to forests, thereby limiting the rights of forest-dwellers. This policy was based on the dominant "knowledge" that forests were being destroyed by forest-dwellers; this was the evidence produced by forest officials. PRIA launched a series of studies in forest areas, using tree-counts by local people and stories of deforestation from village elders, to produce countervailing knowledge that challenged the dominant views.

Likewise, through my interactions with workers at the shop floor, we discovered that occupational health was being mystified by managers to deny preventive measures. The "experts" had diagnosed that smoking and poor living conditions of textile workers were causing lung diseases, not cotton dust. Using diagnostic tools and methods prescribed by ILO, PRIA began to generate "subaltern knowledge" of patterns of shopfloor ill-health which could not be merely explained without reference to work history of those workers. This knowledge then became accessible to the workers' organisations to struggle for prevention of occupational illness. Later, implementation of legislations and sensitization of government inspectors and medical doctors was undertaken by PRIA.

Over these 25 years, PRIA pursued a number of initiatives rooted in the perspective of "Knowledge is Power". Women's livelihood, access to land and forests, literacy and primary education, water and sanitation----a number of developmental problematiques

were intervened upon by PRIA from the vantage point of inquiry-for-action---an inquiry that engaged as actors the very people whose agenda was to be addressed. This methodology evolved into socio-political discourse in the realm of autonomous space for civil society; the methodological tools got applied to planning and monitoring, education and training; many other protagonists of social transformation began to utilize “subaltern knowledge” strategies in their own interventions.

Changing realities at local and global levels expanded the repertoire of PRIA’s interventions---from reforming local governance to democratizing global governance. Citizen participation, based on informed and indigenous knowledge, remained the defining characteristics of PRIA. It gained a great deal in its global partnerships---learning and acting together. Two such enduring partnerships need explicit recognition---with International Council for Adult Education(ICAIE) during the formative years in the 1980’s; and with Institute of Development Research (IDR) during the teenage of 1990’s.

This evolution of PRIA over the quarter century can be seen as an experiment in Participatory Research---an institutional innovation and growth which are built upon action-reflection-action premises, with support from those stakeholders which matter to PRIA. Learning, knowledge and action are intricately linked in PRIA’s soul today. That soul today has many different manifestations; I am one of those living it with PRIA since its inception. My practice and PRIA’s perspectives have been mutually reinforcing my perspectives and PRIA’s practices.

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