

X/10
Dubshidur

Notes on Participatory Research Methodology for Forest Studies

1. These notes are intended to provide a broad guideline for conducting studies on Forest in different states by different institutions. These are to be discussed in the Research-cum-Organising Committee on September 24 and then finalised. It was agreed on July 30 meeting that an attempt should be made to use, as far as possible, a common framework and methodology in all these studies.
2. The methodology of participatory research (PR) is intended to provide a non-academic, action-oriented and authentic effort to develop an alternative data-base on the experiences of poor forest dwellers. So, PR is an attempt to create an authentic, real and alternate documentation of the impact of existing Forest legislation and Administration on common people living in forest areas. This will provide a basis, other than government's data, for arguing for a new Forest policy.
3. Obviously, such a data-base and documentation is not possible without involving the people themselves. This involvement of people in these studies is not just a procedural requirement but also ideological. The manner of carrying out these studies should also facilitate further mobilisation of forest dwellers. Thus this research should be used as a means to make forest dwellers, their activists and organisations to be more capable and confident of carrying out their struggles on a continued basis.
4. As a starting point, in each state or region, local organisation(s) of forest-dwellers or activist group(s) working with forest-dwellers be invited to be partners in the study. These organisation(s) should then be the mainstay of carrying out data-collection, analysis and reporting in the study.
5. As a first step, the concrete focus in that state or region be developed in active discussion and jointly with this group(s) or organisation(s). Though the broad focus and contents of study are outlined their exact manifestation will still need to be determined in each area.
6. At this stage, it may also be useful to invite a few local researchers, from institutes/universities in the area. They may get involved in the study and thus make valuable contributions. Even if such individuals are not presently involved in similar questions their involvement in the study could radicalise them and provide long term basis for support in the area.
7. The partner organisation(s)/group(s)/individual(s) should identify several local activists for potential activists(s) who could be involved in data-collection and analysis. Their number will depend on coverage, say one from each village. These persons could be students, activists in local movements, school teachers etc. They are obviously not 'professional' researchers, but even if they are just literate, it will be alright.
8. The methods of data-collection could then be devised in consultation with this large group. Methods could include simple questionnaires, individual or group interviews, field visits, study camps, records analysis, etc. One has to be creative in developing a wide range of methods. The methods should be such that they promote the involvement of the largest number of forest-dwellers in data-collection.

9. The most crucial stage of data-analysis should be carried out in such a way that activists and forest-dwellers are encouraged to develop their own analysis. Professionally trained researchers can also develop their independent analysis initially, but this should be shared with the activists and forest-dwellers. Thus interaction of several analyses should be promoted to bring out diverse positions and enhanced awareness.
10. Reporting of research findings should be in several forms. One is obviously a written form meant for a common set of studies, intended for influencing government policy-makers. Other forms should be popular ones - like charts, graphs, local language pamphlets, audio-visuals, etc. They can be used to promote further discussion and dialogue in the area among forest-dwellers, activists, local organisations and groups. The findings should also be actively shared with local research institutes and universities to mobilise more students and researchers to join the struggle.
11. Finally, the findings from other regions/states should be summarised and fed back to activists and forest dwellers of that region so as to enhance their awareness of experiences in other areas, develop a national perspective and common bonds of struggles.

It is the incorporation of all these elements that will make this study most valuable. Clearly, what is outlined above is not merely a rigid sequence; it may be cyclical and iterative such that several cycles of data-collection, analysis and reporting are carried out within the phase of the study. Moreover, suggestions of PR made here are based on evolving concepts and practice. Hence it may be equally useful to keep notes of and document, in detail, the methodology used such that these could be compared from other regions and lessons drawn for its future usage in similar issues and dissimilar settings.

Best of luck!

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Rajesh Tandon

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