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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH, EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE
AND
EMPOWERMENT OF ADULTS

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INTRODUCTION

The last three decades have seen an increasingly diverse range of models and theories of social change. The implementation of these models in developing countries like India have brought mixed results. While some improvements for example, in overall agricultural production has taken place, the situation of more than half the rural population has not improved, if not worsened. Starting from community development in the 50s as the basic programme for changing the situation in rural India, we now have people-centred models of development. These models emphasise the principle of people's participation in developing themselves.

This concept of people's participation in development has gained currency in the last 10 years. Various definitions and meanings are attached to people's participation. It is perhaps useful to clarify, at the very outset, that people's participation in this paper is seen both as a means as well as an end in itself (- (Fernandes, 1981). Social change, therefore, is that process where people actively define their desires goals and collectively work towards them. It also assumes that present society in a country like India comprises of a large mass of 'have-nots' who have so far been left out from this process of social change. These are landless labourers and marginal farmers, tribals and Harijans, women, workers in the unorganised sectors, urban slum-dwellers, etc. These persons are generally characterized by lower tends of education, consciousness and organization, besides a very weak economic base (Tandon and Brown, 1981).

Thus social change implies collective and organised efforts on the part of these 'have-nots' to transform their situation in their common interests. It is only through an organised, informed and collective action that the 'have-nots' can influence the direction of social change in their common benefit.

Viewed in this way, the role of education in promoting social change becomes critical. In particular, the role of adult and

non-formal education acquires major significance in the pursuit of this model of social change. Educational process in informing, mobilising and organizing the 'have-nots' has been demonstrably effective (Tandon, 1983).

In this paper, this role of adult and non-formal education is examined and contribution of Participatory Research in this educational process is elaborated. The paper also presents some recent illustrations of use of Participatory Research as an educational process in India. In the end, some implications of this approach are briefly enumerated.

Knowledge as Power

In the early period of this century, bulk of the control exercised by the 'haves' over the 'have-nots' was a direct one. The 'haves' controlled land and other resources and the 'have-nots' were landless. They were able to manipulate the 'have-nots' largely because they exercised this direct power which many a times was reinforced with physical force. While this form of control still continues in a country like India, a more subtle form of control has also emerged since world war ^{II} ~~two~~. This is the form of control that is exercised through knowledge.

Knowledge has increasingly become a major source of power and control. The very process of thinking and valuing of the ordinary people is being indirectly influenced through the control and use of knowledge (Gaventa, 1980). This also allows for indirect and remote control such that New Delhi and Washington D.C. can control the destiny of those living in far-flung villages.

This exercise of power through control over knowledge has been further consolidated with the help of more organized research enterprise. The ordinary persons and the 'have-nots' have been facing two forms of assaults in this regard. Firstly, their own knowledge, the popular knowledge, has been completely devalued with the rise of modern knowledge producing enterprises.

This is most evident in the case of health care, for example, where traditional health care practices have been made to appear meaningless with the rise of modern medicine. This devaluation starts from the experts, who in the process of establishing the reign of the modern knowledge producing enterprises, have done so at the cost of popular knowledge. The 'cult of expertise' has acquired much more significance in the recent years and this has been supported by the institutions of research. Over a period of time, the 'have-nots' themselves began to devalue their own knowledge, and mechanisms of producing that knowledge, which has been relevant for their survival and development throughout the history of humankind.

Secondly, ordinary people have been systematically deprived from having an access to either the knowledge produced by experts or means of production of that knowledge. In fact, the research enterprise has created such an impression that ordinary persons are not considered capable of creating their own knowledge. This is further fortified with degrees, scholarships, institutions, etc. Unless one have been 'properly' trained through a long schooling, one is not considered capable of producing any knowledge (Tandon, 1981).

If social change implies people's collective participation in determining their own destiny as mentioned above, then knowledge is a necessary ingredient in that process. If people can learn to value their own knowledge, and produce as well as use new knowledge, ~~xxxx~~ then it will be a contribution to the process of their empowerment. Participatory Research is based on this basic philosophy of empowering the 'have-nots' through their involvement in both valuing their existing knowledge and producing and using new knowledge.

Participatory Research as an Educational Process

Participatory Research has been demonstrated to act as a powerful educational experience for those involved in it. This educational experience takes place in several ways as described below:

1. Existing popular knowledge is recognised and valued

Participatory Research starts from the assumption that ordinary people already possess some knowledge. Some elements of this knowledge may be distorted, and some may be authentic. This in fact is also the starting point of adult education. Adults are already having some understanding and information. They do not start from a clean slate. This recognition is reinforced in participatory research and its significance to their ongoing survival and development under-scored. It is this existing knowledge which is daily used by the people in their ongoing struggles for survival. And this existing knowledge is examined to identify the elements that are deseperated and the elements that are authentic. In Participatory Research, the synthesis of popular knowledge with existing scientific knowledge strengthens the educational experience of the people (Vio Grossi et.al., 1983).

2. New knowledge is built on the existing knowledge

Starting point for creating new knowledge is the existing knowledge of the people, particularly the authentic elements of it. As people begin to appreciate what they already know, they are more open to seek new information. This desire to seek new knowledge is enhanced if it is done in the context of concrete problems which the people are facing. The people will be motivated to create and use new knowledge if they see its relevance in solving some concrete problems that they face.

3. People learn to exercise control

The process of participatory research puts emphasis on the active participation of ordinary people in generating their own knowledge. This encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. It is this active posture which constitutes a powerful impetus for learning to exercise control over their own lives. This is particularly so since participatory research explicitly calls for and promotes the exercise of control by the people themselves (Brown and Tandon, 1983).

4. It becomes a collective process

One of the elements of participatory research is promotion of collective responsibility for seeking new knowledge. Unlike classical research, it does not encourage individual production of knowledge. As a result, people learn to get together, collectively seeking and analysing information. Many a times this forms the seed of a rudimentary organisation of the people. This has been the particular experience in those situations where 'have-nots' are not yet organised (Fernandes and Tandon, 1981).

5. It creates informed options

The very process of collectively analysing a given situation throws up various alternatives. As part of the process of analysis, options are debated on the basis of concrete information. As a result, people are able to accept and reject options on an informed basis. This creates a sense of empowerment which is based on the confidence that information has been understood and interpreted.

6. Actions emerge out of this analysis

The very act of involvement in the process of analysing a given reality creates a sense of ownership of that knowledge and willingness to transform that situation. Those people are able to take concrete actions as part of their involve-

ment in participatory research. In fact, participatory research is normatively linked to transformation of the situation of the 'have-nots'. As a result, acting as a legitimate form of knowing and learning is emphasised.

The educational aspect of participatory research are elaborated above. Participatory Research is essentially a self-initiated and collective process of inquiry. It builds expertise and awareness among the 'have-nots'; it encourages action and experimentation by them to transform their reality; and, it creates a sense of empowerment and organization among them.

Steps in Participatory Research

A series of simple steps are taken in conducting Participatory Research. They are as follows:

1. What is the problem ?

A group of people first agree on a common statement of a problem. Some common problems, for example, are landlessness, low income, indebtedness, sickness of children, etc. The problem should be stated clearly and concretely.

2. Do we need a solution ?

The group should express interest in solving the problem. Sometimes, problems are identified merely because someone asked them about their problems. This step should ensure that there is a willingness to understand the problem in its entirety and its underlying causes, as well as an attempt to solve it. Questions like: "Why do we want to solve the problem ?", "How will we benefit if the problem is solved?", may help in clarifying this.

3. What do we know about the problem ?

The group records all that they already know about the problem. For example, if the problem is sickness of children, then they can each describe the sickness, its type, intensity and duration in the case of their own children. This helps in focusing on the problem in a concrete way.

4. What else do we need to know about the problem ?

Having articulated and recorded what they already know about the problem, they can then begin to identify what else they need to know about the problem. For example, how widespread is the problem? Why does it occur in this form? Continuing with the example of sickness of children, the group may need to know how many children in the hamlet (or the village) are affected by those diseases, why the sickness occurs, what are the ways to prevent and cure the sickness, etc.

5. How are we going to collect additional information ?

This is the step of data-collection. The group needs to decide how to get the information, whose assistance is needed, when they will get the information, and who in the group will do what..

6. What do we learn from this information ?

Having obtained the information, the group collectively analyses that information. It is important that analysis and reflection is undertaken as a collective process, not to be done by one person alone. This will help the group understand the causes of the problem and provide clues for possible solutions.

7. What solutions are possible? What actions are needed ?

Various solutions to the problem are generated, their workability is assessed and the choice of solution is made. Then, in order to solve the problem, what actions are to be taken by whom, when, where, and how, are also discussed and decided. Then these actions are taken.

8. What do we learn from these actions ?

In this step, the impact of the actions taken is systematically assessed to see if the problem is fully or partially solved. The actions taken may sometimes create new problems. So, this step is once again the beginning of another process of Participatory Research. Thus, Participatory Research becomes an ongoing process in the group, as part of its normal activity and not something separate.

Some Illustrations

It may be useful to provide some illustrations of the above from our experiences in the Indian context.

If we examine these illustrations, then we will note how the educational process in Participatory Research occurs:

- a) A group of bonded labourers in Thane district of Maharashtra was interested to get out of their bondage they had been for years. With the assistance of some activists, they analysed their own history of bondage and prepared documentation on it. In the light of this documentation, they examined the provisions of the Act. As new information became necessary, they re-investigated the historical process of their bondage in relation to the provisions of the Act to establish their case. Based on this, they approached the Block Development Officer and Sub-Divisional

Magistrate with applications for releasing them from bondage. When the government officials visited them to confirm their applications, they found that the labourers had collected authentic information. The process of documenting their bondage had also brought them close together in a group and they continued to put pressure on the government officials till they were released. The organization of the freed labourers has since taken on new issues like education of children and agriculture.

- b) Several tribals in the Ganjam district of Orissa were concerned about their almost landless situation as it was becoming difficult for them to make both ends meet. When they sat down to discuss this one night, one of them mentioned about the loss of his father's land due to construction of a small irrigation dam nearby. This prompted them to investigate this problem further. They started talking to the elders in the villages and meeting the Patwari only to discover that many of their fathers had lost their land in the process of building of this dam. Their investigation also revealed that they had not received any compensation for it. They began examining the necessary legal provisions for cash or kind compensation. With the help of some activists they learnt that cash compensation does not last long as was seen in other cases in the nearby state. So they formulated their demand for land for land as compensation. They have collectively taken up this issue to the revenue commissioner and they are still continuing their struggle.
- c) Bombay has several thousands of people living on pavements. Many of these households are headed by women who perform meagre jobs to feed their family. When some activists started working among these women, they began to explore the possibility of alternative economic activities. In further analysing this, they realised that all the economic activities they were considering required some capital.

They got some information that nationalised banks were extending loans for women like them. They agreed to investigate this and visited the bank officials to collect more information on the scheme of loans. Simultaneously they collected information on the economic viability of the various activities they had identified. Now many of them have received bank loans and are involved in new economic activities. Moreover, the women have become a strong cohesive group and are meeting regularly to share their experiences and solve their other problems.

- d) The workers in a textile factory in Kanpur, U.P., recently became concerned about the impact of their work on their health. They invited some experts on occupational health to share some information with them. This prompted them to investigate the problems of ill-health arising from their work, in general and byssinosis in particular. They are presently carrying out a sample study of 300 workers. In this study they are documenting the health status and medical records of each worker. They are also critically examining the management's attitude towards health and safety as well as the government legislation and machinery in this regard. In the course of their involvement, they have already conducted group discussions with a large number of fellow workers. And thus there appears to be a growing consciousness among these workers about the problems of occupational health.

IMPLICATIONS

Participatory Research thus promotes the capacity of adults to seek and utilize knowledge in their interest, thereby promoting their collective empowerment (Hall, 1981). It is this aspect of participatory research that makes it a potent tool in the context of empowering people and transforming reality.

What are the implications of the above for adult and non-formal education ?

Some of the important implications are briefly mentioned here:

- a) Participatory Research as an educational process reiterates our commitment in the ability of ordinary people. As an adult education, we need to continue to strengthen our faith in the people as self-initiating adults. It is this faith which provides the starting point for the educational process. In essence, our involvement in participatory research justifies that faith in the capacity of the ordinary people.
- b) It shows that those of us working with adults can strengthen our work if we acquire a greater degree of competence in the process and not a content. Adult Educators like participatory researchers, need to have process expertise and orientation and need not be in all the various contents. This is so because the educational content in participatory research gets determined by the concrete situation. But the educational process can be generatized.
- c) It also brings out the need for developing an orientation of inquiry among adult educators. Many of us do not approach our work with the 'have-nots' with an orientation of learning. Many a times the adult educators themselves lack a questioning and research orientation, which if they develop, can help them in their work. Training of adult educators in participatory research acquires importance in this context.

This paper has argued that participatory research acts as a powerful educational and empowering experience for the 'have-nots'.

It has presented some recent illustrations from India to exemplify this. Some steps of participatory research have also been briefly enumerated in the hope that adult educators committed to social change will be able to use participatory research in their work.

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