CHAPTER - 1

Monopoly over knowledge

Historically, the pursuit of knowledge has been an ongoing and integral process in people's lives. Traditional societies developed effective ways of knowing, conceptualizing and disseminating knowledge. Vast quantities of knowledge have travelled across the world and been relayed from generation to generation even before being written down.

With the advent of the twentieth century however, the use and dissemination of knowledge has developed into a specialised industry complete with professionals, para-professionals, experts, researchers, statisticians, projects grants - a whole range of people and activities which regulate the use and dissemination of knowledge in society. In parts of the developed world, this industry is contributing to close to half the gross national product. Large-scale enterprises charged with the function of producing and disseminating knowledge are emerging in the developing countries of the South as well.

With the specialisation of the knowledge industry, control over processes of thinking and acting is, increasingly, being centralised. Special disciplines, journals, networks of researchers and experts have emerged subtly, yet powerfully regulating the knowledge industry. Financed by the state, corporations and other elite interests in society, the knowledge industry determines what is "legitimate knowledge" and what is "subjective opinion". Innovations and investments in communication technology in recent decades have furthered these trends.

It is against this backdrop of professionalisation and specialisation of knowledge and knowledge systems that we examine, in the proceeding the chapter, the contributions of participatory research. In the contemporary context, a variety of mechanisms function to the promote and sustain the knowledge industry. This chapter limits observation to two domains: the domain of social science research and the domain of social development. Both domains have built around a similar "top-down" understanding of social reality and which has been challenged by participatory research.

Social science research : critical assessment

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, when social systems emerged as an area for systematic, "scientific" inquiry to the present day, there has been a gradual movement to professionalise the social sciences. A variety of research approaches are currently being used to investigate a wide range of social systems and phenomena. Highly sophisticated research technology has been developed. Professional researchers are being trained in academic settings, and they are utilising their expertise in research to generate knowledge on a wide variety of subjects. Despite these tremendous developments however, social science research has had only a marginal effect on the lives of ordinary people.

The reasons for this can be found in examining the historical context in which social science research grew. The preoccupation of the first social thinkers was with proving that disciplines like sociology or anthropology, were as "scientific" as the natural sciences. This preoccupation led them to learn, imbibe and practice a research methodology borrowed heavily from the natural sciences. There are three salient features of the conventional social science research methodology which require a critical assessment:

The first relates to the purpose of research. Social science researchers working with the assumption that there are universal truths to explain all phenomena - natural and social, have concentrated on research for purposes of knowledge-generation. They have worked towards establishing laws which explain social phenomena and using these laws as a basis to modify and add onto the existing body of knowledge.

The second salient feature of the conventional research methodology, relates to the position of the researcher vis-a-vis the "subjects" under study. There are two assumptions which merit attention here. The first assumption is that the researcher is "external" to the phenomena being studied. The second assumption is that phenomena being studied can be controlled in a manner that no spurious influence vitiates the inference. Working with these assumptions, social science researchers have

developed rigorous research designs to guard objectivity and distance themselves from the individuals or groups being researched. Often, researchers have kept the focus of research a mystery from the subjects while they attempt to "master" the phenomena under study. Sophisticated research methodology is used to maintain the divide between the researcher and those under investigation. The purpose of inquiry, the methods of data-collection and outcome of inquiry are closely guarded from the "subject".

The emphasis on objectivity and controlling subjectivity tie in with the third salient feature of the conventional research methodology which concerns the methods of inquiry. In an attempt to supress "subjectivity", social science research has over emphasised abstract conceptualisation. Research in the social science is essentially seen as a cognitive activity, requiring manipulation of symbols and concepts. The personal experience, feeling or emotions of the researcher as a basis for inquiry is denied.

These methodological assumptions while contributing to the scientific status of social science research, have actually misdirected the course of inquiry. Considering that social sciences are essentially a study of individuals, groups and organisations in a social setting and that the reality of social systems and phenomena is not physically determined only but also socially constructed, it is doubtful if social science research can utilise a research methodology based on the assumptions of natural science inquiry.

Furthermore, the researcher shares his or her essential humanity with the individuals or groups in the social setting under study. This implies that researchers are subject to same laws that they are attempting to understand. To that extent, the very act of strictly separating the researcher from the setting leads to poor quality of data. What was once assumed to be achieved through objectively is really being distorted by it. Moreover, the very act of inquiry tends bound to have some impact on social systems under study. It is now amply demonstrated that the behaviour of the researcher in experimental settings has substantial impact over the quality of data collected. In fact, the quality of data collection can be significantly improved if the researcher develops rapport with the settings and people in the setting.

The picture that emerges through this critical assessment of the conventional research methodology is that social science research in borrowing the natural science research methodology has implicitly borrowed a value framework which promotes a monopolistic control by researchers over the process of inquiry.

Conventional Research and Top-down Social Development

While the goals, methods and approach of the social science researcher is quite different from that of a development practitioner, policy-maker or activist, the political economy framework which determines knowledge and knowledge production in these two domains is similar. Just as research in the social sciences has promoted researcher control over the process of inquiry, social development policies and programmes have been largely controlled by the "experts". Following are some of the aspects upon which this monopoly over knowledge and action rests:

Distribution of power: Just as the conventional research approach has propagated a remarkably skewed power distribution between the researcher and the so-called "subject". So too top-down social development efforts are almost by definition, characterised by concentration of power at the top. Numerous social development projects initiated during the last three decades will bear this out. A good example is the green revolution in India, which was conceived by the government in consultation with agriculture experts. The Indian farmers had relatively little power in this entire effort of agricultural development. Other sections of rural society, like the land-less labourers, were completely ignored. IT is also interesting to observe that the strategy of "green revolution" was fed and supported by conventional research carried out in agricultural research institutes of advanced countries and their subsidiary counterparts in developing countries. Of course, the launching of a "green revolution" created major funding opportunities for further support of this research in these research institutions. This generated a mutually supportive cycle for traditional research and top-down social development.

Critical Resources : Both conventional research and top down social development efforts rely heavily on resources external to the particular social setting they are focusing upon. In the case of research, this resource is primarily the expert researcher who quite often is alien and external to the system. No attempt is made to recognise or utilise the resources available within the setting. The "subjects" and their resources are largely neglected. Many research projects do not even consider the possibility of consulting the "subject" in their design of research instruments.

Similarly, top-down social development projects are heavily on resources brought in from outside. In the case of "green revolution", massive inputs in the form of high yielding - variety seeds, fertiliser, agricultural implements (like tractors) and credit, were made available from external sources.

Control : Another dimension, related to the two above, is that of control. In a conventional research setting the researcher, by virtue of his "expertise" controls the entire research activity. The "subjects" are controlled, their responses are controlled, spurious influences are controlled.

Similarly, the expert project authorities decide on the design of the social development projects, obtain and provide resources and tell the people how to use them. Continuing our analysis of "green revolution" efforts it is easy to see that the farmers were left with no control about what crops to how or what methods to follow. It was package made available on the basis of the experts judgement about what was good for the farmers in the region. The expert controlled "green revolution" was initiated by setting up a large delivery system that controlled the supply of inputs to the farmers.

Technology : Both conventional research methodology and top-down social development models rely on borrowed and "big" technology. This is largely because they have utilised as their starting point, a western model of inquiry and action.

Similarly, top-down social action efforts are based on the models developed in the advanced countries of the world. The example of "green revolution" further illustrates this case. The model

of integrated agricultural development was based on the assumption that input of capital and know-how will lead a spur in agricultural production. This was obtained by massive inputs of high-yield variety seeds, fertilisers, credit, tractors, etc. Of course, this led to the increased agricultural production but only the medium and large farmers benefited from. They increased their production substantially, they generated a surplus while small farmers and land-less agricultural labourers did not benefit at all.

Outcome: Lastly, both conventional research methodology and top-down social development models are primarily concerned with quantitative outcomes. Both are the goal directed, not process-oriented. In conventional research, concern with quantitative data outweighs qualitative considerations. The success of research is seen by how much data outweighs qualitative considerations. The success of research is seen by how much quantitative and quantifiable data has been generated. Moreover, the criteria for determining the success of these quantitative out are determined by other researchers, not by the people who participate in and create the reality. In most conventional research outcomes from the point of view of the "subjects" are neither aspired for nor valued.

Likewise, top-down social action efforts are primarily concerned with outcomes in quantitative and aggregate terms. That is why gross national product, per capita income, birth rate etc. are the indices that are most commonly used in assessing the outcomes of top down social development projects. Again the emphasis is on goals, not the process. The process of liberation or development is not a valued outcome. Therefore, integrated agricultural development programme was called a successful "green revolution" because a major aggregate indices showed improvement. Per capita production and income, overall agricultural output etc. showed improvement. But the process orientation analysis brought out the fact that certain groups benefited; poor became poorer, landlessness increased. What happened to the life of a small farmer and his family was never an important outcome to be examined in this project.

It is fairly obvious from these deliberations that both in the domain of social science research and development the control continues to be with the professionals. The techniques of knowledge

generation are available only to a body of professionals who are enjoying elite status. Similarly, the outcomes are essentially controlled by the researchers, policy-makers, development experts and go on. Those who assist in the inquiry process as respondents or "subjects", or those who social development projects are designed for no control over these processes and their outcomes.

With these developments, the capacities of ordinary people to engage in serious inquiry about the problems and issues of daily concern to them have been seriously undermined. The monopoly of knowledge by 'experts' has propagated a widespread notion that ordinary people lack the ability and the tools for production of knowledge and that competencies to use knowledge effectively can only be acquired through training in elite academic institutions.

The monopoly of knowledge has also narrowed and limited epistemological options. Historically as mentioned earlier, knowing was a comprehensive integrated process including thinking and feeling and acting. It was believed that human beings knew about social phenomena by the use of their rational self through the processes of thinking and analysing. It was also believed that inquiry and the process of knowing were pursued through feeling the emotional self of human beings. Acting was also a legitimate and important mode of knowing about a given situation. With the rise of the knowledge industry, however, with increasing specialisation and the monopoly over knowledge epistemology has become a rational pursuit not an emotional and action pursuit.

These developments raise serious questions in the broader context of knowledge, action and social change.

Given the magnitude of socio-economic problems and the paucity of resources in countries like India, can knowledge-experts afford to ignore the issue of knowledge-utilisation? To what extent is it acceptable to engage in esoteric conceptualisation in the social sciences or quantitative social development constructs oblivious of the relevance of our efforts?

Can these interventions claim to be value-free? Given the social-psychological aspects of social science research or social development can we engage in studying "others" without offering them

something on return besides "knowledge"? Is it an ethical consideration to involve them more directly in action which will influence their lives?

To what extent can the rigours of natural sciences be transferred to social science research? In our quest for rigour and control of spurious interference, are we measuring the inconsequential precisely?

To what extent is the present melds of inquiry and action a dogmatic pursuit? Have we become prisoners of our own methodology? Has the method become the end, as opposed to a means for inquiry? Have we become so method-bound so as to not permit any deviations from the established course?

If social change implies people's collective participation determining their own destiny, than 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, then it will be a contribution to the process of their empowerment. It is not surprising then, that the last decade has seen a growing interest in alternative paradigms, both in the domain of social research and social development. Participatory research is examined in the following chapter as an alternative to the topdown, monopolistic control of knowledge and action.