

PD - I/1

# Knowledge, Participation and Empowerment

*Dr. Rajesh Tandon*  
*Executive Director*

*November 1997*

***Society for Participatory Research in Asia***

*42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 062*

*Phone : (91-11) 698 1908, 698 9559 Fax : (91-11) 698 0183*

*Email : pria@sdalt.ernet.in*

## ***Knowledge, Participation and Empowerment***

### ***History :***

Efforts to understand and change a given social reality have always been based on perspectives of those promoting such change. Knowledge systems and knowledge producing institutions have been at the forefront of defining and organising such perspectives. In most societies and periods of human history, the elites have maintained hegemonic control over such knowledge systems. These dominant perspectives for understanding and changing social reality have mostly been the perspective of those in positions of power in a given society. Thus dominant knowledge about and perspectives on social reality have largely been those supported by the elite and the powerful in a given society.

The subaltern(or 'bottom-up') perspectives on social reality have been largely negated and undermined throughout human history. The perspectives and knowledge systems of "underdogs" and marginalised sections of society have rarely been acknowledged as legitimate or 'scientific'. The representation of social reality from the point-of-view of ordinary citizens was largely rejected or ignored.

Participatory Research as a philosophy of 'bottom-up' knowledge systems attempted to articulate such a perspective of ordinary citizens . It gathered together, and provided a voice to popular knowledge and wisdom gained over generations of struggles and living by ordinary women and men. More than 20 years ago, Participatory Research began to provide a coherent framework to explore alternative perspectives, processes and methods of knowledge production and utilisation from the point-of-view and in the interest of the marginalised and the powerless.

### ***Participatory Research :***

The critique of dominant perspective of knowledge as illustrated through Participatory Research grew out of the practice of Adult Educators in poor communities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Teaching of literacy and new

functional skills to illiterate and poor women and men in the developing countries during 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated immense knowledge and analytical capacities of such persons. This became a major challenge to adult educators. National, Regional and International Networks of Participatory Research promoted by such NGOs as Asian-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) and International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) became the fragile breeding ground for new experiments in promoting Participatory Research in different parts of the world.

### ***Participatory Learning :***

PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) was founded on this perspective of Participatory Research more than 15 years ago. Its fundamental purpose was to promote meaningful participation of ordinary citizens, hitherto excluded in processes and institutions that influence and shape their life. In order to promote such meaningful participation, PRIA began to strengthen the capacities of such citizens and their organisations through a series of interventions aimed at consolidating and augmenting their learning process. This was the beginning of the development of Participatory Training Methodology.

As we began to experiment with, and further refine, Participatory Training Methodology as an intervention towards strengthening learning of ordinary citizens, we began to feel the need for reaching out to like-minded and similarly inspired initiatives within the region and beyond. ASPBAE's support in the early years helped to extend the use of these methodologies in various situations where community education and organisation was being undertaken.

The need for building capacity at local levels among groups and organisations voluntarily created by local people and activists began to influence our own interventions. We began to see the real meaning of empowerment at local levels. For us, in our practice, empowerment meant an inter-linked twin processes of organising and learning. We began to see how participatory training methodology could accelerate and consolidate learning among such individuals and groups in a manner that helped further collectivisation of their initiatives.

The perspectives of Participatory Research also inspired our approach to Monitoring and Evaluation. Through a series of experimental efforts applied in diverse developmental contexts, we evolved methodologies of participatory monitoring and evaluation. Its application to issues of natural resources, access and control over land, water and forest by those whose livelihood and survival depended on them, provided wide ranging set of experiences and insights.

It is at this stage, in 1985, that we began our partnership with DVV. This partnership opened our experiences for larger sharing in a mutually supportive manner.

### ***Empowerment-in-Action :***

Over the years, application of Participatory Research perspective spread to issues related to workers education and occupational health. Expert knowledge and management influence had, by and large, excluded the issues of work place health and safety from the agenda of workers' education and organisation. Through a series of micro studies within the perspective of participatory research, PRIA began to integrate the articulation of workers' knowledge on these issues. Ten years later in mid 1990s, while continuing its work in that stream, PRIA extended the focus to include the experience of communities on environmental health. Water and Air pollution was the daily experience of ordinary citizens and communities, though experts and state institutions have maintained apathy towards this. Thus learning to act in support of occupational and environmental health became an ongoing part of PRIA's interventions.

The struggle of ordinary women to given visibility to their productive and economic role in society became a further focus of our work in late 1980s and early 1990s. Many development programmes and policies of the government and other international institutions viewed women as housewives, mothers and family-makers. The economic role of women was largely over-looked. Through a series of interventions inspired by the perspective of participatory research, PRIA started a number of Capacity Building initiatives to strengthen the abilities of ordinary, semi-literate women to pursue their economic activities with greater effectiveness and improved results. Management capacities of these women and their

organisations was strengthened to enable them to participate more meaningfully in productive economic enterprises, and to gain a sense of collective influence over market forces.

In recent years, our efforts have extended to include building capacities of local self governance at the village and neighbourhood level. Top-down development methods, including educational interventions centrally planned and executed, have historically undermined the capacities of our citizens to organise their self governance process and institutions. With opportunities for devolution being created world-wide, educational interventions aimed at strengthening the capacities of citizens and their groups to meaningfully participate in self governing institutions and process has emerged as a major challenge. PRIA's own work in recent years has focused upon this issue as well.

In a broader sense, civic engagement and strengthening of civil society requires sustained and deliberate educational interventions. Perspectives on knowledge and social transformation from the vantage point of civil society also require sustained and long-term engagement. Therefore, building social capital in our societies will be the future challenge for practitioners of adult education and participatory research. This is a challenge that we in PRIA are preparing ourselves to respond to creatively and authentically.

### ***Challenges Ahead :***

The history of our experience is also full of frustrations and obstacles. A dominant force contributing towards such obstacles is the centralised and bureaucratic state institutions. This has included institutions and programmes of learning and education started and resourced by the state. Statism as institutions and philosophy has entered our life in a comprehensive way and, therefore, needs to be addressed as a new challenge. Ordinary citizens have been made to behave in a passive manner ever so dependent on government agencies and programmes. This dependence further fuels forces of population and demagogy, enhancing the power of the state over ordinary citizens. Adult education has a major role to play in enabling citizens and their organisations to regain their capacities and initiatives.

Similarly, the new forces of globalisation are integrating economies and spreading the new information technology. Knowledge of these forces and meaningful participation by ordinary citizens to influence these global forces and institutions is a huge obstacle. Macro global forces are increasingly shaping micro contexts and constraining local initiatives. Our perspectives on Participatory Research need to be scaled-up in a manner that meaningful participation of citizens could encompass globalisation and new Information Technology in the next millennium. Otherwise, the decades of work in local empowerment would get wiped out in the face of such powerful global forces. We are discovering that the new information technology is further distancing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Its access and control needs to be made an agenda for adult education in the new millennium.

We are looking forward to our partners, to join us in these new efforts.