

**PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AS A METHODOLOGY OF
DEVELOPMENT**

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Various methods of research and inquiry have been utilised in identifying needs for development and social change. In planning for development and implementing these plans, the most common method of inquiry has been the classical research approach. This paper argues for an alternative research methodology for development.

Classical research is characterized by

- a. an overwhelming emphasis on objectivity. The researcher tends to manipulate data and/or research activity so as to reduce any elements of subjectivity.
- b. a clear distinction between the researcher and the subject. The subjects are used to provide information and the researcher generates knowledge from that.
- c. a value-neutral stance of the researcher. His/her own values are supposed to be outside the purview of subject-matter under study.
- d. a unilateral control by the researcher. The entire process of research and its output is only controlled by the researcher.

Participatory Research is an attempt in my view, to move beyond the existing limitations of classical social science research. Classical social science research has modelled itself after the natural science research paradigm and, therefore, has not only failed in its attempt to meaningfully describe the existing social reality but also in helping people appropriately to change it. As an alternative, Participatory Research (PR) is an attempt to make research not only relevant to the present socio-economic context but also an educational experience for those being “researched”. It is an attempt to direct research to the needs of the under-privileged sections of the society as well as to reduce the unilateral control of the researcher over the entire research processes. It is an attempt to challenge the professional's manipulations of the subjects and methods of research and call on to blow over the myth of objectivity and neutrality in social sciences research. Finally, it is an attempt to share the process of knowledge-generation and knowledge-utilization to the level of problems being experienced daily.

Participatory Researchers

Briefly stated, the following are the characteristics of PR

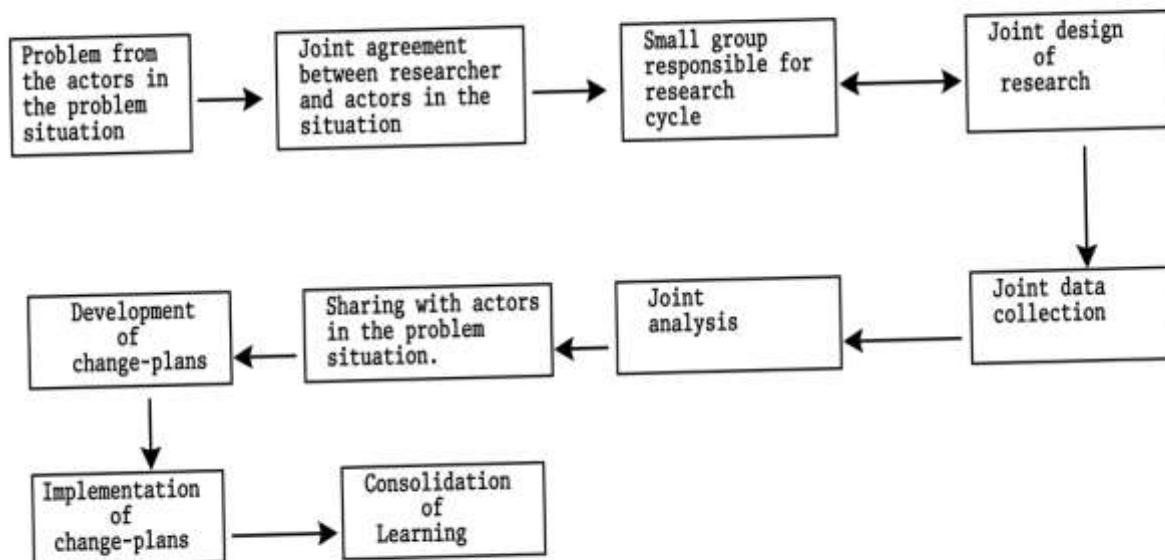
- (i) the choice of the problem is made by the needs of a group or community.
- (ii) the ultimate purpose of research is the radical transformation of reality.
- (iii) the beneficiaries of research are the members of the community.
- (iv) the success of research entails active participation by the community.
- (v) the outcome of research is some concrete developmental change in the interests of the underprivileged.
- (vi) the researcher is a committed participant and leader in the process, militant rather than detached.

The figure I indicates steps in an ideal PR approach. A number of researchers are relevant to this ‘ideal’ approaches

- a. The initial request in an ‘ideal’ PR process may come from powerless actors in the situation, but in reality, this may not be me. The request may come from powerful within the situation, or outside it. Yet, the researchers are transform it into participatory research approach by following some later steps, provided his/her ideological stance is explicit.
- b. Various steps outlined in figure - I appear to be one-shot, fixed steps. In reality, a Participatory Research process has to be cyclical and Iterative. For example, joint agreement need to be worked and reworked many time, over the entire cycle.
- c. As presented here, various steps in Participatory Research process assumed the involvement of an outside researcher. In reality, groups of actors in a particular setting

may go through the entire process without any assistance from the outsider. In fact, effective Participatory Research process must have the increased capacity of the actors in the situation to inquire into and change their situations as valued outcome. To that extent, an outside researcher will become redundant soon

Figure - I: Steps in an 'Ideal' Participatory Research Approach.



Illustrations of Participatory Research

It may be useful to give some concrete illustrations of participatory research. The following are three brief illustrations of PR from India:

1. Registration of Share Croppers in West Bengal: Operation Barga

The implementation of land reforms in West Bengal was given a major thrust recently through a very innovative method. One aspect of land reforms is the registration of sharecroppers so that tenancy rights can be bestowed on the farmers. Moreover, surplus land has to be distributed to the landless. The initial strategy was to send a team of officials to the village to inspect plot-to-plot records and determine the surplus land as well as register the sharecroppers. This strategy did not have much success because when the officials arrived in the village they were surrounded by landowners and told that no surplus land share-croppers existed. Moreover, the time cycle for the recording of a sharecropper in the alive process of law was very long, 9-12 months.

An alternative was tried in 1977. The strategy entailed organizing a reorientation camp in some villages. These camps are of 3-day duration; participants include 30-40 beneficiaries and 10-15 officials. The camps are intended to be an opportunity for these rural poor to identify their problems and to devise their solutions. Initial hesitation and suspicion needs to be gradually removed before serious, critical reflection takes place. An outcome of these camps is to identify sharecroppers with the help of the beneficiaries. Evening meetings are organized, names are recorded, plot-by-plot inspection is made, and public lists of these records are displayed for any objections/challenges. The objections are reviewed

right then and final records are made and displayed. The entire process takes less than ten days.

Once the "bargadars" (sharecroppers) are registered they get loans from the bank and cooperative societies. Their exploitation by local moneylenders is reduced. In the event there is a legal case against a registered sharecropper, the officials support his case in the court as they are a party to registration. Thus, the sharecroppers and the officials act as mutual support system. "Operation Barga" was the name given to this approach after the first reorientation camp.

Another important outcome of this process is an increased awareness of the sharecroppers. They begin to examine and understand the dynamics of their suffering and to move beyond dependence on outsiders. The reorientation camp acts as a method of identifying and locating sharecroppers (research), recording them and assisting with loans (change), and increasing their awareness (education).

2. Joint Irrigation System among Tribals

Among the tribals of southern Rajasthan Seva Mandir (a voluntary agency) had been working in the field of adult education. The need for irrigation was very strongly felt by these tribal farmers and Seva Mandir began to assist them. With the fragmented land as well as labour, individual irrigation schemes appeared non-viable. The government agencies had not bothered much since many of them knew about earlier experiences where tribal farmers had not cooperated with each other for the success of the group scheme. Yet, a development agency (SFDA) was willing to give 50 per cent subsidy in case of a group scheme.

Twelve families whose aggregate landholdings added up to 20 acres, were approached by Seva Mandir. The entire planning for the scheme, including identification of sources of water, procedure of sharing and methods of cooperation were discussed and planned by these 12 families along with the Seva Mandir staff. There were a number of difficulties in this process, the most important being the mutual distrust among the families. After sometime, through a family elder-man, it was discovered that a few decades back, there was a system of sharing water called "Parsi". This traditional system of mutual cooperation was geared towards survival. The system had gone into non-use over the years. This discovery facilitated the task of planning as well as constructing the well. The technology chosen was such that the twelve families can participate in construction.

After this period of 18 months, the scheme became operative and has been functioning well. The group of families has been able to obtain other assistance and loans as well. This appears to be an excellent illustration of viable, self-managing groups as the basis of development, not marginal, "handicapped" individuals.

3. Organization of landless agricultural labourers: Shramik Sanghatana

For the past seven years, this organization has been in existence in Shahada and Taloda Taluka of Dhulia District in Maharashtra. The movement of Saldars - yearly contract labourers earning about Rs. 300/- per annum — was started in 1972, against low wages, lack of weekly rest day and inhuman treatment. The

movement has been successful in obtaining minimum wages for the Saldars and has been extending its activities gradually.

One of the major aspects of this movement is the mobilization of tribal women. Roughly 60 per cent of the population of these areas is tribal and landless labourers also account for 60 per cent. The mobilization of women began from a camp organized for them. During the camp, women shared their experiences and liquor emerged as their major enemy. Alcoholism by men led to all sorts of miseries on women. These women then moved to the nearby village and broke all the brewing pots. They asked the local women who participated in the camp to identify the drunkards. Then, these drunkards were surrounded by women and asked to bow to their wives. In future, it was decided that the punishment will also include tying to a tree and beating by women.

The police patel of that village was then called by women to explain why he was not checking assaults on women. It was during this dialogue that a very sensitive dynamics was unmasked. The police patel used to arrest a few drunkards, then also bail them out himself. This way he maintained his control over the men of the village. By himself bailing them out, he became a respected man. The women asked the police patel who paid for his salary. "The Government", told that police patel. The women then reminded him that the government gets money through taxes which are contributed by the poor villagers when they buy soap, bidi, etc.

In the initial stages of the movement, the **Sanghatana** had fought for the restoration of land to tribals as it was illegally alienated from them. The process of identifying the land and its history was a collaborative effort carried out by activists and the local tribal population. This was a major research task because written records of landownership were not easily accessible.

The Sanghatana continues to engage in many such surveys for its various activities, all of which are conducted by activists and villagers together. For instance, women from many villages have collected information regarding cases of wife-beating and alcoholism. This information is then used to fuel concrete action, such as a "**Morcha**" or a protest.

During negotiations with landlords or government officials, the delegates are continually controlled by the people. While delegates negotiate inside, protesters wait silently outside. The delegates are not permitted to make any decisions inside without first consulting the people sitting outside.

One of the major activities of the Sanghatana in recent years has been non-formal/adult education. Camps have become an integral part of their organization. Tarun Mandals have come up in many villages. The Sanghatana demonstrated the validity of participatory research approach through its actions and methods.

Issues in Participatory Research

The experience of Participatory Research to-date brings out a number of major issues which are presented here:

- a) Participatory research in its attempt to bring about social transformation, has a necessary relationship with social action. While classical social science research has conspicuously avoided any connection with social action, the

experience demonstrates that PR invariably culminates in some form of social action. To that extent, participatory research and participatory social action are theoretically and empirically closely linked with each other.

It is this very linkage between PR and participatory social action that has scared many professional researchers from joining PR. It is precisely because of this linkage that many have attacked PR as merely a model of community development and not research. In the Asian context, PR is increasingly becoming synonymous with processes of liberation of people. The involvement of poor, marginal farmers and landless agricultural labourers in the twin processes of PR and participatory social action have consequently resulted in enhancing their self-confidence and ability to take collective initiative in their common interest. The PR approach can contribute towards the liberation of people only if it is associated with some form of participatory social action.

- b) To the extent that PR has invariably been associated with some form of social action, there have been clear political implications of engaging in PR. To use PR approach in identifying land alienation with the organization of landless tribal labourers is to link enquiry with the political dynamics of the setting. To join with the farmers to engage in social analysis of their existing situation is to raise political pressures about the existing structure. To develop an alternative health care system which favours the rural poor is to enter into direct conflict with those whose interests are challenged. The PR approach, by its commitment to the under-privileged as well as to social action, enters into a political arena where questions of method and validity become simplistic.

The political implications of PR, in evolving, become more visible in the existing political contexts of developing countries. While some of these countries are explicitly oppressive in allowing political opposition, others are much more subtle. The consequences of such oppressive political and government structures in developing countries are obvious for those engaged in PR. It is not uncommon, therefore, to come across illustrations of physical injury to some of those engaged in PR.

This situation has led to a certain amount of hesitation on the years of many to associate themselves with any PR effort. On the other hand, it has made many activists and field workers much informed about the value of Pr. Most importantly, the information about such PR efforts and the usage of that information becomes extremely critical in this context. It is possible that some of the right be wrong in a naive fashion or by overestimating various PR efforts.

- c) The rural context in developing countries is primarily unorganised. The under-privileged, whether landless labourers or urban time-dwellers or women, are primarily unorganised. In most of these countries, in fact, in a large measure, the other state of poverty, exploitation and helplessness are related to this non-organisation. To initiate PR with such groups of underprivileged people means to initiate the process of organisation-building. Unless there is a somewhat organised group of people in a particular setting, it is inconceivable that PR approach can be applied to that setting.

In the absence of such an organisation, the PR efforts will become the unilateral manipulation by an external. To that extent, initiating PR efforts with such unorganised and groups of people requires an initial effort in developing a rudimentary form of organisation of them.

In many instances, it has been shown that the PR effort itself contributed to the building of an organisation of the people with whom this process was started. By the mere process of attempting to bring a group of small, marginal farmers to analyse their own situation, temporary organisations of farmers developed in the tribal areas of South Rajasthan in India. This poses some questions about the methodology of PR as well as our definition of it. To the extent that the developing societies are unorganised in comparison with more developed societies in the world, any PR efforts in such countries have to be simultaneously an effort at building organisations.

- d) The present experience in PR is very diverse in terms of the method utilised as well as the entry points. In some settings, the entry point has been land, in others it has been health. In some others, PR efforts has begun from adult education. There are a number of industrial as well as urban examples of PR.

In terms of the method, some have started with an initial survey and moved on to more dialogical approaches; some others have conducted surveys at the request of the people. There has been, by and large, a primacy of qualitative methods in all these PR efforts.

The question of method in PR becomes a tricky one in many ways. On the one hand, the rigour of method is the hallmark of classical social science research and, therefore, the acceptance of PR is judged on the basis of its methodology. On the other hand, as the experience shows, any rigorous prescription for a method in PR might lead to the exclusion of those experiences which are wholly field-inspired. What is possible is to define a set of guidelines which are different from those prescribed by classical social science research in evaluating the methodological impact of PR.

- e) One of the critical issues in PR which has been repeatedly visible in our experiences, is the longer implications of PR on the life and living. For example, if PR entails participation of the people in the research process, what is the style of the researcher that will make it possible? If the researcher or the activist, as the case may be, practices participation in his/her own life, it is much more likely that he/she will be able to facilitate participation of the people in various research efforts. On the other hand, it is doubtful how an authoritarian personality of the researcher can encourage PR with the under-privileged.

It naturally leads to two sets of issues in terms of researcher's skills in PR. First, the values of the researcher may or may not be in congruence with the value premises of PR. The person who believes in the basic strengths of the people and who cherishes democratic values may be more suitable for it. Secondly, the behavioural skills required to encourage and sustain participation of people must be possessed by the researcher. These behavioural skills become critical in the context of the focus on the under-privileged sections of the population. Greater effort is required, and therefore, greater skills are needed, to facilitate participation of such sections of the

population because one of the dominant characteristics of the underprivileged is their inability to and fear for participation.

The above presentation of PR is intended to catalyse debate among those engaged in various developmental efforts. The PR methodology has proved to be of immense use in our own efforts at facilitating development. It is still an emerging methodology and it is hoped that contributions from others in the field will further modify and enrich this methodology.