

## CHAPTER-II

### **Participatory Research : An Alternative**

The term 'Participatory Research' was first used in the context of adult education during the 1970s. Its articulation was an attempt to reinstate the underlying philosophy of adult education which several adult educators felt was being diluted in practice. Adult education is premised on a commitment to adults actively participating in the world, deciding what they want to learn and the best way they can learn is. The professional training adult educators receive however, along with and their engagement in systematic, empirical research distances them from learners and establishes a one-way control over the research process. Similar contradictions were being faced by other social scientists - particularly those who had experienced the inadequacies of the conventional research methodology in explain the harsh realities faced by oppressed people around the world.

In its early formulation therefore, PR was posited as an alternative social science research methodology which sought to challenge the very premises - both epistemological and political, on which conventional research methodology was based. As part of its history however it is important to recognise certain other trends which have contributed towards its emergence and growth.

#### Roots

From within mainstream social sciences, the discipline of anthropology was important in the initial development of PR. As anthropology is one of the few social sciences that has a tradition of in-depth research at the community level.

Phenomenology and historical materialism also had an impact on PR in its early days. The contributions of phenomenologists expanded the basis of knowing beyond intellectual cognition to include human emotions, experience and feelings. Subsequently this stream of work has developed in a significant way as a body of knowledge and practice within the frame of experiential learning.

Historical materialism with its supporting notions about class division, conflict and struggle have also been fundamental to participatory research thinking. These concepts have enabled researchers to recognise the conflicting interests which emerge as groups and movements challenge the status quo. Historical materialism has also directed us to investigate the social, political and economic relations which form the context for any problem, investigation or action.

Beyond the mainstream of the social sciences and instrumental in providing support to PR, was the work of Paulo Friere in developing an alternative pedagogy based on the concept of "conscientization". Conscientization implies a process through which individuals get involved in an ever-deepening analysis of their own realities, in order to question common assumptions and achieve a better understanding of that reality. This process reveals a link research between education and action and the need to establish a dialogic relationship between educators and "students" or researchers and "subjects".

Support to PR also came through the work of action research, a field which travelled in parallel to participatory research for a number of decades and continues to converge with and contrast PR today. In particular action research challenged the myth of static notion of research and inquiry. It argued for "acting" as a basis of learning and knowing.

Since the 1980s, a major impetus to PR has been provided through debates around the dominant development model. Several new linkages have been formed between educators, researchers, activist and community mobilisers. The social movements taking place during the eighties have strengthened these alliances as well as the underlying assumptions about people's participation as central to the development process. Participatory researchers found that several aspects of their methodology has been part and parcel of social and political movements as long as movements have existed.

The participatory research tradition continues to be reinforced and re-vitalised in the present day context. Discussions abound on the 'new politics of science' which suggests that science based on

instrumental rationality, the logic of manipulation and control of nature (both material and human) has been the basic instrument of ensuring continued hegemony of the ruling classes.

Alongside, many new methodological labels have emerged. There is now a growing body of literature available on participatory rural appraisal. This approach to analysing rural reality has evolved innovative techniques and tools which make the process of village based investigation of local reality far more accessible and practical. Similarly, new strength has been given to the formulations of this have emerged in the context of aboriginal educational systems, institutional development and community organisations.

Participatory research has increased dramatically in the last decade. The editor of a special issue on participatory research concluded: No single issue of a journal nor any collection of papers can do justice to the richness and diversity of the debate nor give an adequate overview of "what is going on".(Gayfer, 1981)

## Characteristics of PR

Participatory research is best explained as an integrated activity that combines social investigation, educational work, and action. Some of the main characteristics of PR have been outlined below:

1. PR is a process of knowing and acting. People engaged in PR enhance their understanding of a particular situation and simultaneously, take action to change the situation to their benefit. To that extent, PR attempts to remove the established dichotomy of knowing and utilizing that knowledge. Knowledge for the sake of knowing alone is de-emphasized; knowing is linked to concrete action. This enhances the quality of knowledge as well as informs the basis for action.

Participatory researchers, emphasize the value of useful knowledge and dismisses the abstractions and irrelevancies of more traditional social science ( Hall, Gillette & Tandon, 1982). They also place a high value on developmental changes emphasising research that enable oppressed groups to improve their lives. Recurring value themes in participatory research include equitable distribution of resources empowering oppressed groups, increasing self-reliance, and transforming social structures into more equitable societies (Freire, 1970; Hall, 1981, Fernandes & Tandon, 1981). Therefore, an existing problem provides the initial motivation for engaging in PR. In situations where people are already aware of a problem and articulate enough about it, they themselves may initiate PR. They may or may not use the resources of experts from outside. In other situations, some outsiders, be they activists or educators or researchers, may provide the initial problem focus. However, the involvement of people from the situation in the process, even if it begins with external push, is a necessary element of PR.

3. While participation of people in the processes of knowing and acting is a necessary aspect of PR, the extent and nature of this participation varies considerably. Where initiative to engage in a process of PR comes from people of the situation, their participation is quite widespread. In most such cases, they participate in the methodology of data-collection, analysis of data, planning and taking action etc. In other cases where initiative comes externally, the participation of people from the situation is initially limited but tends to increase in scope and depth as the process moves on.

They may not be so involved in methods of data collection and analysis as they may be in planning and taking action.

4. This leads to the issue of control in PR. The people of the situation must have control over the process of knowing and acting. This is easier when the people themselves initiate the research process. In case of external initiative, it takes a while before people of the situation begin to control the PR. The external party may not relinquish control so easily. This gets further complicated if this external party is an expert. Experts have a tendency to control others; ordinary people tend to voluntarily submit to expert's control. In either event, it is imperative that the process of PR shift control over the process of knowing and knowledge to the people in the situation.

5. Participatory research emphasizes the conservative social implications of overemphasis on social science rigor (Freire, 1970s; Fals Borda) while PR employs conventional methods of data-collection, it also emphasizes qualitative and phenomenological methods which in the conventional sense are considered: "Unscientific". Stresses interpersonal communication among different parties and demands clarification of the motives of external party, if any.

6. One of the most important characteristics of PR is its collective nature. As evolved over the years, the process of PR requires groups of people to engage together. The most important step in this context is collective analysis of a given situation. An important outcome of this characteristic of PR has been the creation of organizations among the poor and the marginalized. The process of PR brings such persons together, and collective sharing, analysis and action generate strong connections between them. Over a period of time, these connections grow into organizations of individuals able to articulate and address their interests.

7. Finally, the process of PR is an educative experience for those engaged in it. The people in the situation become aware and more knowledgeable through their engagement in PR. They become knowledgeable about methods of knowing and analysis; they become aware of their situation and possible ways to change the situation.

## **A re-search into social reality : PR and conventional research compared**

As an alternative therefore, PR challenges the political economy framework of knowledge and knowledge construction in conventional social science research. It 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 dislodge the professional's manipulations of the subjects and methods of research as well as to blow over the myth of objectivity and neutrality in social sciences research. Finally, it is an attempt to restore the processes of knowledge-generation and knowledge-utilisation to the level of problems being experienced daily. The relevance of the PR alternative is best understood by comparing it at this juncture with conventional research methodology.

## **The Definition of Problems**

Definitions of research problems fundamentally shape and constrain results of enquiry. In social science research, researchers define problems in traditional social science research on conceptual and methodological grounds, or they are defined by government and corporate interests with investments in problem solutions. Problem definition in the participatory and action research traditions is influenced by traditions' commitment to "real" problems, for a variety of interest groups may be affected by research results.

Participatory researchers on the other hand are explicit about people's contributions to problem definitions. They also start with the assumption that oppression is a central problem. This perspective has at least three implications: (1) participatory research clients will define problems differently from dominant groups, (2) authority and resources will be controlled largely by other interest groups and (3) dominant interest groups can be expected to resist or attack problem definitions that threaten their positions.

Oppressed groups often recognize problems, even when system authorities do not see any difficulties. The appalachian land ownership research project (Gaventa & Horton, 1981), for example, attacked a problem perceived by the researchers and the alliance of citizens groups, but not by the regional commission. The commission controlled the resources and the authority to support the study, but preferred to define land settlement rather than land ownership as the research problem. The alliance and the researchers had to threaten public exposure to get the commission to accept their definition. Problem definition in this project initiated adversarial interactions between actors with potentially conflicting interests.

## **DATA collection and analysis**

The choices of methods, the types of data, and data collection and analysis procedures are also influenced by interested actors and the distribution of authority and resources. Conventional social science research traditions emphasize data-collection and analysis methodologies, such as

experiments and surveys, that require specially trained researchers and complex experimental or data-processing installations (Diesing, 1971). These methodologies, such as experiments and surveys, that require specially trained researchers and complex experimental or data-processing installations. These methodologies allow researchers to control data even when other actors finance the research. But researchers control may prove counterproductive for research intended to influence nonresearchers. One study of social policy research found conceptual and methodological rigor to be negatively related to impact on social policy making (van de Vall & Bolas, 1977), perhaps because policy makers did not consider the findings relevant.

Participatory research explicitly requires client participation in the control of the entire process" and defines all participants as "researchers" (Hall, 1981, pp.7-8). But not all interested actors can be participants: solidarity with oppressed groups often makes participatory researchers adversaries of dominant groups. Participatory researchers use collaborative data collection and analysis strategies with participants, much like action researchers. They develop "education for critical consciousness" (Freire, 1974) and methods of "collective analysis" (Barndt 1981). But, in addition of this, they seek information from unwilling sources, who use control over vital information to oppress their clients. The participatory research tradition uses "militant observers" (Darcy de Oliveira & Darcy de Oliveira, 1975), investigative and advocacy research (Laue, 1978), and "conflict methodologies" of various kinds (Lehmann & Young, 1975) to extract information from uncooperative adversaries.

### Use of Results

Access to or control over findings, decisions about dissemination, and choices of how to link results to implementation are important issues for researchers. The political economy perspective directs attention to actors interested in result utilization, distributions of authority and resources among them, and costs and benefits of utilization decisions. When pragmatic consequences of research are not obvious, interested actors may be limited to other researchers of funding agencies concerned with basic problems. Participatory research, however, explicitly seek pragmatic results

and so may involve many interests in utilization decisions. For example, contract research supported by government agencies or corporations may involve many interested actors.

Participatory research explicitly calls for improving the lot of oppressed groups, and participatory researchers seek research outcomes that will change the status quo. So at least three sets of actors have interests in research outcomes; the researchers, their clients, and their opponents. Opponents often monopolize formal authority and resources; researchers have training and expertise; client groups have information, energy, and time.

Participatory research explicitly calls for improving the lot of oppressed groups, and participatory researchers seek research outcomes that are often inimical to the interests of other groups. Gaventa and Horton's (1981) project demonstrated the land ownership is concentrated in a few absentee land-holders - a fact already recognized by poor residents but not by government policy makers. The project also sought to create new actors, such as trained citizens, informed networks and mobilized regional constituencies. The researchers expected new data and new actors to strengthen the representation of poor people in negotiations with such established interests as major landowners and the regional commission.

Participatory researchers explicitly join one set of actors in a social system fragmented by conflicting interests. That choice is expensive, for the researchers must give up some access to authority and resources. Participatory research saks "fundamental transformation" of societies, and the price may well be conflict with existing authorities and resource holders.

### PR Approach & Methods

It might be worthwhile to enumerate what a PR approach might entail concretely. Figure-I is an attempt to chart the steps of an "Ideal" Participatory Research approach. One major element of Participatory Research that is missing in this "ideal" model is the ideological/normative stance. To the extent that participatory research approach is an attempt to break away from unidirectional control of the professional researcher, at is to be consistent in its definition of "actors in the

problem situation". Therefore, participatory research approaches solely in response to and for the fulfilment of the needs of the less powerful, weaker segments of a social setting.

it is important to note however that:

(i) The "ideal" participatory research process may come from the powerless actors in the situation. But in reality, this may not be so. The process may start by someone powerful within the situation, or outside it. Yet, the researcher can transform it into a participatory research approach by following some later steps, provided his/her ideological stance is explicit.

(ii) Various steps outlined in figure-1 appear to be one-shot, fixed steps. In reality, a participatory research process has to be cyclical and iterative. For example, joint agreement may need to be worked and reworked many time, over the entire cycle.

(iii) 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 inquire into and change their situation as a valued outcome. To what extent, an outside researcher will become redundant soon.

#### Initial contributions of participatory research

This section started with a discussion on political economy and knowledge production and how it has limited epistemological option available to us. It is in this context that we have to examine and explore the initial contributions of participatory research as an alternative social science research methodology. The following section will build on these contributions in the broader context of social development.

#### Valuing people's knowledge

In the face of continuing delegitimizing of people's knowledge and alternative systems of knowledge production, a major contribution of participatory research is to strengthen the forces of relegitimizing people's knowledge. Counter forces must be established to demonstrate that popular knowledge and alternative systems of knowledge production continue to be practiced by the poor in support of their daily struggle and survival. One of its major contributions, for example, is the rediscovery of traditional health practices as important ways of sustaining health in community. Other areas include traditional agricultural practices, systems of irrigation and water management, protection of forests and other natural resources. However, it has to be recognized that these alternative forces continue to face the growing onslaught unleashed from the dominant system of knowledge production.

### **Refining capacities**

The second major contribution of participatory research has been the recapturing and refining of ordinary people's capacities in conducting their own research. This entails enhancing their self confidence in their capacities in order for them analyze their situation and to develop solutions. In doing so the analytical and critical facilities of ordinary people which have been undermined and undervalued can be reinstated.

### **Appropriating knowledge**

A third major contribution of participatory research is the assistance it provides to ordinary people appropriating the knowledge produced by the dominant system. In contemporary societies the dominant system produces knowledge about various socio-economic phenomena and processes, in particular about the conditions of the poor. Participatory research has assisted the poor their organisations in acquiring, incorporating, appropriating and reinterpreting the knowledge produced by the dominant system for their own use.

### **People's perspective**

The fourth contribution of participatory research has been the development of knowledge that is relevant to ordinary people in struggle. Participatory research has uncovered pertinent questions like alienation from the land and other natural resources, the continued struggle to resist the forces of domination - questions which are not the focus of inquiry in the dominant system of knowledge production. These are questions that are derived from the perspective of the ordinary people themselves.

### **Liberating the minds**

And finally, participatory research has contributed to the forces of liberating the minds of the poor and the oppressed by helping them reflect on their situation, regain their capacities to analyze and critically examine their reality, and to reject the continued domination and hegemony of the elite and the ruling classes. By encouraging critical reflection, questioning and the continuous pursuit of inquiry, participatory research liberates the minds of the poor and the oppressed, and challenges dominant forces.

### **Continuities and ambiguities**

The early writings on participatory research have been the focus of great attention, both by the protagonists and the antagonists. The conceptual, practical, epistemological and methodological critiques of participatory research pointed out several ambiguities in theory and inconsistencies in practice. A decade later, with the development of practice and the refining of theory, participatory researchers can respond to these ambiguities and inconsistencies.

Four categories of ambiguities were highlighted in the writings on participatory research about a decade ago. These ambiguities related to the objectives of participatory research, the role of the researchers and the participants, the methods of research, and the results of research.

The primary objective of participatory research is the production of knowledge and encouraging the poor and oppressed, and those who work with them, to generate their own knowledge, control

their knowledge and control the means of production of knowledge. Awareness as an educational process is a by product of this process of participatory research. In pursuing knowledge, the ordinary people experience and educational process and as a result become aware of forces that control them and delegitimize their experiences and competencies. But awareness as an educational experience is not the primary objective. Social changes has never been a direct outcome of participatory research and therefore it cannot be construed as one of its objectives. Social transformation requires several types of intervention: organizing, mobilizing, struggle, knowledge (control over knowledge, control over means of production of knowledge, appropriating knowledge produced by the dominant system). Participatory research can make a small but important contribution to the social change process but it cannot lead directly to social transformation.

The second ambiguity is related to the question of the roles of researchers and participants. This ambiguity arises out of those of us who have been products of the elite system of knowledge production, who have rejected that system, and who are trying to find relevance for ourselves in the context of the alternative system. We are called researchers. For ordinary people in participatory research, the distinction between the researcher and the participant is irrelevant - they are both. For us, it becomes difficult to behave as participants in the ongoing social realities of the poor and the oppressed because we are not part of it. We must therefore try to focus on the processes of participatory research and the alternative system of knowledge production. Participatory research is a collective process of inquiry, as opposed to individualistic nature of classical research methodology. As a collective process, therefore, it rejects the separation of roles and the emphasis on the researcher as an individual. In fact, there is a danger in this type of separation of roles because it reinforces the division of labour between the mental and the manual-the researchers and the participant. Do researchers like us who have been trained in the dominant system but who have rejected it in favour of the alternative system have a role to play in our system of choice.

Formally trained researchers like us can contribute our skills and expertise by bringing additional information and constructs produced from the dominant system to the service of the alternative

system and the processes of appropriating such constructs. Those of us who have a philosophical faith in the underlying principles of participatory research, have a definite role in contemporary context and must play that deliberately and actively.

This is a manifestation of one of the inconsistencies in the actual practice of participatory research. Many of the contemporary experiences and illustrations of participatory research seem to involve professionally trained researchers. But then this is the very nature of dialectics - the contradictions being the basis for further movements and change. In fact, the use of the label "participatory research" came from those of us who were trained in the classical methodology. yet, as many of us began to question the empiricist, behaviourist and controlling tenets of the dominant paradigm, we began to sow the seeds of an alternative view of knowledge and its production. It is this dialectic which promoted several of us to recognize the alternative paradigm of knowledge and system of production of knowledge and to promote participatory research as its methodology.

The next ambiguity involve methods. Historically, references have been made to methods which are appropriate to participatory research and others which are inappropriate. Methods of data collection which are qualitative in character have been seen as more appropriate to participatory research, while survey and other quantitative methods of data collection are seen as irrelevant. If concrete information has to be collected from a large number of people in a given situation for strengthening people's action, surveys and questionnaires are appropriate.

Participatory research is the methodology of the alternative system of knowledge production. It is not a set of tools, techniques and methods. Embodying the values and philosophy of alternative and popular systems of knowledge production, it is based on the belief that ordinary people are capable of understanding and transforming their reality. Its articles of faith include a commitment to collective participation, and empowerment of the ordinary people in having and knowing their world; in envisioning a new society; and in playing their collective roles in that process of transformation. It is this faith in the participation of ordinary people that also acts as the philosophical basis for participatory research methodology. The determinants of this participation in participatory research are three fold:

1. People's role in setting the agenda of inquiry.
2. People's participation in data collection and analysis, and
3. People's control over the use of outcome and the whole process.

Practice shows that different combinations of the three determinants have been employed.

Additional methods of data collection which do not rely on the written word have been used in several examples of participatory research. These methods derive from the oral traditions of communications and dissemination of knowledge like songs, dramas and music which express ideas in a way that is an integral part of the life of ordinary people in our societies.

The fourth ambiguity, results of the participatory research, relate to the objectives. The primary outcome of participatory research efforts is new knowledge or a fresh syntheses of old knowledge. Learning by the people and becoming organized are by-products of the collective pursuit of knowledge. The primary result is knowledge. Who uses the results? Do people control the use of results?

The question of the relevance of participatory research presents a new challenge. It has been argued that participatory research is relevant only in developing countries. This argument seems to negate the existence of developing work situations in the developed countries. If we continue the exploration of participatory research and contemporary representation of the alternative system of knowledge production by the poor and the oppressed, then whenever such people exist, (and they do exist in the North as they do in the South today) such systems of knowledge production exist. As a result, participatory research as a means of strengthening alternative systems of knowledge production can be practiced anywhere, irrespective of the North and the South divide and irrespective of the socio-political and geographical context of a given country. If we also look at the contributions of participatory research as referred to earlier, this confusion disappears. These contributions can be made in any society.

## Links to social movements

What have been the links between participatory research and contemporary social movements? Historically systems have been related to and based on the ordinary people's need to survive which has meant maintaining close links with the struggle of people. In its contemporary manifestation, participatory research must discover, as well as built such links to the people's struggles and social movements.

The links of participatory research with contemporary social movements have varied in different parts of the world depending on the strength and location of those movements. It also seems that voluntary organizations, grassroots practitioners, development workers and other catalysts of social change have been providing the major momentum to the practice and conceptualization of participatory research around the world. Four social movements in particular have links with the participatory research movement.

The movement to preserve natural resources provides one such link. In different parts of the world, movements have emerged in response to lack of access to and control over natural resources like land, water and forests, by the poor and ordinary people. The centralized, elite-controlled, development strategy is leading to dispossession of the poor and displacement from their traditional access to and ownership of natural resources. Degradation of natural resources has been another major consequence of the current development strategy being followed worldwide. These issues have been the rallying points of the natural resources movement. Participatory research has contributed by helping ordinary people to generate new knowledge and to appropriate knowledge produced by the dominant system.

Participatory research has developed links with the workers' movement, particularly workers in the unorganized and the informal sectors of the economy. The struggles of rural labourers, informal sector workers and women workers on issues of wages, rights, workplace health and safety, and living conditions in slums and housing colonies, have been the areas where participatory research practice has played an active role. It has also served to highlight their own experiences as workers

to provide them with a legitimate basis for the representation of their rights in society. In some contexts, workers' takeover of economic enterprises in order to collectively manage and control them has been the focus of participatory research efforts. Workers' cooperatives in different parts of the world have also provided links with participatory research in several countries. Workers' inquiry as an ongoing theme of the struggles of the working class as an integral component of that struggle seems to be the basis for the links to this social movement.

Participatory research and the women's movement have well-grounded links. The special experiences of women as women, the recognition of unique modes of inquiry have been the basis for establishing these links with participatory research. The points of interaction between the two have included the struggle to overthrow women's double oppression to be treated as persons in their own right; the formation of women's organizations; the efforts to expose domestic violence; and the struggle to gain equal and just status for women in society.

The human rights and peace movements have been arenas for links with participatory research. In many societies with military dictatorships the daily violation of human rights has been the basis for organizing social movements. The links to participatory research, however, are fairly weak at the moment.

The links of participatory research with contemporary social movements are theoretically inevitable yet practically very difficult. Our earlier elaboration of the concepts and the origins in the meaning of participatory research makes the establishment of close links with contemporary social movements inevitable because of the nature of the struggles. Yet it is very difficult to establish these links when professionally trained researchers are involved in trying to support the alternative systems of knowledge production. Nevertheless, participatory research must be used to strengthen the alternative systems of knowledge production. The links between the two are historically necessary. The future practice of participatory research needs to focus on these links in order to realise its historical potential as a contribution to contemporary efforts at social transformation.

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