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Chapter 6

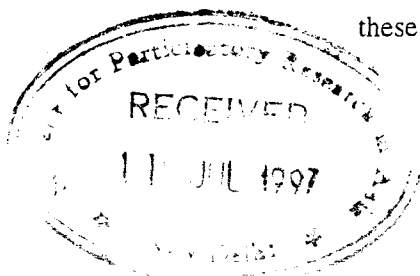
Towards an epistemology of participatory research

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It was sometime during 1968, in my first year of college, that I read Dostoevsky's Crime and punishment, which provided a passionate critique of money, economy and a vivid description of the inhuman impact of money-lending and interest. Once, in the economics class, while the teacher was explaining theories of interest, I could not resist raising certain questions about the attempts to rationalise an inhuman practice which was rampantly prevalent in our society. The point of debate in the classroom was on the Liquidity Preference Theory of Interest, which, as a natural consequence, led to the question of distribution. For about half an hour the teacher tried to argue in a scholarly manner but suddenly he became very serious. He confessed that though some of my arguments were making a lot of sense, he was being paid a salary to teach something different and the students could get the grades only on writing the same theories during the exams. So, the teacher suggested that I not waste the time of others in the class in such futile debates. As a democratic gesture towards me, he suggested that I not attend the class and yet promised me full attendance to fulfil the bureaucratic requirements of the university.

At this juncture, I stopped attending my classes for a couple of weeks and tried to reflect upon my entire experience of the education system. The scenario looked quite frightening. I realised that the values related to profit, accumulation, interest and individualism are grilled into us from our very childhood. All four basic operations of mathematics i.e. addition, subtraction, multiplication and division are taught to us through questions framed around these values during our primary and elementary education.



During our times, profit-loss, simple interest and compound interest used to be the core of arithmetic throughout the school. As a result, most of my peers became insensitive to these issues and started considering these things sacrosanct.

In the absence of a clear ideological reference point, the world looked like hell in those days. One took recourse in reading through history books to study the phenomenon in-depth.

Time has testified that I chose the right direction by seeking recourse in history and going back to the classics, as advised by the elders.

Today, since most of us from Asia, Africa and Latin America are struggling against the same values, and the clutches of international monetary and market systems are instrumental in perpetuating 'status-quoism' and anti-people power correlations in most of our countries, we are obliged to place the philosophy of Participatory Research (PR) in this historical context. Even the journey of PR Networks through the last fifteen years is full of experiences which provide ample evidence that PR is neither a mean critique of conventional research methodology nor a set of tools and techniques, as attempts in the past have been made to prove. It is necessary to develop an epistemological framework of PR with an historical perspective and with a vision of totality.

Lessons from history

Knowledge and the control over its production and use has been an effective instrument in the hands of rulers, ever since societies got divided into rulers and those who were ruled. If the armed organisations of the state have been instrumental in protecting the physical boundaries and control of power, the control over knowledge and information have been instrumental in providing the rational and moral basis for that power to perpetuate itself. The function of sustaining the psyche conducive for acceptance of a specific power-relation had been solely performed through control over knowledge and information throughout history.

The attempts by the custodians of knowledge (Brahmins in the case of India) during the ancient period to prove that the 'King is a Reflection of God' or the attempts of officially sanctioned specialists in contemporary times to rectify and rationalise every act of 'power', irrespective of its implication on societies, are the same phenomenon.

The industrial revolution in modern times led to the commercialisation of all human values. Even knowledge was conveniently converted to a mere commodity. The conditions of knowledge production also acquired the characteristics of an industry, i.e. the production and distribution of knowledge were guided by the demands of the market on the basis of equations of input and output.

The directions of the formal knowledge systems were decided by the requirements of those controlling the power. All the advances made in the field of information technology during the twentieth century tend to centralise control over knowledge production and its use in favour of those dominating the power correlation.

Historically, in most of the developing societies the mode of control over formal systems of knowledge production and distribution are of a similar nature. Such controls may be categorised into three. Historically, in most of the developing societies the modes of control over formal systems of knowledge production and distribution are of a similar nature. Such controls may be categorised into three types: structural, linguistic and thematic.

Structural control

During every stage of social development throughout history there have been certain controls which debarred the entry of the common mass into the fold of formal systems of knowledge production and distribution. In ancient India it was prerogative of only 'twice-borns' (specific social strata) to indulge in knowledge production and its use. The people performing menial functions in the society were debarred even from listening to the scriptures. The historical incidents provide ample evidence that whenever someone from the ranks of

lower strata of society tried to acquire knowledge, the person was severely punished. These types of structural control were certainly crude and got washed away in the post-industrial revolution wave of 'equality, fraternity and liberty'. Certainly, when the dominant mode of production in society was not in a position to discriminate between human beings on the basis of their birth, how could the formal system of knowledge production do so? Even more so, the rise of industry demanded more and more skilled working hands, the doors of formal systems of knowledge production were opened for 'everyone' to the extent of preparing them to operate machines, etc. High levels of knowledge production and use still remained the prerogative of those who could afford the high costs.

A number of developing societies like India, claimed to hold on to the values of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' and thus, in principle, opened the doors of the formal system of knowledge production and use for everyone. But the conditions of rampant poverty debarred the masses from taking advantage of the gesture of goodwill made by the dominant sections.

In India, attempts have been made over the last forty years to create two tiers of non-formal systems of knowledge exchange. There is one set of facilities for the elite which prepare technocrats, bureaucrats and managers, and there is another set to prepare workers, clerks and consumers.

So, even today, in our societies the strategy to perpetuate conditions of poverty through monetary and market manipulations marginalises the majority of the populace from the formal systems of knowledge production and their utilisation.

Linguistic control

This relates to the medium of instruction used in formal systems. In India the formal systems of knowledge production and use, throughout history, had a medium of instruction which was never the language of the masses. During the ancient period we had 'Sanskrit', a language which only the uppermost strata in the society was allowed to use. Even women were prohibited from using that

language. In some parts of today's India we see the introduction of 'Persian', which was again not the language of the masses. The colonial era, then, introduced English as the medium of instruction, which we are faithfully following still. At all points in history this has helped in keeping the field of knowledge production and usage inaccessible to the masses. This has been an effective instrument of monopolistic control over knowledge and information by those dominating the power-relations in our societies. It is this monopolistic control which leads to the ideological and cultural hegemony of dominant sections.

Another dimension of such linguistic control is related to the cultures linked with these languages and their impact. Even if some people work hard and transcend the linguistic barriers, they fall flat because of not being able to internalise the culture attached to that language. It is only the second- and third-generation users of these languages who get entry into the cliques of the elites monopolising knowledge and information.

The most apparent implication of such a process in our modern societies of modern times is that the people who somehow get entry into the formal systems of knowledge production and usage, start looking down upon their own community, language and culture and thus get alienated from their own people.

Thematic control

The content or the issues which the formal system of knowledge production and usage address are also the means to control, by those dominating the power correlation in our societies. Along with the structural and linguistic controls, the content of formal system of knowledge exchange had always been of the status quo. During the ancient and medieval period in Indian history, such controls were explicitly pronounced as policies of the formal system of knowledge production, but in modern times, due to the compulsion of democratic rhetorics, such controls are camouflaged and indirectly exercised through financial regulations and aids.

The example of mathematics education, which is projected as value neutral yet which revolves around profit, loss, accumulation, interest and compound interest, clearly demonstrates the implications of thematic control in perpetuating the status-quo amply. The field of engineering and management education in most of the developing countries is another glaring example of such a control. In India, engineering and science education was heavily funded by the US P.L. 480 grants and had influenced the whole curriculum in such a way that the engineers produced by such institutions were only good for working in the West or with the technologies developed in the Western world. The local conditions and requirements have had no influence over our own engineers. They are trained to design only big buildings, large dams, super power stations and macro irrigation systems, all of which lead to a centralised control, serving the multinational business interests. The appropriate technologies, which would have helped in meeting the basic requirements of the masses, have no place in the curriculum of our professional and technical institutions. The curriculum of medical doctors does not include occupational health and safety issues which endanger the lives of millions of workers. By influencing the content of engineering education in our country, the interests of the developed world and that of big local business, have been able to direct the course of social development as a whole to suit their needs.

Areas of social science and history are always made to serve the purpose of those holding the reins of power.

History also reveals that the formal systems of knowledge production and its use were never the only channels of knowledge creating at any given point. Outside the purview of the controls of formal systems, there always existed systems and mechanisms where people themselves created knowledge relevant to them. Although there has never been much research or written-work done on these systems and mechanisms for obvious reasons, the developments in historical writings during the last two decades do make tangible references to this phenomenon. For example, communities and villages in our society, until recently, had some mechanism for gathering information every day which

served the purpose of transferring knowledge from elders to the younger generation and exchanging experiences, all of which led to the enhancement of existing knowledge. Most societies and communities in developing societies have a strong tradition of verbal knowledge transfer and creation of a knowledge bank which is the contribution of such a mechanism only.

Indian history, as it is available today, is full of instances where issues consequential to the lives of the masses were raised and resolved through these mechanisms. People sought recourse in these mechanisms for their problems, related to their livelihood and social relationships. All the movements challenging the different aspects of 'status-quoism' in history grew and drew strength from such mechanisms.

Thus, history points out the parallel existence of two types of systems of knowledge production and its use: the first being the formal system with all its burden of serving sectional interests and mechanisms of control, and the second one operating within the communities as part of larger social practices. While a lot is written about the former, the latter still needs to be explored in depth. Both these systems of knowledge production have distinctive means and relationships of production.

If we go deeper into analysing the means and relationships of knowledge production and its use, within the framework of such a historical perspective, we may be able to identify some broader characteristics of such modes of knowledge production. Now for better articulation purposes, I suggest that we refer to the formal system as a 'dominant mode' of knowledge production and its use, and refer to the latter as the 'popular mode'.

Characteristics of the dominant mode of knowledge production

A closer look at the formal systems of knowledge production and usage through Indian history highlights some of the following characteristics.

Isolation

The formal system of knowledge production in India has always been isolated from the day-to-day life in our society. In India we had the tradition of Gurukula where disciples used to come and stay for years with these teachers. These places were in remote forests, totally cut off from the rest of the society as a rule. Suspending links with families and all other human relationships was a prerequisite for joining the ranks of those involved in the profession of knowledge production.

The basic element of 'isolation' in this tradition seemed to have percolated down from history to even modern times. The formal systems of higher learning even today are organised in the same way. Such organisation of the system of knowledge production and its use, makes isolation from real life imperative to those willing to join the elite club. This process makes them special when they go back to their communities and as a consequence they become isolated from their own people.

Individualistic pursuit

Throughout history, the act of acquisition and utilisation of knowledge in our society has been considered as an individualistic pursuit. The end of the pursuit of knowledge is always seen as an individual gain or a matter of personal satisfaction.

In modern times, due to the commercialisation of values of life and the existence of a perpetual rat-race to find a niche in the system, this element of our age-old tradition has compounded in manifold ways.

The issues of social relevance of knowledge created through these formal systems and of the social obligations of those in possession of such knowledge are thrown into the background, thus isolating the noble process of knowledge production even further and identifying it as a specialised profession.

Accumulative nature

The first two characteristics contribute to creating a possessiveness about knowledge (and information), and encourage its use for carving out a position for the individual in power mechanisms. Thus, the people involved in knowledge production tend to accumulate more and more knowledge. Sharing this wealth of knowledge with others, for whom it may be more useful, is not part of the value system of the dominant mode of knowledge production.

Abstract issues and sectional interests

The substance of knowledge produced and used in the dominant mode generally deals with abstract issues and serves sectional interests, those dominating the power correlation.

In the ancient period of Indian history, the substance of knowledge production was devoted to metaphysical issues related to life and death and concentrated upon learning of scriptures and use of arms. In modern times the major thrust of the system is on projection of GNP, etcetera, and on development of 'Star wars' programs, which are totally inclined towards perpetuating the control of a powerful few over the powerless many.

Centralised control

An individualistic pursuit (of accumulative nature) of abstract issues in sectional interests, creates conditions conducive to centralised control. The whole process of knowledge production and use in this mode leads to the creation of a class of specialists with high stakes for survival which turn them into instruments of control. Financial support has been the most effective means of control throughout the history of humankind. The state and sections of society with a larger stake in state functioning are the ones financing the formal systems of knowledge production of this type. Such shared stakeholdings of those dominating the power correlation and those specialising in knowledge production have facilitated centralised control throughout history.

Perpetuation of 'status-quoism'

Perpetuation of 'status-quoism' has been the most basic characteristic of the dominant mode of knowledge throughout history, as elaborated in previous sections. With advancement and investment in information technology on the lines of the above-mentioned characteristics, the implications of this function of dominant mode are becoming of more consequence for us, nationally and globally.

Characteristics of the popular mode of knowledge production

Interaction

The process of knowledge creation and its use in the popular mode had always been like a social event. People acquire knowledge, contribute to the development of knowledge, and make use of that knowledge while carrying out their daily chores. For them, this process is a part of their daily routine.

Interaction in terms of exchange of experiences, ideas, stories, songs, anecdotes, etcetera, is the core of this process of knowledge-creation. It is this characteristic which makes the popular mode an interactive mode of knowledge production and use.

Collective pursuit

In the popular mode, the function of knowledge acquisition and use becomes a collective pursuit as against being an individual pursuit in the dominant mode. The interactive nature of the popular mode makes it imperative upon the process of knowledge production and its use to be a collective process. It is through mutual sharing and collective action that people generate or evolve new knowledge.

Disseminative nature

The popular mode, by its basic nature of being interactive and collective, ensures dissemination of knowledge and information as against the

accumulative character of the dominant mode. Dissemination, in a way, is inbuilt in the process of knowledge-creation. Along with the interactive and collective nature of the popular mode, its disseminative character works as a source of its strength.

Concrete and common issues

Historically, and by virtue of its nature, the popular mode tends to address itself to concrete and common issues. The interactiveness and collectiveness of the process ensures the concreteness and commonness of the issues it tackles. These issues generally relate to the livelihood and survival of the common people and the common interest of the masses.

Decentralisation

Due to the basic characteristics explained before, the popular mode tends to create a decentralised system which may be developed as a system of knowledge production and usage. Because of its inherent situation and culture-specificity, the popular mode operates in conditions which are not at all conducive to any kind of centralisation or control. The popular mode, due to its tenets, defies the creation of any kind of monopoly over knowledge, its production and its use. It is a decentralised mode in letter and in spirit.

Questioning 'status-quoism' (seeking transformation)

Though one does not have enough evidence from history to proclaim that the popular mode of knowledge production and its use is the sole factor responsible for any kind of transformation in our societies, the evidence from history does suggest that in every effort of social transformation the basic tenets and processes of the popular mode of knowledge production and use have substantially contributed in strengthening the efforts.

From Indian history, several instances ranging from challenges to the ancient Brahmanical control, to struggling against colonial rule, can be cited where elements of the popular mode were extensively used.

The writings on PR available to date suggest that, in a way, PR is an attempt to reinforce, refine and enhance the popular mode in the contemporary context. The practice of PR during the last fifteen years has explicitly highlighted the need to explore further the existence and role of the popular mode in different societies, and draws strength from this heritage. Though the term 'participatory research' in present times may have been coined only fifteen years back, the roots of its epistemology lie in the age-old traditions of the popular mode of knowledge production and its utilisation.

The characteristics of the popular mode of knowledge production provides PR with the epistemological basis from which to draw strength.

What is to be done?

Centuries of systematic undermining of popular mode of knowledge production had successfully paralysed the faith of people on their own systems. The power of printed works and supremacy of institutional expertise had invaded the mass psyche following the flag of industrialisation and market economy in the remotest possible communities.

Despite our faith in people, their willingness and capacity to learn and change, and our wish to reinforce the people's systems of knowledge production and use, it is almost impossible to reverse the direction of history. But the frustrations and disillusionment among some of those professionally trained as experts in their respective disciplines led to evolving a critique of the dominant mode and ventured to transcend the boundaries to certainly initiate a process of interaction which through experiences have evolved strategies for reinforcement of the popular mode. Linking knowledge production to the field of people's action was definitely a starting point in this direction. The concepts of praxis, organic intelligentsia and action research are important land marks in such chain reactions.

The experiences around all these concepts have thrown up some fundamental questions such as who sets the agenda for social inquiry? Who is involved in the process of inquiry? In whose interests is the outcome of inquiry used?

The underlining thrust of such questions have remained an issue of control by people over the systems of knowledge production and its use. The attempts in the past in this direction point out a gradual movement from 'use of research in favour of people's interest and actions' to 'involving people in the process of research' and then preparing people to set up the agenda for social enquiry.

Substantial contributions have been made in acceleration of such movement by the processes of appropriation, adaptation and incorporation of knowledge produced through the dominant mode in strengthening the base of people's knowledge for the creation of their own knowledge.

In order to enhance and strengthen the processes facilitating people's control over knowledge production and its use, the precondition is to break the 'culture of silence' by enhancement of people's self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence.

This is precisely the reason why PR should situate itself in the processes of people's empowerment and organisation.

What are we doing?

In the beginning of the 1980s we began an organised effort to promote the practice and enhance the understanding of participatory research in the Asian region. The first step in this direction was to develop the roots of our own practice in India before playing a wider role. The analysis of the situation at that time made it clear that thousands of small grassroots initiatives were already in existence and devoted to facilitating the process of empowerment and organisation among the urban and rural poor. This has helped us to evolve a strategy of enhancing the capacities of such grassroots initiatives through educational interventions based on participatory research philosophy.

We began by getting involved in the issues which the grassroots initiatives were taking up, that is, people's access and control over natural resources; women and development issues of urban poor; workers' education; occupational health and safety; and many other related areas.

The basic thrust of our work was on capacity building within grassroots initiatives for strengthening the knowledge base of their own actions and thus reducing their dependence on expertise from the dominant mode. Within a couple of years, our interventions had acquired three distinct dimensions: first, sensitising the initiatives to different aspects of the issues; secondly, assisting the initiatives in building the capacity to understand and analyse their reality with a view to evolve appropriate action; and thirdly, to support a strengthening knowledge base of their actions and struggles. Involvement of this kind has tremendously helped us in building credibility by taking stands on the issues, on the one hand, and by being responsive in times of need on the other.

While facilitating such educational intervention, we have enhanced our own understanding of participatory research, participatory training and participatory evaluation. We became clearer that along with enhancement of knowledge base of people's action, it is important to strengthen the grassroots initiatives of organisations in order for them to play the role of vehicles of peoples' aspirations for directing the process of change to their advantage. This realisation made us interpret the theories of organisational dynamics and development within the framework of grassroots initiatives and participatory research framework and intervene to build capacities in grassroots initiatives to guide the processes and directions of their organisational development by themselves.

The application of a pedagogy based on experiential learning that helps create respect for their own experience and knowledge, and facilitates the process of building understanding on that base, has helped in initiating a process of empowerment among those involved in empowering the marginalised and powerless. This has also helped in creating a sense of ownership and responsibility of their own learning.

Challenges for the future

Specificity of context

Participatory research needs to be interpreted and defined in the specific context of each situation and culture. It needs to establish coherence and linkages with the heritage of the popular mode of knowledge production in each community.

Evolution of techniques and tools

Participatory research needs to reduce its dependence upon the techniques and tools of social enquiry borrowed from the dominant mode of knowledge production. The techniques and tools should not be taken as value-free phenomena, because that tends to dilute and distort the basic tenets of our epistemology.

Reference of validation

At this stage, PR should stop seeking validation from the frame of reference of dominant modes of knowledge production. Instead, it needs to seek validation from the tenets of its own epistemology. Since individuals representing the dominant mode are constantly criticising and brow-beating the reinforcement and refinement of popular modes of knowledge production, this task becomes more urgent, in spite of its complexities. Falling back upon the frame of reference of the dominant mode for validation, creates conditions for co-option of participatory research into the dominant mode of knowledge production and use. Participatory research may become just another set of techniques, for example, in some forms of participant observation and action research.