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Issues and Experiences in Participatory Research in Asia

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The concept and meaning of Participatory Research (PR) has been amply discussed in the various articles and seminars during the past three years. While it is important to briefly indicate my own understanding of PR, this paper is primarily an attempt to put together some key characteristics of PR in Asia. The paper is based on the recent meetings held in India and Thailand as well as a number of reports received from the various researchers.

PR is an attempt, in my view, to move beyond the chocking limitations of classical social sciences research. Classical social sciences research has modelled itself after the natural sciences research paradigms 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, 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 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.

Given this orientation of PR, the rest of the paper will describe the special experiences in Asia as well as the major issues raised from these experiences.

Characteristics of experiences of Participatory Research in Asia:

The concept of participatory research, as it is translated in the Asian experience, brings out the following salient characteristics:

a) PR has been, in its broad and loose meaning, a historical and ongoing process in Asia. While the label of this approach is relatively recent, it is quite common to come across examples of people engaged in similar efforts in various parts of Asia. The organisation of landless labourers in Dholia District of the State of Maharashtra in India has used similar methodology in identifying the records of peoples whose land was illegally alienated from them. Similarly, the Rural Development Laboratory in South Korea utilised similar approach to ascertain the extent of functional illiteracy and indebtedness among the villages.

The relevance of this characteristic for PR is to recognise that while the label is new, the approach has existed in practice over the years. Moreover, while the labelling of concepts is an activity of professional researchers, ordinary people somehow do not see their approaches in similar conceptual framework. Therefore, the PR is a new approach for us; It is an accepted and pragmatic approach for those in the field. This poses significant questions for the development of PR approach. For example, do we have a single, well defined and well articulated PR approach? Are we clear that the range represented by those engaged in PR (from professional researchers located in universities to semi-literate field workers in the villages) necessarily implies tensions which need to be addressed in a inclusive manner?

b) A Related characteristic that deserves mention here is the range of people and their diverse motivation to PR. In the Asian context, there are at least three sets of people and motivations. One set comprises of those who have been trained professionally in the traditional empiricist paradigm of traditional social science research. They have moved into PR due to the frustration with existing forms of research. For this set, the reality has remained untouched and unchanged despite tremendous development in research technology. They noticed that despite increased volume of printed material, the life of ordinary people has remained unchanged. Moreover, the institutionalisation of research in the universities and other such institutes has led to a monopolistic control over the research on one hand, and a distance of research from ordinary people. For this set of researchers, such an irrelevance of social science research is intolerable in the context of the poor societies of Asia.

The second set of motivation is related to the need to redirect the processes of development in the various Asian countries. The failure of existing programmes and models of development is being well established. These are the activists and field workers who have experienced frustrations & anger over the misdirection of our developmental strategies. For them, PR is a possible alternative to provide momentum to decentralised alternative models of development - development of the people with their active participation. They are engaged in localised experiments in PR to try out these alternative models of development.

Education as a means of social transformation is the underlying motivation of the third set. For this set of people, research is a learning and educational experience and, therefore, should be attempted in a manner that facilitates society level change. Unless research contributes to learning and unless that learning is wide-spread (to include those who are part of that setting), research is a meaningless activity. To that extent, PR has been found the relevant approach to education and learning.

c) The size of rural populations in Asian countries as well as the complexities of developmental dynamics have contributed to the overwhelming rural context for participatory research in Asia. The best examples of PR efforts in Asia are presently available from the rural context only. The Farmers Assistance Board in Philippines, The Peoples Health Centre in Bangladesh, the Integrated Rural Development Programme of Thailand and the Joint Irrigation Systems among Tribals of Southern Rajasthan in India are some of the examples of PR in Asia.

This is an important characteristic of PR in several ways. Firstly, the rural context of PR in Asia has highlighted the relevance of PR in developmental efforts. Secondly, this rural context of PR in Asia aptly compliment the somewhat more urban contexts of PR in Europe and North America. Thirdly, it can provide for suitable illustrations for future research in other developing countries outside Asia. For example, the efforts of Tanzania, Venezuela and Chile have immensely contributed to our own understanding in Asia. Fourthly, dynamics of research and its costs in poor countries of Asia can be reexamined through these PR efforts in rural contexts. These efforts demonstrate the value of concentrating in the rural context where the pay-off is likely to be more meaningful.

Issues in Participatory Research in Asia

The Asian 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. Are we in a mood to accept this as an operational definition of PR? Are we brave enough to commit ourself to a research approach which is closely linked with social action? Is it possible, to demark separate identities of PR and community development without ignoring the elements of participatory social action?

b) To the extent that PR in Asia 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 organisation of landless tribal labourers is to link enquiry with the political dynamics of the setting. To join with the farmers in Philippines 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 in Bangladesh 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, therefore, become more visible in the existing political contexts of Asian countries. While some of these countries are explicitly oppressive in silencing political opposition, others are much more subtle. The consequences of such oppressive political and governmental systems in Asian 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 in Asia has led to a certain amount of hesitation on the part of many to associate themselves with any PR effort. On the other hand, it is made many activists and field workers informed about the value of PR. Most importantly, the information about such PR efforts and the usage of that information become extremely critical in this context. It is possible that some of us might be acting in a naive fashion by advertising various PR efforts in Asia.

c) The rural Asian context is primarily unorganised. The under-privileged, whether landless labourers or urban slum-dwellers or women, are primarily unorganised. In most of these Asian countries in fact, in a large measure, their state of poverty, exploitation and helplessness are related to this non-organisation. To initiate PR with such groups of under-privileged people in Asia 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 an organisation, the PR efforts will become the unilateral manipulation by an outsider. To that extent, initiating PR efforts with such unorganised groups of people in Asia 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 sheer 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 Asian societies are unorganised in comparison with more developed countries in the world, any PR efforts in such countries has to be simultaneously an effort at building organisations.

d) The Asian experience in PR is very diverse in terms of the method utilised as well as the entry point. In some efforts, the entry point has been land, in others it has been health. In some other, PR effort 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 these PR efforts. Are there any optimal combinations of various methods in PR? Does PR imply a total exclusion of classical methods of research? Are there any guidelines for the choice of entry point as well as methods? These questions acquire a saliency in the light of wide range of Asian experience in PR.

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 Asian experience shows, any rigorous prescriptions for a method in PR might lead to the exclusion of those experiences which are wholly field-placed. 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 aspects of PR.

e) One of the critical issues in PR which has been repeatedly visible in the Asian experience, is the larger implications of PR to 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 basically 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 PR. Second, the behavioral skills required to encourage and sustain participation of people must be possessed by the researchers. These behavioral 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 in Asia because one of the dominant characteristics of the under-privileged is their inability to and fear for participation.

The brief descriptions of experiences and issues in PR in Asia provided above does not do justice to the complexity of the Asian situation. However, these issues do highlight the similarities as well as the differences in participatory research between various parts of the world. It has been possible to bring out these differences largely because the net work of the participatory research is a decentralised regional net work. The ideas and experiences of wide range of people engaged in PR in Asia cannot be summarised in a brief paper like this. However, it is hoped that this paper has been able to raise some important issues for those of us who are concerned about future evolution of participatory research.