

SOCIETY FOR
PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN ASIA

45, Sainik Farm
Khanpur
New Delhi - 110 062.

Report of the Meeting on Participatory Research held at
Dehradun, India April 22 - 24, 1983.

As a follow-up of earlier consultations with partner organizations and like-minded people, this meeting on PR was convened by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). It was intended to bring together a group of persons who varied on their knowledge and experiences in PR such that it may generate new questions and clarifications. It was also hoped that the past activities and role of PRIA will be reviewed and future directions evolved. The agenda, as it evolved in consultation with participants is shown in appendix 1. The meeting was attended by 24 participants (list appended).

The residential nature of the meeting provided opportunity for extended formal and informal interactions. Several sessions in the meeting were held together, and several broken into smaller groups. Thus getting to know each other became a major function of the meeting. The process of the meeting, therefore, was highly informal, flexible and responsive to the needs of a heterogeneous group of participants. Thus a variety of topics and issues got discussed, some more intensely than others. It is difficult to portray the spirit and outcome of such a meeting in a report. Yet, this report briefly enumerates key issues discussed, the review of PRIA and its future directions.

Ideology and Participatory Research

One of the key issues debated in the meeting was the role of ideology in PR. To some people, it was beginning to appear important that some degree of ideological clarity and positioning was necessary for those engaged in PR. It was essentially derived from the increasing importance of why than How - that is, whose interest is PR and knowledge serving? It was observed that 'Who benefits from PR ?'

is a question that we have to ask ourselves repeatedly. Hence, making one's ideological position explicit may be a first step towards resisting cooptation by the system.

On the other hand, it was also said that ideological clarity emerges through praxis. We can have clarity on some issues, but may be quite vague and confused about others. Can we wait for a final thesis or complete clarity? Perhaps not. One way to acquire greater clarity is to engage with people, to act in a concrete situation, to analyse with people.

One aspect of this debate led to an analysis of national scene - the political scene in particular. It was discussed that political parties, state, non-governmental organizations, trade unions etc., are not monolithic structures. Simple generalization about them may not be possible. One may have to examine a concrete situation to decide where to begin. Yet, it was also argued that a minimum macro perspective is necessary to inform micro action and choice. The increasing gap between the party and the class was seen as an important phenomenon in the present political scene. It was suggested by some that PR can contribute to actions with the class in a local situation.

Two other important points were made. First, PR as a contribution to the actions of the class does not become identical with class struggle. And people's research does not imply that PR is a value-free, framework-free, perspective-free facilitation of people's research. Secondly, it was felt that those of us engaged in PR have to perhaps attempt to bring about changes in values and attitudes (say, democratic interaction) in our personal lives and institutions. This may be a beginning in the right direction.

The debate on this topic was at times lively and at times drab. As is perhaps evident, no simple conclusions or common consensus were reached. We perhaps came back with more questions and doubts.

Linkage between Participatory Research,
Participatory Evaluation and Participatory Training

Because of increasing currency of the terms PR, PE and PT, the issue of linkages between them was raised. Based on their own experiences, the participants felt that PR, PE and PT are closely interlinked. One group or project may begin PR, but soon move on to PE and PT. So, it is difficult to compartmentalize them, though different phases of a project may emphasise them differentially - PR, PE and PT becoming central at different times. In fact, one opinion was that PE has to be an ongoing part of any PR project. Since PE is ongoing evaluation, a series of preliminary analysis are small steps in PE - a part of the overall movement towards PR and final analysis. As far as the empowering function of PR is concerned, it is also the same with PE and PT. Similarly, learning and knowledge are common elements in all three. As someone put it, PE and PT may be the tools of PR.

It was mentioned that PT, at times, may be a short, separate event. It may also have a narrow, technical purpose. Yet, it was also argued, that PT should be consciously build in any effort of PR and PE. In fact, transfer of skills should be seen as consistent with and an integral part of any PR or PE effort.

One interesting issue that was discussed was whether PR/PE is possible with all types of organizations. It was said that the extent of internal democracy and people's participation in an organization may be one of the main factors in attempting PR/PE with that organization. Yet, another opinion was that initiating PR/PE with highly autocratic, hierarchical organizations may make them sensitive to participation and thereby influence them.

Complexity of Roles in Participatory Research

Unlike traditional definition of a limited researcher role, the issue of variety and complexity of roles in PR was discussed. One central concern was the extent of activism that an outside researcher can engage in. It was clarified that examples of PR without professionally trained, external

researcher also abound. This issue acquires importance particularly when an outsider is involved.

The discussion on this topic was facilitated by a lucid presentation of an ongoing PR experience by a participant. Working with a Dalit theatre group for women's research project in an urban slum, the participant articulated her work at four different levels: individual women, group of women, the theatre organization, and Dalit community. In the course of her work, she ended up playing these roles: educator, trainer, facilitator, learner, researcher, counsellor, organiser, advocate, adversary, conflict manager, etc.

Besides, she had her personal role as a woman in her own family, a professional role as a member of the research team; and she also contributed her professional theatrical skills.

The illustration underscored the complexity of demands that PR may make in a given situation. Added to these demands are realistic constraints of time, funds and energy for a specific assignment. Thus a person engaged in PR experiences a variety of tensions, role conflicts and dilemmas.

Two suggestions made in this regard are important to record. Firstly the educator, animator, facilitator roles in PR are inevitable and hence should be accorded a priori legitimacy, thereby taking them into account in planning a project. Secondly, given the wide range of role expectations and skills needed, it may be desirable to have a team of persons working on a specific PR assignment instead of an individual researcher.

Interest Groups

Though several topics for interest group discussion were listed, the participants spent focused time on four of them: Primary Education, Forest Studies, Baseline Survey and Women.

Primary Education and Participatory Research

The central question asked in this group was: Can PR help generate effective demand for primary education ?

.....5.

Recognizing the sorry state of primary education in the country, it was suggested that community pressure is needed to improve primary education. Perhaps primary education can become a part of adult education curriculum; perhaps, it can be a part of the social change agenda of activist groups and organizations.

Another interesting issue for PR was to focus around primary school as a place of social learning. Given the widespread presence of primary schools in the country, could PR be used to focus on them as a starting point for analysing inequality and oppression?

Secondly, the traditional research in primary education has focused upon issues of learner motivation, dropouts, etc. and created a 'blame the victim' syndrome. Can PR look into the question of primary education and help expose some of the myths and create new categories and ways of analysis, understanding and action?

Forest Studies and Participatory Research

The discussion in this group focused upon two ongoing Forest Studies in Orissa and Himachal Pradesh. It was found the the study was facing a major tension around PR. The twin objectives of Forest Studies are influencing the national forest policy and facilitating local mobilization of forest dwellers. While the former requires academic rigour and respectability, the latter can be accomplished only through PR. This combination of macro and micro foci and involvement of local activist groups in designing the study has led to the proliferation and expansion of study contents and scope.

Thus on the one hand the scope and requirements of the study have become large, the time and resources available are small, on the other. This has put considerable pressure on local groups involved in the study to accomplish so much, so quickly. Moreover, the local groups are not fully equipped, personnel and skill wise, to undertake the study quickly.

It was then agreed to redesign the study by reducing its contents and scope in the first phase and giving it a cyclical nature. Secondly, training for the staff of local

groups and use of group interviews as a central method of data-collection may further facilitate accomplishment of the twin objectives.

This group discussion demonstrated the tensions in engaging in PR on a national, macro issue, the impact of time and resource constraints on practical elaboration of the methodology, and the need for continuous evaluation and innovation in order to move ahead.

Designing a Baseline Survey

One interest group focused upon actually designing a baseline survey using PR for a programme of rural women. It was designed in such a way as to include both process and outcome variables, since it was felt that monitoring the process is critical for the empowerment of rural women.

The group decided to use group discussion as its main method of data collection. This was felt to be useful in promoting rural women's participation in and contribution to data-collection, as well as catalyzing the process of self-reflection among those women. It was also mentioned that perhaps a simple camera could also be used as a tool for data-collection.

It was proposed that the initial design for baseline survey should be discussed with rural women and they should have the option to add/delete/modify its elements as well as to question its relevance to them.

Finally, the need to have multiple documents (forms of presentation) for different audiences was discussed. In this particular case, it was felt that report in three languages may be needed: English, Hindi and local dialect. The local dialect report could be hamlet-wise also, such that rural women can make some use of it.

Women and Participatory Research

The interest group discussion on women got into personal concerns and experiences of group members. Since the discussion became so personalised, it was difficult to report it.

.....7.

However, two general points can be made here. Firstly, it was felt that PR is perhaps the only appropriate methodology for women and their issues. Secondly, perhaps women are more effective participatory researchers than men. A separate note 'A Thinking Point?' is focusing on this second issue.

Role of PRIA

In reviewing the past activities of PRIA, two main issues were mentioned:

- (a) PRIA is working with other groups, organizations associations and agencies engaged in rural or urban areas. Its role has been to support and assist these organizations in carrying out their own programmes and activities. Thus PRIA is attempting to contribute to people's empowerment, organization and advancement through these mediating organizations.
- (b) In a related issue, one participant described PRIA as a 'pickle.' It is not to be eaten alone, but with the rice and bread of such mediating organizations, thereby adding to taste and flavour. This succinctly described the nature of partnership that PRIA 'pickle' has and can have with the 'rice and bread' of people's struggle.

Several suggestions for the future role of PRIA also emerged. The main ones are:

1. The need to have a promotional role of PRIA was strongly expressed. It should act as an advocate for PR. This could be done through exposure programmes for other agencies, universities, young persons, etc. It was also emphasised that existing partners of PRIA can play this promotional role as well, and it was recognised that some have already been doing it. A concern was expressed that at this stage of its development, PRIA should attempt to build credibility through its concrete work and not spread itself too thin. Also, there may be a need to carefully choose its partners.
2. Another important need is production of materials on PR that are simple, illustrative, in local languages, with visuals, etc. Such materials are presently almost non-existent. These materials could be used for promotion as well as training.

It was agreed that both PRIA and its partners should take initiative in this regard. Some partners, like Streevani, are interested in this very much and will seek the help of others to identify the type of materials needed and to develop them. Thus resource units in different regions could come up and be supported by PRIA.

3. Another concrete suggestion was to introduce PR with industrial labour and their organizations and explore possibilities of their involvement in it. Occupational Health and Safety and modernization were mentioned as particular examples.
4. It was suggested that a list of resource persons and organizations, skilled and experienced in PR, should be prepared by PRIA. The need for a large resource pool was felt and perhaps training in PR and consultation skills could be organized to expand this pool of resource persons.
5. The newsletter and its scope were discussed. It was suggested that the newsletter should promote PR through illustrations as well. Also, partners of PRIA should use the newsletter to seek specific help. Currently, Gram Vikas needs suggestions for materials, resources persons, ideas etc. for a new primary education programme they are planning; Krishna Kumar needs suggestions for his proposed study on political economy of adult education; and, Streevani welcomes ideas about the type of training/learning materials on PR.

May 5, 1983.

APPENDIX 1

A G E N D A

1. Introduction : Self and work.
2. What is PR ? PE/PT ?
3. Critiques of PR, Doubts /Debates/Questions on PR.
3. Present Socio - Economic political situation and our perspectives.
4. Interest groups.
 - Forestry
 - Women
 - Theatre
 - Baseline Survey
 - Primary Education
 - Primary Health Care
5. PRIA : Review/Future.
