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A REPORT

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH MEETING IN INDIA

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A meeting of Participatory Research in India was held at Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education, New Delhi during February 7-9, 1979. The meeting was attended by 35 participants from all over the country. These participants were a mixture of activists, field-level workers, researchers and practitioners. This diversity of people were invited for two primary reasons:

- a) to provide intellectual and emotional support to those working in educational and research institutions and government agencies who are beginning to engage in activities which can be broadly called Participatory Research (PR);
- b) to catalyze systematic reflection and documentation by those who are working in voluntary groups and associations.

This diversity posed major challenge to the meeting and at the same time resulted in a very stimulating and creative exchange of ideas and experiences. The four broad purposes of this meeting were:

- i) sharing of experiences in PR;
- ii) elaboration of the various aspects of PR approach;
- iii) development of a network of people engaged in such efforts in India;
- iv) exploration of mutual interest and common understanding in future PR activities.

At the beginning of this meeting, the participants shared their personal reasons for this meeting. There were three major themes in these personal statements:

1. For one group of participants, their present frustration with existing forms of research was the major reason. As one participant put it there has been 'tremendous development of research technology, while reality has remained untouched'. For another, 'books and reports have hardly made any impact on the life of the people'. A participant trained in traditional empiricist paradigm expressed the need for 'rehabilitating understanding instead of explanation' through PR. For another, there was no opportunity to go out in the field in existing

research institutions. One participant felt very strongly about the monopolistic control of research by a few people, while another expressed a personal crusade against the existing irrelevance of research in terms of its cost to a poor country like India. This was one set of personal reasons.

2. Another set of personal reasons emerged from the existing failures of programmes of development. For one participant, it was due to bureaucratic malaise and he wanted to 'take the shop to the doorstep of the poor'. One participant was bothered about the continuous failure of programmes like adult education; several participants wanted to improve such programmes and some of them had experimented with alternatives that proved effective in the field. For another participant, how to make community education and tribal development programmes more effective was the major issue. Education of slum children, housing for urban poor, emancipation of women etc., were other major concerns of some of the participants. Protection of consumers from organization (business and government) through research was the concern of another participant.

3. The third set of responses focused upon education and learning as a method of social transformation. Some participants wanted to understand how systematic educational efforts can lead to social change. One participant called 'education a tool of usher in social metamorphosis'. For another, it was to understand how the poor can be mobilized to stand on their own feet. One participant wanted to discuss his method of mobilization in order to learn from others.

These three sets of personal reasons highlight the range and type of concern people brought to this meeting. After briefly describing several case studies that were presented in the meeting, we will return to some of these concerns in the context of PR.

Case Studies

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

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

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

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

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

B. Joint Irrigation System among Tribals

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

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

After this period of 18 months, the scheme became operative and has been functioning well. The group of families has been able to obtain other assistance and loans as well. This appears

to be an excellent illustration of viable, self-managing groups as the basis of development, not marginal, "handicapped" individuals.

C. Organization of landless agricultural labourers: Shramik Sangathana

For the past seven years, this organization has been in existence in Shahada and Tabda Taluqs of Dhulia District in Maharashtra. The movement of Saldars - yearly contract labourers earning about Rs 300/- per annum - was started in 1972, against low wages, lack of weekly rest day and inhuman treatment. The movement has been successful in obtaining minimum wages for the Saldars and has been extending its activities gradually.

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

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

In the initial stages of the movement, the Sangathana had fought for restoration of land to tribals as it was illegally alienated from them. The entire process of identification of this land and whom it belonged to was carried out by the activists and the local tribal population. This was a major research task since written records of landownership are not easily accessible. The Sangathana engages in many such surveys for its various activities. All of them are carried out by the activists and the villages together. For example, women of many villages collected information from their villages about cases of wife-beating and alcoholism. This information is then used for concrete action - either a "Morcha" or a protest. Even during negotiations with landlords or government officials, the delegates are continually controlled by the people. All protesters silently wait outside while their delegates are negotiating inside. The delegates cannot take a decision inside without first consulting the people sitting outside.

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

A number of other case studies were presented either briefly or to smaller groups. It is important to make a note of them:

1. A group of young people have begun some work among the bastis of Chandigarh. Despite the architectural megaplan of Chandigarh, bastis (slums) of poor people have emerged. This group has attempted to assist the residents of one basti in improving the quality of construction of their houses.
2. A voluntary agency has been assisting artisans from a village near Ahmedabad in setting up their own economic activity. A weavers cooperative and creche for children have emerged. Women have also begun economic activities.

3. Another group has been active in educating the children of Poona slums. The effort has been to involve the children in developing their learning materials.
4. The development of village-based groups of poor farmers, self-help cooperative societies, etc., has been an ongoing activity of Seva Mandir.
5. Action India, a voluntary group in New Delhi, has been working in the various resettlement colonies in attempting to educate the adults.
6. Various efforts in mobilizing women were mentioned, there is an ongoing attempt of organizing rural women near Ahmednagar.

During the Participatory Research meeting, most men participants joined the women participants in a protest demonstration against the "virginity test" of Indian women seeking entry into Britain.

Issues in Participatory Research

Various conceptual, epistemological and methodological issues in Participatory Research emerged during the meeting. Though there was no consensus in resolving these issues, they were important enough to occupy the discussion. Many of these issues are mentioned here as questions, with a view to achieving further clarity on them later.

1. One main theme of the discussion was the relationship between participatory research and participatory social action. It was basically agreed that Participatory Research must, at some stage, head to participatory social action. To the extent that the line between Participatory Research and participatory social action is rather thin, is there a marked difference between the role of the researcher and the activist? Should the purpose of Participatory Research be only understanding and knowledge? Or should it also include the initiation of changes? It was generally agreed that Participatory Research must entail in its purpose some concrete changes in accordance with a certain value stance. It is very

difficult to isolate the components of Participatory Research from those of participatory social action. To that extent, Participatory Research puts a much greater responsibility on the researcher as compared to the classical research.

2. Two related issues were also raised in the meeting. First, it was felt that Participatory Research is a logical outcome of certain types of human evolution. Therefore, the socio-political implications of Participatory Research are important. In some ways, Participatory Research is linked to a participatory democratic form of life and living. The value premises of Participatory Research are integrally subsumed under it. Participatory Research is an approach towards building a more egalitarian form of society, organizations and groups.

The second related issue is the dichotomy between the researcher and the activist. In the present context, the two roles are assumed to be or seen as mutually exclusive. The discussion in the meeting pointed out a large area of overlap in the functions and activities of the researcher (under PR) and the activist. It was not suggested that the distinction between the two will completely evaporate in Participatory Research, but that there will be a major overlap and hence a greater scope for shifting roles. Moreover, this overlap will also significantly reduce the existing gap between the activist and the researcher.

There was a brief reference to the fact that two possible approaches in practicing Participatory Research are the researcher moving into the setting or the researcher emerging from the setting. It was generally agreed that both are important approaches and both must be encouraged. I personally believe that this is a very critical tension for Participatory Research to manage. Emergence of a researcher from an action setting has to be seen as a very legitimate and important aspect of Participatory Research. Hence, the activists must be a part of Participatory research networks and encouraged to systematically reflect upon and document their experiences.

3. It is a general experience that the poor are made dependent on outside resources and ideas. It was suggested in the meeting that while the outsiders (activists/researchers) have an important task in assisting the poor, caution must be exercised in ensuring that further dependency is not enhanced. The researcher or activist may push his/her own ideas on the community and thereby reduce their ability to control their actions. It was suggested that one way to ensure that the researcher's ideas do not get pushed on is to engage in a joint analysis of the situation. If the researcher and the members of the community jointly analyse the data obtained about the existing social reality, it will reduce the chances of the outsider perspective prevailing fully.

4. There was a lively discussion on the points of entry in Participatory Research, understandably so given the diverse background of the participants. It was generally agreed that various entry points are possible in Participatory Research. One can begin with adult education, land alienation, health care or drinking water. However, there is a common stream of struggle, participation and political implications in all these entry points.

Similarly, it is difficult to lay down precise rules and sequence of steps for Participatory Research. Participatory Research process emerges uniquely in every case and is based on the concrete context of our work. To specify rigid guidelines for Participatory Research will be to contradict its very philosophy. However, how does one call some activity Participatory Research? Is everything Participatory Research? Or should there be some identifiable characteristics of the activity if it is Participatory Research? What are those components, keeping in view that we have labeled the activity participatory research?

5. A very fruitful comparison was made between Participatory Research and classical research (CR). The five major principles on which the distinction between Participatory Research and Classical Research was drawn are notable. First, CR is based on the principle of exclusion while PR is based on inclusion. CR attempts to exclude influences, styles, approaches, values and emotions that deviate from its rigidly laid down procedures; PR is an

inclusive approach in terms of emotions, values, influences and styles. Second, CR is engaged in highlighting differences between phenomena, systems and processes; its methodological hallmark is to delineate those differences and provide an explanation. Moreover, the proof of theories and concepts is also based on the principle of differences. On the other hand, Participatory Research approach appears to be based on the principle of similarity; it is a process of recognizing similarities between phenomena, systems, people and problems. Participatory Research uses consensus and agreement as a principle for extending understanding.

Thirdly, the CR has emphasised only thinking as a legitimate mode of inquiry. Feeling and action mode are considered "unscientific". To the extent that humans are simultaneously thinking - feeling - acting beings, inquiry modes can be all these. Participatory Research recognises its and encourages feeling and action as equally legitimate processes of knowing, just like thinking. It emphasises the notion that action systems are simultaneously learning systems and emotions can be a powerful mode of knowledge, just like thoughts. The fourth principle is a derivation of the third, that Participatory Research is holistic in comparison to Classical Research which is partial. Classical research attempts to enhance partial, linear understanding of miniscale issues; Participatory Research is an attempt to develop holistic, systemic and circular (iterative) understanding of micro issues as related to the larger macro context.

Finally, Classical Research is based on the principle of consumption; it encourages consumptive trends by explaining established status-quo. By claiming that it is value-free, Classical Research supports, may be inadvertently, existing systems. Participatory Research, on the other hand, is premised on liberation; it attempts to change the existing system in accordance with those values that support the liberation of have-nots.

These distinctions between Classical Research and Participatory Research appear to be an important step towards further clarifying the conceptual underpinnings of Participatory Research.

5. Finally, the characteristics of a researcher in Participatory Research were discussed. In some ways, it was felt that the researcher in Participatory Research is challenged much more than in Classical Research. It was emphasised that researcher is the most important "tool" in Participatory Research. The empathy and self-awareness of the researcher are critical ingredients in effective Participatory Research. The phrase "calibration of the researcher" was used in this context.

Similar points were raised in calibrating the activist. It was suggested that the "liberation of the activist" is an important precondition to his/her effective efforts in liberating the oppressed. The researcher and the activist, both need to develop awareness about themselves and empathy with others. The ability to understand oneself in a context is an important skill for Participatory Research.

There were several thorny issues that were left somewhat untouched. It was discussed that Participatory Research is not a total replacement to existing modes of research. Survey can be a useful method for knowing certain things, for example.

But under what conditions and for what issues Participatory Research is more effective needs to be specified more closely. Then there is an important question of communicating knowledge. In classical research, written form (with due guidelines) is the only acceptable form of communicating the research findings. It appears that the scope and methods of communication are much broader in Participatory Research, but alternative forms need to be identified and practised more seriously.

In some ways, this meeting was an important step in extending Participatory Research. Some participants have identified various projects and ideas since then. They were excited to move ahead with Participatory Research approaches. Some of them indicated a need to hold smaller regional meetings and volunteered to arrange them. Some others have agreed for a more systematic reflection and documentation of their efforts. I hope that we can extend this network of Participatory Research more effectively as an outcome of this meeting.