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Abstract:

The paper argues that inclusion of Participatory Research (PR) in the curricula of institutions of higher education will facilitate its actual practice, thereby contributing to new forms of knowledge production and social change. Participatory Research (PR), as an alternative to dominant social science research methodology and an approach for social change, gained recognition in the 70s. More than three decades later, however, much more is needed for the inclusion of PR in the formal higher education system. This paper highlights the status of PR in institutions of higher education in India; it analyses the viability of its inclusion and presents the challenges it faces across social science disciplines, in degree level courses, as well as in doctoral research. Drawing upon national and international experiences, the paper explores ways by which higher education institutions in India can include PR in the curriculum and teaching practices.

The practice and discourse on development is engaged in two distinctive, yet related trends. On the one hand, we are witnessing reaffirmation of the contribution of PR approaches to ensure people centred development and deepening of democracy. (Gaventa, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Taylor and Pettit, 2007). This has created need for development practitioners, researchers and educators to acquire requisite knowledge, skills and perspectives to facilitate participatory processes (Taylor and Pettit, 2007; McArthur and Sachs, 2007). The learning opportunities on PR and other participatory approaches however are restricted more to training and short term courses, as opposed to being formally taught at Higher Education Institutions (Paule, 1999; PRIA, 2005, Greenwood, 2007).

On the other hand we are witness to the growing significance of Higher Education as a means to build knowledge economies. Market and globalisation are affecting what is taught and researched at Higher Education Institutions (HEI), with preference for courses which enhance student employability. (Nayar, 2008). This is resulting in a growing demand for Universities to be socially responsive, addressing both individual needs as well as social benefit needs (Tandon, 2008).

In the light of these two trends, this paper argues that the inclusion of Participatory Research (PR) in the curricula of institutions of higher education will help build future PR practitioners, researchers and educators, thus facilitating its actual practice- thereby contributing to new forms of knowledge production and social change. In addition such a process will also assist Universities to be socially responsive, extending their knowledge production and teaching role to communities.

The paper will critically assess the status of PR teaching, with specific reference to India. It will identify barriers to the teaching of PR and building from experiences of other countries, explore strategies to overcome these barriers and challenges. In the paper, based on Reason and Bradbury 's definition, Action Research (AR) is taken as a group of research approaches that reduce or eliminate the researcher and research distinction common in traditional research stance (Boser, 2006).The international illustrations of teaching AR included in the paper, thus need to be analysed keeping the broader definition of AR in mind.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

PR originated three decades ago within the context of Higher Education. It emerged as a critique to the dominant classical social science research methodology. Tandon (1982, pp 79-84) classified the critiques as: the *absolute critique*, questioning the limited purpose of knowledge generation as discovery of truth; the *purist critique*, questioning the search for objectivity; the *rationalist critique*, questioning thinking as main mode of knowing; and the *elitist critique*, questioning the elite control over research process and outcome and addressing the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge production (Tandon,1982). These critiques still hold good in most of the research taking place in Universities and other institutions of Higher Education.

As an alternative research methodology, the philosophy of PR recognized the popular system of knowledge production of ordinary people as an important strategy for empowerment. It aimed to bring researchers and local participants together in joint inquiry, education and action on problems of mutual interest (Hall, 1982). Underlined ideologies of PR addressed the political economy of inquiry with relation to the definition of problem, collection and analysis of data and the utilisation of results (Brown and Tandon, 2005).

Three decades later, however , PR is not part of the teaching or discourse of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Internationally and within India, there is very little literature on the practice and institutionalization of either PR or AR in higher education. Some interesting work on teaching single courses and innovative programmes on AR and PR exist in HEI but these illustrations are more individual driven rather than institutionalized (Sankaran, et al., 2007; Greenwood,2007). As Paule (1999, pp52) reflects that as PR “has not been widely offered in Universities, researchers are often led to fend for themselves”.

STATUS OF TEACHING PR IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF INDIA

If one analyses the enormity and complexity of the Indian Higher Education system, there are tremendous challenges of incorporating PR into the curricula. The Indian Higher Education system is a large system .According to Agarwal (2009) with 12.8 million students, it is third largest education system in the world. India also has largest number of institutions for higher education in the world - nearly 20,000 institutions if one includes both universities and colleges (Agarwal, 2009). As per the University Grants Commission (UGC), there are currently 42 Central Universities, 258 State Universities, 130 Deemed University and 65 Private Universities. In addition there are few institutes of national importance including the

Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) (UGC, 2010).

In order to systematically identify the status of teaching PR in HEI of India, PRIA undertook a survey of teaching of PR in Indian Academic Institutions in 2004-05. While a large number of public universities were approached, through written request, to participate in the survey, only 22 Universities, 65 academic institutions and few other educational and research institutions agreed to participate in the same. The in-depth survey was carried out in 27 departments of the consenting 22 universities, covering 12 states of India. The survey primarily studied three important aspects of PR teaching,; the content of course, the modes of teaching, and the reference materials on PR. Key departments covered were Social work, Sociology, Anthropology, Rural Development/Management, Political Science, Public Administration, Food and Nutrition and Communication. (PRIA, 2005)

The PRIA (2005) findings revealed that only 3 Universities taught a separate paper on PR methodology at a Masters level. In 24 departments, PR was part of Research methodology paper. Interestingly it was observed that it was the departments of Social work, Sociology, followed by Anthropology that had included PR approaches in the curricula. PR was taught under different labels. In nearly 50% of the cases, it was taught as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)/Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), while in the remaining it was termed under following labels: PR Techniques; Participatory Action Research ;Positivism and Action Research; Qualitative Research; Research Techniques etc.

The general analysis indicated that within social sciences, PR was primarily taught as qualitative research method. It was taken more as technique of data collection, and therefore its social transformation role was inadequately covered in the curriculum (PRIA,2005). The underlined ideologies of PR, which included issues of equity, self-reliance and centrality of oppression issues (Brown and Tandon, 2005) thus are not effectively covered in the curriculum.

The survey concluded that social sciences need to incorporate PR to expand the methods to gather data, as well as adopt a framework of social change (PRIA, 2005).

BARRIERS TO TEACHING OF PR IN INDIAN HEI

Teaching of PR in Indian HEI needs to be promoted in a systematic and holistic manner. In order to explore strategies and enhance teaching of PR (and related participatory approaches) within institutions of Higher Education, especially within the social science disciplines, it is necessary to critically assess the potential barriers that prevent its inclusion. This analysis builds upon the survey on PR conducted by PRIA and review of other relevant literature on the subject.

RESTRICTIVE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

This large canvas of the Higher Education system of India is fraught with challenges. Despite having the reputation of housing the largest number of educational institutions in the world, the gross enrollment rate (GER) for tertiary education is around 11%. Issues related to lack

of access to resources, autonomy_of universities, dearth of good faculty, poor quality of teaching, inadequate and poor quality research both in the science and technology are some important issues that need to be addressed.

The current political environment is restrictive, with limited resources earmarked for humanities and social science faculties, and for social science research (Nayar, 2008; Agarwal, 2009; National Knowledge Commission, 2006). According to Agarwal (2009) only 4.1% of the total government expenditure on Research and Development in India is spent through the Higher Educational Institutions. Issues of incorporation of PR teaching in the curricula of HEI, especially of social sciences, thus becomes all the more challenging in an educational context where the disciplines of social science and social science research itself is under threat.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Literature review and PRIA survey (PRIA, 2005) has shown that *decision makers* like Vice Chancellors, Boards of Studies and other Academic Boards can restrict inclusion of PR approaches in teaching. In the PRIA study it was found that the leadership was unable to provide space to include PR in teaching. There was rigidity towards teaching new research methodologies, curriculum and pedagogy (PRIA, 2005). This problem is not restricted to India alone. Sankaran et al (2007) shares problems they faced with Ethics Committee and the Graduate Degree Committee, while supervising an action research based, distance mode of Ph.D programme in Singapore and Hongkong.

Institutional systems and settings of higher education also restrict the teaching and education of action researchers. In the PRIA survey the other constraints mentioned included resistance from University System and conservative social scientists to include PR in “strict academic courses” (PRIA,2005). The focus of market driven subjects, specialisation and disengagement from community and non-university actors are also factors which restrict inclusion of PR in the *curriculum of social science* in Universities. (Greenwood, 2007; Tandon, 2007; Nayar, 2008) . Examples from the Universities in the West have shown that PR is not included in the curricula, as it not very economical,with not many students enrolling for it. (Sankaran, et al., 2007). Even in cases where PR is included in the curricula it is difficult to teach, as there is inherent tension between research and action, (Paule , 1999). PRIA study (PRIA, 2005) reinforced this international view , and found that PR was not included in the curricula as it takes more time and experience for the students to facilitate it .

In India, as elsewhere the *pedagogy* of University teaching, in most cases is not very conducive to teaching of PR. Greenwood (2007) is of the view that Universities still follows the banking system of teaching, with predomination of lectures as against co-generative learning in order to save the University money and time (Greenwood ,2007). In India, even in social sciences dealing with social and political issues, there is less focus on field engagement. Disciplines like social work education and rural management have structured field engagements, but the quality of engagement needs enhancement.

Inadequate number of *trained teachers* on PR philosophy is another constraint, restricting the inclusion of PR in relevant social science courses. The PRIA Survey (PRIA, 2005) revealed that the absence of trained teachers made it difficult for departments and universities to introduce courses on PR. Further it was found that the reading material on PR was only available in English thus making it difficult to for faculty and students of vernacular universities to access the reading material. It also focused more on the methodological components, as opposed to also providing information on the social transformation component of PR. (PRIA, 2005).

Lack of financial resources for community based research is yet another barrier for teaching and practicing PR in a University system. PRIA survey revealed that resource constraints restrict effective use of existing fieldwork facilities for carrying out PR interventions (PRIA, 2005). At this juncture, it is important to note that even in the West where resources for collaborative research between community and university are available, in most cases only the HEI receives funds to develop partnerships with CBOs (Stocker, 2008). This itself impacts the quality of collaborative research interventions like Participatory Research and Action Research .

It is thus essential for the University system to be self reflective, and make necessary changes to address these institutional barriers, or else one would be tempted to agree with Greenwood (2007, pp 259) that “Rather than reforming in fundamental ways, they [university] continue recreating and intensifying the very problems of hyper-specialization, corporatization, internal competition, and social disengagement that got them into trouble with the public and their elected officials in the first place”.

INDIVIDUAL CONSTRAINTS

While the above mentioned political and institutional factors are potential barriers to the teaching of PR, we cannot conclude the analysis without looking at individual factors at the level of the educators and researchers, which obstruct the process of teaching PR in University setup.

The educator’s underlined *values, commitment* to the teaching of PR and its facilitation in a university setup can prove facilitative, as well as detrimental to the teaching of PR. PR is a process wherein community is involved in the entire research project with the objective of mobilisation of human resources to solve social problems. It is essential that the research project should benefit the community (Hall, 1982). The expertise culture and underlined values of educators however can manipulate the participatory research processes in order to only meet the student and faculty’s educational and learning needs, without addressing the problem of the community (Stoecker, 2008).

The issue of *ethics* thus is an important component from the point of view of the educator who facilitates a PR and AR process in the University setting. Stocker (2008) has emphasized the need to address ethical issues in collaborative and participatory research interventions - like who sets the schedule in a research partnership (as many times it is as per university convenience, as opposed to community time frames); who controls the research product

(research serving the university need more than the community need); who determine the labor pool (i.e. sending untrained students to promote their learning, as opposed to outcomes for the community) (Stocker, 2008). These ethical dimensions, which if not adequately addressed, can prove detrimental to the teaching and practice of PR in an educational setup. Indian Universities, unlike Universities in the West, lack adequate discussion on ethical dimensions of research, which in itself is a barrier to teaching and facilitating collaborative research with the community.

WAYS FORWARD

The status of teaching of PR in Higher Education, especially in India and elsewhere, is not encouraging. Lot more effort, at different levels and by the various actors, are needed to initiate changes for facilitating teaching of PR in HEI. The ways forward suggested build upon the learning of the PRIA survey and review of relevant literature from other countries. Though focused on the Indian higher education landscape, they are equally applicable to higher education apparatus of other countries.

POLICY CHANGES

Within the Indian context, there is urgent need for changes at the policy level, to ensure academic and administrative reforms in Higher Education system. The National Knowledge Commission, a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, has highlighted the need for expansion, excellence and inclusion in the Higher Education system (National Knowledge Commission, 2006). The recent National Commission for Higher Education and Research bill 2010, is a step in the right direction. There is however a need for a Higher Education policy which lays emphasis on the *Social Responsive* role of Universities, and greater engagement of Universities with other actors, which include Communities and Civil Society actors.

There is need for *adequate and flexible financial resources* to support not only of research in social sciences, but research which are collaborative and participatory (Stoecker, 2008). Like in the West, there is requirement in India for innovative mechanisms for funding PR projects within the University setup. Community-engaged scholarship (CES) and community-academic partnerships, like CURA (Community University Research Alliance) in Canada, are gaining momentum in higher education institutions of countries like US and Canada (Tandon, 2007). These mechanisms will give impetus for the teaching of PR, as students will learn about PR through the practice component of it, as part of their curricula.

National Knowledge Commission (2006) recommend greater *autonomy for departments* within University to introduce new relevant courses, and rewards and encouragement for innovations in teaching and research. These recommendations hold good for incorporating necessary changes in the curricula and teaching pedagogy of HEI. There is need to integrate a mechanism of curriculum upgradation, at least once in three years, so as to assist the HEI to contribute to common public good, in addition to addressing private and intellectual gains. This will enable critical review of existing curricula especially of social science disciplines, and inclusion of holistic perspective of PR in the same (*PRIA Report, 2005.*)

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

There is need for deeper institutional transformation in higher education, in order to ensure meaningful and sustained education of Participatory Researchers /action researchers working on social change context (Greenwood, 2007; Taylor and Pettite, 2007).

Within the HEI it is essential that institutional spaces are created vis a vis the *curriculum* to accommodate teaching of PR. There is need for a culture which supports innovation, and deepens collaborative relationships within universities, amongst students, staff and administrators (Greenwood 2007). Having champions of PR and AR in academic committees to defend alternate research approaches against the dominant scientific paradigm has been found useful in other university contexts (Sankaran, et al 2007).The curricula needs to be flexible and innovative . Provision of “Flash” seminar wherein faculty and students could be engaged in an PR/AR project in short notice; flexibility in course design by keeping one course open for CBR (Stoecker, 2008); and provisions for participatory curriculum development (Taylor and Pettit (2007) are some ideas which can be applied to HEIs.

Sankaran,et al (2007) describe an innovative intervention wherein an online programme (Action Research and Evaluation Online - AREOL) was used as a qualifier for Masters and Doctoral programmess at Southern Cross University (SCU) of Singapore. The recently launched MA in Participatory Development(MAPD) in India is another innovative collaboration between a Civil Society Organisation (PRIA) and a University- Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).The curriculum includes Participatory Research as an integral component of the course on participatory development, as well as the course on research methodology.

Institutional reform for teaching PR requires flexibility in some of the existing systems of the Univeristy. *Assessment systems* in the University needs to be flexible, wherein the Community can develop its own model to assess costs, benefits and ethical issues in a research partnership with the institution (Stoecker, 2008; Boser, 2006); where Ethics committee and board of studies will accept that PR and AR thesis will be different (Sankaran, et al 2007) ; and where new ways addressing issues of informed consent and confidentiality in PR and AR practices will be developed (Boser, 2006).

Innovative *participatory pedagogy* which allow the learners to question, critique, challenge, and be immersed in field realities will go a long way in creating an enabling environment for teaching and learning of PR (Tandon,2007 ;Taylor and Pettite, 2007). *Strategic partnerships with Community* also needs to be built to strengthen the teaching and practice of PR within universities. In countries like US and Canada there is growing emphasis in universities making contributions to the poor and marginalized communities ,through service learning programmes, and community –academic partnerships. (Greenwood, 2007; Taylor, 2008).Within the service learning literature there is however a note of caution to ensure that the community’s expectations of service learning are met rather than the experience only

serving as a training opportunity for students. (Stoecker, 2008). Similar initiatives should be undertaken in the Universities of India, moving beyond the limited community interaction inbuilt within social work education and rural development courses. In addition there is need for Universities to collaborate in a more meaningful way with Civil Society Organisations, in order to strengthen their links with the community, and thereby enhancing the quality of their teaching and practice of participatory research.

Faculty Orientation and incentives are also important components to facilitate the PR teaching in HEI. There is need to have incentives for educators to teach and practice PR in University setup (Tandon, 2007). The teachers need to combine a range of capabilities and work actively with “multiple dimensions and levels of learning and knowledge involved in transformative action research” (Taylor and Pettite, 2007, pp 244). To ensure this it is important for University to organize faculty orientations on PR and access courses on PR being run in face-to-face or distance mode by other Universities or even Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

An useful *illustration* of Faculty Orientation and University- CSO interaction is PRIA's programme with Social Work Educators of India. Between April 1995 and 1997 PRIA in collaboration with ASSWI (Association of Schools of Social Work in India) and Maharashtra Association of Social Work Educators (MASWE) was involved in an ongoing development intervention with social work educators of India. The intervention included a series of inter-professional dialogues, at national and regional level. The dialogues provided opportunities for social work educators, renowned academicians and experienced practitioners of participatory development (PD) and participatory research (PR) to come together on a common platform. (PRIA, 2001).

The focus of the dialogues was to study the status of social work education, assess the implications of Participatory Development and Participatory Research in social work education and practice and to make efforts to incorporate the same in the social work curriculum. A research fund on participation was also initiated by PRIA in order to catalyse the involvement of the faculty and the students of Schools of Social work and other institutes to undertake field based research on community participation issues. (PRIA, 2001).

An internal review of the inter-professional dialogues reflected that in a number of institutions concepts of PR and PD were incorporated in the social work education curriculum. 70% of the respondents found that the dialogues were useful in facilitating participatory development and participatory research in social work teaching and about 80% found that the dialogues were useful in facilitating social work practice. The research fund on participation helped in strengthening the knowledge base on participatory research as a methodology and concept of participation in sectors as diverse as sanitation, industrial pollution, self help groups, tribal women's participation, among others. (PRIA, 2001)

PERSONAL CHANGES

In order to teach and practice PR in a University setup, it is very essential that the educators themselves undertake small but meaningful changes at the personal level. The educator needs

to be investing in her/his own *personal growth* vis a vis building critical understanding of the PR process- not only as a process of data collection, but also as means for social change. Critical understanding of the ideological premise of PR, its roots, understanding of the political economy of knowledge, are important components which educators of PR needs to ensure.

It is essential that educators of PR are in continuous process of *critical reflection*, recognizing and addressing the ethical and methodological dimensions, which face her/, him while teaching and facilitating PR in a university. Critical issues like does the PR process ensure community's control over the research process and empower the community; does it "transform the social relations of knowledge production" (Stoecker, 2008); is the purpose of knowledge for "private gains, or public good" (Tandon, 2007) are important questions which the educators need to continuously engage with.

Working around the constraints of the university setup individual *initiatives and innovations* can facilitate the teaching and practice of PR in Universities. Greenwood's (2007) innovative intervention of undergraduate fellowship program, where he linked seminar on AR with service learning project at Cornell University is an example in point. In this case the service-learning project benefited from the AR skills which the student has acquired from the seminar on AR.

The *perseverance and commitment* of the educators to the cause of PR, when pitched against the structural and systematic barriers of the University setup, will go a long way to create creative spaces for PR in Higher education.

To conclude, the teaching of Participatory research in Higher Education Institutions in India, and elsewhere needs greater impetus. The winds of change in the Higher Education system of India in particular, and in the world at large, make this moment an opportune one to ensure political, institutional and personal changes for making teaching of PR in Higher education institutions a reality. It will go a long way in ensuring education of future PR practitioners, researchers and educators, thus strengthening the practice of PR and assisting the Universities to play their social responsive role in an effective manner. The paper is a small step in that direction. There is however need for more systematic cross country studies on the teaching of PR in Higher Educational Institutions, in order to systematically identify the existing gaps, as well as identify best practices in teaching PR. Those studies will serve as appropriate advocacy tools to press for the above-mentioned changes and ensure relevant teaching of PR in higher education.

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