

Participatory research in the empowerment of people

Rajesh Tandon

1981

UNESCO Knowledge Democracy / Participatory Research Hub
Publications

Copyright © 2013 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. Copyright © International Council for Adult Education.

Original citation:

Tandon, R. (1981). Participatory research in the empowerment of people.
Convergence, 14(3), 20–29.

Downloaded from UVicSpace Research & Learning Repository

dspace.library.uvic.ca



**University
of Victoria**

Libraries

Participatory Research in the Empowerment of People

Rajesh Tandon, Asian Regional Coordinator,
Participatory Research Network, India

As a way to improve coordination and work on projects and activities, Rajesh Tandon and some members of the network have formed a registered and voluntary group called Participatory Research in Asia.

The last decade has seen a growing interest in alternative research paradigms in social science research. Much of the impetus for the search for alternatives has come from the experiences of professionally-trained researchers who found their paradigms inadequate to provide answers to all the questions they had. Another push towards the search has emerged from the continuing failures of development efforts in the Third World, as well as enhanced visibility of pockets of poverty within the First World. As accepted and prevalent models for development, growth and change begin to show cracks, policy-makers and administrators are yelling for 'something' that may work, thereby restoring confidence in their positions of authority and in themselves.

At the same time, there are increasing trends of successful development efforts initiated and organized by ordinary, common people across the world. Such successful efforts in many instances by poor, illiterate and rural people, underscore the 'correctness' of their knowledge and paradigms for development and change; after all, they must have based their efforts on 'correct' assumptions since they did succeed.

The frustrated professional researchers and dejected planners/administrators now appear to be looking into these successful attempts by common people in order to seek those alternatives. 'People's participation' as a catch-all phrase has emerged partly due to this 'run for the gold.' The term 'participation' has found greatest currency in the last decade and, like much of the currency in inflationary situations, it is a term used with different meanings and one that leads to confusion and also abuse.

Participatory Research (PR) as a concept, approach and movement also had its birth and meteoric growth during this same decade. Many allege that PR is as much a part of the contemporary fad as the World Bank's pronouncements on people's participation. While there may be some basis for this allegation, this paper attempts to clarify PR as it is practiced today and what it may/should be in future so that such allegations may be soundly refuted. The experiences and trends in participatory research in Asia provide the basis for my arguments,

although I have borrowed frequently from my colleagues in other parts of the world.

THE MOTIVE FORCES IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

From its inception there have been two basic motive forces in the emergence and growth of participatory research (Tandon, 1980). The first is concerned with the discomforts of some professional researchers who found the classical research paradigm insufficient as well as oppressive. The classical paradigm lays emphasis on value-neutrality of the researcher; makes objectivity as the hallmark of the research process; suggests complete unilateral control by the researcher over the entire research processes; treats people as objects only responding to the researcher's questions; and attempts to study people and social phenomena as the natural sciences do. Much has been written on these aspects and limitations of the classical research paradigm. The important point here is that PR is an expression, at least in part, against the limitations of the dominant paradigm.

The second motive force for PR has emanated from the continued and ever-increasing exploitation and oppression of a large majority of people. In many ways, the power of the oppressors is derived from their superior knowledge about legal rights of a sharecropper or land-holding patterns to a landless labourer or the balance sheet of a corporation to a contract labourer are some of the commonplace illustrations of the same. Knowledge has been and will continue to be a source of power. Participatory research has been an attempt to shift this balance of power in favour of the have-nots.

The two motive forces are interrelated in some important ways. One of the critical functions of the dominant research paradigm is to socialize professional researchers. This socialization is not limited to mere learning of research skills; it extends to the conceptual frameworks guiding research as well as the value positions underlying it. For example, the harmony model of society as opposed to the dialectical, conflict model has been ingrained in most sociologists trained in the West; their researches are, therefore, guided by the harmony model (some call it structural functional model).

The socialization into value premises of neutrality and objectivity is perhaps more critical. A professional researcher thus socialized considers himself above ideology and, in fact, makes attempts — mostly unsuccessful — to remove ideology from the research. The research shows 'what is', 'how is', but rarely shows 'why is' because this may reveal the researcher's ideology; for example, Harijans (those without a caste) are poor because they are lazy. The researcher considers it irrelevant to say 'what it should be'. Such a stance, therefore, absolves a researcher from taking any position in the work being undertaken.

Another important way in which the dominant research paradigm is linked to ongoing exploitation is by ascribing a professional expertise to research. This implies that research is what only professionally trained persons can undertake. And, such professionally-trained persons invariably come from the 'haves' of society. The have-nots, therefore, lack access to professional skills, thereby

lacking some knowledge.

The essence of the above argument is that participatory research is an attempt to provide an alternative to the dominant research paradigm as well as to provide access to knowledge to the have-nots. It is this twin emphasis in PR that distinguishes it from other fads and makes it more than a set of new techniques. Because of its ideological component, it could be useful to view PR within a theory of society, as described below.

THEORY OF SOCIETY

One cannot present a detailed theory of contemporary societies in a short paper, so only a brief outline is presented of some relevant elements.

Broadly speaking, all societies are characterized by two sets of people: the haves and the have-nots. The haves are rich, educated, control positions of power in government, business and trade, own resources, such as capital, land, etc., have access to those who own or control resources, are socially high in status, economically well off and politically powerful. Invariably, their number is small and they constitute an internally cohesive and well-organized group. On the other hand, a large majority of people are have-nots. They are politically weak, unorganized, poor, landless, unskilled, ignorant, illiterate, etc.

In reality, there may be several layers of haves and have-nots and they can be identified specifically in a concrete situation rather clearly. For example, in the Asian context, the small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, migrant workers, women and unskilled industrial workers constitute the bulk of the have-nots. The dynamics of a society is such that the haves want to maintain their positions of privilege and power and the have-nots want to usurp it. Over the years, in reality, more and more people in Asia are in the ranks of the have-nots.

There are essentially two main mechanisms by which this exploitation or oppression is taking place (Saint, 1981). One can be called *direct* and another *indirect*.

The *direct* mechanism of exploitation is where the exploiter is immediately available and visible, where local processes of exchange and control are used to maintain the position of the haves. An example is the case of a typical Indian village. The landlord and money-lender are the haves. They use the ignorance of the marginal farmers and landless labourers to perpetuate exploitation; customs and traditions are used against the have-nots; legal provisions are ignored; land is usurped; low or no wages are paid; the have-nots are socially outcast; the haves act as political brokers of the village. In this situation, the exploitation is visible, immediate and identifiable. The resources in question are within the community and it is not possible for the have-nots to collectively assert themselves against the power of the haves.

The *indirect* mechanism is a direct outcome of the processes of modernization in the last three to four decades. The process of exploitation here is reflected through increasing dependence of villagers on urban market mechanisms, transfer of resources away from the villages, new plants/dams/schemes that erode the local communities. The oppressors are invisible; science and

technology are used against the common people; advanced knowledge is taken as the basis for maintaining control; governments, large corporations, financial institutions and planning bodies influence small communities by remote control.

With increasing linkages in the international arena, such a mechanism operates globally. Multinational corporations, foreign governments and agencies may collude with national institutions in this mechanism. It is not uncommon, for example, that a decision made in the headquarters of World Bank in Washington to aid a giant hydro-electric project in North Karnataka in India may uproot a million persons engaged in subsistence agriculture. This indirect mechanism is becoming increasingly more powerful; it is difficult to understand; it operates remotely; it cannot be countered by local action alone.

It is within this framework of society that the role of knowledge and the characteristics of participatory research will be discussed.

KNOWLEDGE AS POWER

Knowledge is the core of the issue in participatory research. The overriding purpose of all research is knowledge. Historically, knowledge-generation has been an ongoing process in people's lives. Before the advent of modern sciences, people had a way of knowing, conceptualizing and disseminating knowledge. Even today, those segments of populations which are only marginally affected by modern education engage in similar modes of knowledge-generation, utilization and dissemination. This has been labelled 'popular knowledge'. The effectiveness of these traditional processes can be established by the fact that large bodies of religious scriptures in Indian history travelled several centuries before being written.

With modern sciences, beginning with natural sciences and leading to social sciences, knowledge has become a commodity. There is a market mechanism for this commodity: some experts produce knowledge, other experts consume it. The production of knowledge has become a specialized profession and only those trained in that profession can legitimately produce it. Large institutions of research and training have developed as factories to produce knowledge and knowledge-producers. National and international networks of knowledge-producers and consumers have been erected. Transfer of knowledge has entered the international market and provides the greatest economic and political leverage to those advanced in this business (Arnove, 1981).

Further sophistication is being introduced in the production and transportation processes of knowledge (computers and microfilm are two examples). National and international bodies, manned by 'reputed' professionals, have come up to monitor and control the quality of production of knowledge. Strict norms and standards have been laid down for this. Individual producers who follow these norms are handsomely rewarded through professorships, scholarships and other appointments; those who deviate are ostracized, punished and rejected (Gouldner, 1970).

These developments have made knowledge as the single most important basis of power and control. As a result, ordinary people are not considered

either knowledgeable or capable of knowing. Therefore, decisions affecting ordinary people are shown to be based on 'expert' knowledge and any attempts by ordinary people to counter these decisions are labelled as 'uninformed', 'pedestrian', and so on.

A related outcome is the alienation of people from those attempting to generate such knowledge. For instance, researchers are finding it rather difficult to obtain authentic data. This has a social psychological reason. An ordinary person is only considered a respondent in a research project. This person has no influence over the researcher, the questions asked or the use of such research; he or she is neither aware of or interested in the research. It is possible to enhance the authenticity of data by arousing the interest of respondents. Financial incentives have failed to do so. What the respondent may like is influence over research and its outcome. The researcher may be unwilling to concede this if the overriding concern is objectivity and fear of criticism by the professional research community. The researcher is, therefore, caught in a bind.

One possible way out of this bind is to redefine the purpose of knowledge as power to ordinary people. This implies democratization of knowledge-generation and reduction in monopolistic control over the commodity of knowledge. This further implies that the balance of power may shift from the fists of few to the hands of many. If the ordinary people, the have-nots, begin to have influence over the processes of knowledge-generation, utilization and dissemination, they can use the power of knowledge to counter trends of oppression against them. It may also provide the researcher an opportunity to get authentic information. It may, therefore, help the researcher to generate valid knowledge which represents reality correctly.

Participatory research appears to provide this opportunity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The concept, approach and methodology of PR as it has evolved over the past few years has several characteristics. We enumerate them briefly.

► Participatory research is a process of knowing and acting. People engaged in PR simultaneously enhance their understanding and knowledge of a particular situation as well as take action to change it to their benefit. To that extent, PR attempts to remove the established dichotomy of knowing and using that knowledge. Knowledge for the sake of knowing alone is de-emphasized; knowing is linked to a concrete action. This enhances the quality of knowledge as well as informs the basis for action.

► The process of PR is initiated in the context of the actual reality which the have-nots intend to change. Therefore, an existing problem provides the initial motivation for engaging in PR. In situations where people are already aware of a problem and articulate enough about it, they may initiate PR themselves. They may or may not use the resources of experts from outside. In other situations, some outsiders — be they activists or educators or researchers —

may provide the initial problem focus. However, the involvement of people from that situation in the process, even if it begins with an external push, is a necessary element of participatory research.

► While participation of people in the processes of knowing-and acting is a necessary part of PR, the extent and nature of this participation varies considerably. Where initiative to engage in a process of PR comes from people of the situation, their participation is quite widespread. In most such cases, they take part in the methodology of data collection, analysis of data, planning, and taking action. In other cases, where initiative comes externally, the participation of people from the situation is initially limited, but tends to increase in scope and depth as the process moves on. They may not be so involved in methods of data collection and analysis as they may be in the planning and taking action stage.

► We come now to the issue of control in participatory research. The people of the situation must have control over the process of knowing and acting. It is easier to obtain control when initiative comes from the people themselves. In case of external initiative, it is a slow process by which people of and in the situation begin to control the PR. The external party may not relinquish control so easily. This gets further complicated if this external party is an expert. Experts have a tendency to control others; ordinary people tend to voluntarily submit to an expert's control. In either event, it is imperative that the processes of PR shift control over the process of knowing and knowledge to the people in that situation.

► The methodology of PR attempts to reduce or eliminate the limitations of classical research. It employs methods of data collection which are prevalent in classical research. However, it also emphasizes qualitative and phenomenological methods which are generally considered 'unscientific' in the classical model. The methodology of PR, however, stresses inter-personal communication among different parties and demands clarification of the motives of the external party, if any.

► An important characteristic of PR is its collective nature. As evolved over the years, the process of PR requires groups of people to engage together. The most important step in this context is collective analysis of a given situation. It is this significant distinction from the classical paradigm that makes research an individual effort. Participatory research is a collective enterprise and this is reflected in its different steps.

An outcome of this characteristic of PR has been the creation of organizations among the have-nots. As described earlier, many of the have-nots, in the Asian context, are unorganized and isolated. The process of PR brings such persons together; collective sharing, analysis and action generate strong connections between them. Over a period of time, these connections grow into organizations of the have-nots. This has been demonstrated many times in the rural Asian context.

► Finally, the process of PR is an educative experience for those engaged in it.

The people in the situation become aware and more knowledgeable through their engagement. They become more knowledgeable about methods of knowing and analysis; they become aware of their situation and possible way to change that situation. It is this component of learning-for-all that makes PR a distinct approach.

Examined in the light of the above characteristics, PR has made valuable contributions in Asia and throughout the world. It has been used to bring about improvements in villages, urban slums, tribal habitats, etc. It has been effectively engaged in adult literacy, primary health care, agricultural practice, economic enterprise. It has been brought in from outside as a tool for local confrontation. It has contributed to people's organization, conscientization and liberation. It has highlighted possible approaches to development.

In all these efforts, particularly in Asia, participatory research has confined itself to micro situations (a hamlet, a slum, a colony) and concerned itself with the have-nots (landless labourer, migrant worker, tribal people, women). It is now time for PR to address itself to the other side as well.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

As argued earlier, most experiences in PR, particularly in Asia, have focused upon micro settings. Undoubtedly, these have helped in countering the direct mechanism of exploitation. However, there is an increasing impact of the indirect mechanisms on the lives of ordinary people. Moreover, this indirect mechanism operates through the processes of modernization and use 'expert' knowledge as the basis for making its case. To counter this mechanism, 'expert' knowledge from the viewpoint of ordinary people is to be generated and disseminated. It is in this process that I see an important future role of participatory research: giving the have-nots the power of knowledge. A future role of this kind may have many important elements.

□ Firstly, the 'expert' knowledge being used by the planners and decision-makers needs to be thoroughly exposed and challenged. This exposé can demonstrate both the incompleteness of assumptions on which this knowledge is posited and the inadequacy of the knowledge itself. However, for planners and decision-makers to take note of this exposé, it has to be fashioned, at least in form and knowledge, exactly after the way of that 'expert' knowledge. This implies that professional researchers can bring their professional skills to bear on the exposé. To that extent, the role of professionally trained researchers becomes crucial.

□ However, it is important to underscore the alliance of the professional researcher with some groups of have-nots. The exposé is not merely an academic exercise but is intended to contribute towards the empowerment of the have-nots. The alliance has to be more than mere emotional sympathy. Many professional researchers are engaged at present in exposés of multinational corporations, foreign trade and government policies. Yet, these are individual

efforts inspired by personal motivations. While all such efforts are valuable contributions to the cause of the have-nots, they would not classify as participatory research. For PR, an elicit alliance is essential with a group of have-nots so that these people can participate in this exposé inquiry.

□ It may be somewhat unrealistic to expect nascent groups of have-nots to contribute towards this sophisticated exposé inquiry. Yet, their involvement is central in participatory research. What is certainly possible is to initiate a process of continuous dialogue between the professional researcher and the group of have-nots during the course of the inquiry. This will certainly make them better informed about and more aware of the functioning of the indirect mechanism of exploitation. In any event, a translation of the exposé into the language of ordinary people is the minimum that must be achieved to link the exposé to their lives.

□ It is conceivable that the knowledge of common people — popular knowledge — may form an important basis for exposé and alternative 'expertise'. It has been shown repeatedly that ordinary people have a way of knowing and a store of knowledge that has escaped the attention of planners and decision-makers. One task of a professional researcher in PR may be to translate this store of knowledge in the dominant form — a form that planners and decision-makers understand and accept — so that their knowledge could influence the 'expert' knowledge. It is clear that the popular knowledge, unless translated into the dominant form and language, cannot provide a basis for consideration by planners and decision-makers.

□ An important theme requiring further clarity is the linkage between macro and micro research. It appears that if participatory research is to play an empowering role it has to focus on both micro and macro issues. Given this perspective, it is crucial to develop modes and models for this macro and micro focus: simultaneous, sequential or both, or . . . ? Similarly, the new direction of participatory research suggests an important role for professional researchers. This opens up the thorny questions of interaction and influence between the researcher and the ordinary people.

□ The aspects I have mentioned provide only a partial outline for this future role of participatory research. Much more needs to be considered, practised and conceptualized. There are several issues that require further clarity even within this outline. My aim is to share my own praxis of reflection and action and to continue the dialogue on new directions of participatory research.

REFERENCES

- Arnove, Robert F. 'Foundations and the Transference of Knowledge: Implications for India'. *Social Action*, vol. 31, no. 2, April-June, 1981
- Gouldner, Alvin. *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970
- Saint, Kishore. 'Participation and Liberation Communications in the Indian Context'. Paper presented at workshop on Participatory Research Evaluation, Ranchi, India, 9-12 March 1981
- Tandon, Rajesh. *Participatory Research in Asia (ed.)*. Canberra: Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University, 1980

La Recherche Participante: un moyen d'Accroître le Pouvoir du Peuple

Le coordonateur du projet de recherche participante asiatique, Rajesh Tandon, rappelle le développement du concept à partir de ses origines jusqu'à l'émergence de ses préoccupations premières ainsi que ses futures tendances.

Deux forces motrices élémentaires ont donné le ton à la maturation de la recherche participante. La première s'intéresse aux incommodités causées par la nature déficiente et oppressive de la recherche classique en pointant du doigt le fait que les chercheurs, n'ayant aucun sens des valeurs, contrôlent unilatéralement le déroulement de la recherche et traitent les gens comme des objets de recherche. La deuxième émane du fait que les petits groupes les mieux nantis exploitent de plus en plus les groupes les plus défavorisés de même qu'ils contrôlent la production et la diffusion des connaissances.

Les connaissances, en tant que base de pouvoir et du contrôle se veulent le sujet central de la recherche participatoire. A travers une démocratisation de la création et du contrôle du savoir, la recherche participatoire se donne pour objet de créer un savoir populaire afin de mieux munir les groupes opprimés par la société. L'auteur présente sept caractéristiques de la recherche participante:

- c'est une opération visant à éliminer la dichotomie savoir/agir;
- cette opération découle des problèmes réels et concrets auxquels les gens sont confrontés;
- l'étendue et la nature de la participation des gens au niveau des opérations de la recherche varie de la collecte et de l'analyse des données à la planification et la prise d'action;
- les gens contrôlent eux-mêmes l'opération de la recherche;
- la méthodologie regroupe la communication interpersonnelle et la discussion dans un même cadre dont l'approche se veut qualitative;
- c'est une activité collective qui pourrait éventuellement mener à la formation de mouvements et de groupes sociaux;
- l'opération est une expérience éducative pour tous ceux qui y sont impliqués.

En Asie, la recherche participante en tant qu'approche de développement s'est impliquée avec succès dans les domaines de l'alphabétisation des adultes, de la distribution des premiers soins, de la pratique de l'agriculture ainsi que des entreprises économiques. Toutefois, la recherche participante, dans tous ses déploiements, s'est confinée, comme le souligne l'auteur au domaine des problèmes de moindre envergure de même qu'aux plus démunis.

En conséquence, l'auteur préconise en prévision du futur, un besoin de contre-carrer les mécanismes, indirects mais puissants, d'exploitation et d'oppression des gens du peuple exercés au nom du modernisme. En vue d'une telle tâche, il serait nécessaire d'explorer et de défier les hypothèses et les carences de la soi-disant connaissance 'experte' dont se servent ceux qui planifient et prennent des décisions. En entreprenant des recherches sur les corporations multinationales, l'aide étrangère et les politiques gouvernementales, il est essentiel pour les chercheurs de s'allier un groupe de démunis, car la participation des moins bien nantis dans ce genre de recherche peut ou bien contribuer à ladite recherche ou bien en bénéficier et même parfois les deux.

• • •

Investigación Participativa y la Base Popular

Rajesh Tandon, Coordinador Asiático del Proyecto de Investigación Participativa, traza las líneas generales del desarrollo del concepto, clasificando sus antecedentes desde sus orígenes hasta la esencia de los hechos y las direcciones futuras.

Dos razones básicas e interrelacionadas han dado forma al crecimiento de la investigación participativa. La primera preocupación en sí misma, es el malestar asociado con la insuficiencia y opresión natural de la investigación clásica, paradigma en términos de su énfasis en valores neutrales de los investigadores, objetividad y control, unilateral por los investigadores y el tratamiento de la gente como un objeto de investigación. El segundo motivo ha emanado de la continua y siempre en aumento explotación y opresión de las masas desposeídas por grupos pequeños de sectores pudientes, quienes también controlan la producción y diseminación del conocimiento.

El conocimiento es la esencia como única y más importante base de poder y control en la investigación participativa. A través de la democratización del conocimiento, creación y control, la investigación participativa está preocupada en la creación de un conocimiento popular el cual pueda servir como un medio de habilitación a los grupos oprimidos en la sociedad.

En este artículo están bosquejadas siete características de la Investigación Participativa:

- Es un proceso en cual trata de eliminar la dicotomía establecida entre conocimiento y acción.
- Los procesos se originan de una realidad concreta del problema enfrentado por la gente.
- La extensión y naturaleza de participación de la gente en el proceso de investigación varía considerablemente desde la recolección de antecedentes, análisis de datos a la planificación y toma de acción.
- La gente tiene control sobre el proceso de investigación.
- La metodología hace hincapié en la comunicación interpersonal y la discusión en un marco de trabajo de un enfoque cualitativo.
- Es una actividad colectiva la cual puede eventualmente conducir a la formación de movimientos sociales y otros grupos.
- El proceso es una experiencia educativa para todos los que están comprometidos en él.

En Asia, la Investigación Participativa como una propuesta de desarrollo, ha estado efectivamente comprometida en alfabetización de adultos, cuidados primarios de salud, prácticas agrícolas y empresas económicas. Aunque el autor sostiene, que en todos estos esfuerzos la Investigación Participativa se ha confinado a situaciones micro y de desposeídos.

Consecuentemente, haciendo planes en direcciones futuras, el autor sostiene la necesidad de contrarrestar indirectamente poderosos mecanismos de explotación y opresión de la gente, que es llevado a cabo, en nombre de la modernización. En esta tarea, existe la necesidad de explorar a fondo y desafiar la apropiación de los llamados "expertos" en conocimiento que está siendo usado por los planificadores, los que toman las decisiones. En tareas de investigación y explicaciones de corporaciones multinacionales, la ayuda foránea y otras políticas de gobierno, son esenciales para un investigador sólo con un grupo de desposeídos. La participación de la desposeídos en esta clase de investigación puede por un lado contribuir a la investigación o beneficiarse de ella, o ambas.