

Participatory evaluation and research: Main concepts and issues

Rajesh Tandon

1981

UNESCO Knowledge Democracy / Participatory Research Hub

Publications

Original citation:

Tandon, R. (1981). Participatory evaluation and research: main concepts and issues. In W. Fernandes & R. Tandon (Eds.), *Participatory research and evaluation: Experiments in research as a process of liberation* (pp. 15–34). Indian Social Institute.

Downloaded from UVicSpace Research & Learning Repository

dspace.library.uvic.ca



**University
of Victoria**

Libraries

Participatory Evaluation and Research: Main Concepts and Issues¹

Rajesh Tandon

From the days in the 1930s when the University of Bombay first introduced a post-graduate course in sociology, to our days, there has been a gradual change to professionalisation of the social sciences. With professionalisation came specialisation and its acceptance as a science that can be considered objective by creating a distance between the researcher and the 'object' of study i.e., the people studied—actors in the social setting.

What is forgotten in this classical mode of research is that this cry for objectivity is a result of the post-renaissance developments in the West, the evolutionary thinking of the late nineteenth and the rationalist schools of the early twentieth centuries, when 'modernist' thought considered the world as chaos. The work of the social scientist was to create order out of this 'chaos' by remaining outside the system and taking an observer stance. His work was to analyse the behaviour of man and understand the system in a 'scientific' way.

Looking at the world as chaos led further to the model of man where subsistence and survival were hypothesised as

¹This paper has borrowed extensively from two other papers of the same author, the first presented at the Adult Education Research Seminar held at Kungälv, Sweden, June 25-27, 1979 and the second presented at the Participatory Research Meeting held in New Delhi, India, February 7-9, 1979.

the prime driving forces. In order further to gain some control over the chaos it was necessary to generate a construct of social order demanding compliance.²

The classical research approach in social settings has, therefore, implicitly borrowed the method of inquiry used in the natural sciences. This has led to a distorted emphasis on 'objectivity' and researcher-object differentiation. This approach in social settings has placed primacy on developing research designs (both in the laboratory and in the field) that attempt to maintain the separation between the researcher and individuals in the social system under study. Such an emphasis will seem misdirected if we examine the three distinctive characteristics of inquiry in social settings.

(i) Social research means a study of individuals, groups and organisations in a social setting;

(ii) The researcher shares his essential humanity with the individuals in the social setting under study;

(iii) The very act of inquiry tends to have some impact on the social system under study.

One can clearly notice the differences that emanate from these distinctive characteristics of social research and inquiry in the natural sciences. To that extent, it is doubtful if social research can utilise a methodology that is implicitly based on the assumptions of natural science inquiry.

Another major influence of natural sciences on social inquiry is in terms of the acceptable purpose of research. In the natural sciences it is solely aimed at increased understanding of, and knowledge about, natural phenomena. The utilisation of this new knowledge has been the task of the technologist. Social science researchers have assigned similar roles to themselves. Social change based on the enhanced understanding of the social system and phenomena is not seen as an integral part of their role. In the absence of social technologists, the utilisation of new knowledge has been neglected.

The Historical Context

One may ask why social technologists have not 'arrived' in spite

²Sushanta Banerjee, 'Participatory Research: Ethic or Logic,' in Rajesh Tandon (ed.), *Participatory Research in Asia* (Canberra, Centre for Continuing Education—Australian National University, 1980), p. 26.

of this sort at 'objectivity'. The reasons should probably be found in the historical context in which the social sciences grew. The search for objectivity that finds its best example in Durkheim is the result of the interaction of the early twentieth century social thinkers with the natural scientists. Their pre-occupation was to show that sociology and anthropology were sciences i.e., objective like the natural sciences.³ They had thus to be shown as studying an object that was outside man. Durkheim declared that the object of study was a social fact which is external to man 'every way of acting which is general through a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.'⁴

If Durkheim's pre-occupation was to show that sociology was different from psychology and philosophy, Weber had to show its psychological linkages which were essentially individualistic.

The main intellectual influences in which Weber's work is steeped are as predominantly German as those which shaped Durkheim's writings are French. Moreover, Durkheim's early studies are rather abstract and philosophical in character... Weber's first works on the other hand, are detailed historical studies, and it was from within the context of specific problems brought to light primarily by the German historical school that Weber went on to expand the range of his writings to embrace questions of a general theoretical nature.⁵

Moreover, in all the classics including Marx, an evolutionistic trend is clear. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this was also a colonial context since it made a distinction between 'primitive' and 'advanced' societies—the former belonging to the colonies and the latter to the colonising countries. Though Indian sociologists gave it a 'national' interpretation by making the anthropologists study the 'primitive' tribes of India

³ David Walsh, 'Sociology and the Social World,' in Paul Filmer, *New Directions in Sociological Theory* (London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1972), pp. 16-18.

⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 13.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory—An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (London: Cambridge University Press, Reprint 1974), pp. 119-120.

and the sociologists studying India's 'advanced' societies,⁶ the original intention of the colonialist trying to understand his own society by going back to the origin of 'primitive civilisations', or trying to know more about the colonies in order to better control them, has to be borne in mind.

It is in this context of evolutionism and its colonial past that the present should be examined. This is especially important if one bears in mind that in spite of thirty years of independence, our intellectuals are, by and large, dependent for their status and acceptance on their links with the West.

From among the members of the second generation and of the third generation (of sociologists) some went to the United States and some to Britain after independence...All these persons formed a category and did influence sociological tradition in India, by introducing the new trends. For academic position a foreign degree, or even a stay abroad without any degree, was considered more acceptable by the universities and they filled up many positions in the university departments. This new trend was reinforced by the visit of the foreigners to India, again a very large number from the United States and a smaller number from Britain.⁷

Classical Methodology

This methodology was more and more quantitative in character and assumed the universality of social principles. In other words, methodologies developed in the West under a totally different social, cultural, economic and political situation were absolutised and transferred to India and other Third World countries. These methodologies that took the principles of natural sciences for granted, did not make allowance for the distinctive nature of social science inquiry. If we assume that it is impossible to control all the spurious interferences in social research (and this is an increasingly doubtful assumption), then it might be difficult to talk about 'reproducibility' and consequent generalisation. We only develop a partial understanding of a social phenomenon and this seriously limits our ability to generalise. Therefore, a major argument against the utilisation of

⁶ I. P. Desai, 'Craft of Sociology in India—An Autobiographical Perspective,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (n. 8 February 14, 1981) pp. 247-248.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 246

knowledge generated by social research is its lack of applicability in particular settings. As the director of the Amul cooperative said recently,

Technocratic approaches to improve productivity in our villages cannot put the tools of improved productivity into the hands of our poor, rural majority. Thus, increasingly, in our search for a key to rural development, we leave aside the conventional economists and technocrats and we turn to the sociologists. Then we encounter a paradox: the professional sociologist is very good at describing a social structure, at measuring attitudes to change, at diagnosing male/female roles and so on...But all these sociological exercises do not seem to be of much help, when it comes to putting some equality into the power structure, or modernising attitudes to change, or freeing women from the bondage of traditional ideas about men's and women's roles.⁸

To that extent, those interested in social change in a particular setting need to move away from this type of professionalism and initiate their own research process in that setting. It is because classical social research has neglected the issue of change of social systems except as one more subject of study. It has not only been indifferent to this issue but also actively punished those who attempted to combine the two purposes of understanding and change by labelling their efforts 'unscientific'.

Another argument against researchers' involvement in social change is premised on the misconception that research is value-free. Since all change, especially social change, is based on a normative vision of the 'desired' and since the researcher's task is to be objective and value-free in pursuit of his inquiry, how can one expect him to combine the process of inquiry with the process of change?

The underlying fallacy in this argument is the naive assumption that inquiry is value-free. Neither social research, nor even inquiry in the natural sciences is value-free. The researcher not only believes that the natural phenomena are orderly and therefore can be researched, but he also adopts a framework in order

⁸ V. Kurien, *Productivity and Rural Development—Some Economic, Technical and Social Considerations* (New Delhi: National Productivity Council, 22nd Foundation Day Lecture, February 1980)

to collect observations. These frameworks are as much normative as those held by social researchers.

Moreover, the myths of value-free inquiry and the non-normative role of the researcher have led to the dehumanising and catastrophic utilisation of knowledge. The overwhelming obsession of researchers with 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' has resulted in the development of nuclear missiles, biological poisons and psychological brainwashing. Other studies have shown how the standards of professionalism in the social sciences set by foreigners, have in fact led to a colonial control of institutions and knowledge.⁹

Finally, there is an ethical issue that has been largely neglected in classical social research. The practice of classical social research resulted in complete and exclusive control of the process and outcome of research by professional researchers. The researcher develops knowledge based on data collected from individuals, groups and organisations in a social setting. Those individuals, groups and organisations do not have any control over the knowledge generated from the data obtained from them. They are only the 'objects' of research.

And the researcher is neither accountable to them nor responsible for the use of knowledge thus generated. A researcher can do that in the natural sciences without any ethical considerations because the subject-matter is natural phenomena. Can we follow the same argument for inquiry in social phenomena?

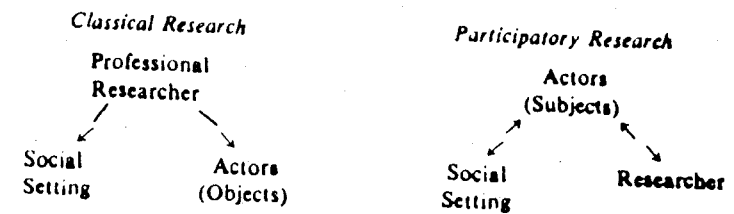
Participatory Research

In the light of the above frustrations with classical research, it may be valuable to analyse the issue of control a little more in depth. In various types of research approaches, what is chosen and who chooses? Figure I can give us some idea. (see next page)

As Figure I shows, classical research emphasises professional control over the generation, utilisation and elaboration of knowledge—hence the need for new approaches. Participatory research and evaluation maintain that the actors in the situation are not merely objects of someone else's study but are actively

⁹Zafarullah Chowdhury, 'Research—A Method of Colonisation,' in Rajesh Tandon, *op cit.*, pp. 16-25.

Figure I: Control over Knowledge-Generation and Elaboration Process



influencing the process of knowledge-generation and elaboration. To that extent, the participatory approach is an effort to check the present trends of (a) professionalisation and centralisation of knowledge in its generation and utilisation since it can be used to manipulate the actors of a social setting without their having any control over it; (b) the neglect of the actors in the situation not only as sources of knowledge but also as its legitimate owners.

Is this an ethical issue or ideological confusion? Probably it is a combination of both. Whatever be the case, it is obvious that if the actors in the social setting become the owners of knowledge they generate, the process of this elaboration can itself become an important step in awareness-building and social change among the oppressed.

If we broadly classify research types into the three categories shown in figure II (see next page), then it is easy to understand how participatory research approach differs in some very fundamental ways. Academic research is what most professional researchers are engaged in and what most research institutes reward and encourage. Policy/evaluation research has become increasingly popular over the last two decades. An administrator, policy-maker or government agency commissions a research study in order to satisfy some of the administrative needs. This client is, by and large, outside the problem or area he wants researched by a professional researcher.

Participatory research has been set against these two types on the three key steps in a research act: choice of the problem, choice of the methodology and choice of the outcome. Figure II highlights, somewhat dramatically, this issue of control in research. Academic research has emphasised unilateral control by the professional researcher on all steps of a research act.

and the sociologists studying India's 'advanced' societies,⁶ the original intention of the colonialist trying to understand his own society by going back to the origin of 'primitive civilisations', or trying to know more about the colonies in order to better control them, has to be borne in mind.

It is in this context of evolutionism and its colonial past that the present should be examined. This is especially important if one bears in mind that in spite of thirty years of independence, our intellectuals are, by and large, dependent for their status and acceptance on their links with the West.

From among the members of the second generation and of the third generation (of sociologists) some went to the United States and some to Britain after independence... All these persons formed a category and did influence sociological tradition in India, by introducing the new trends. For academic position a foreign degree, or even a stay abroad without any degree, was considered more acceptable by the universities and they filled up many positions in the university departments. This new trend was reinforced by the visit of the foreigners to India, again a very large number from the United States and a smaller number from Britain.⁷

Classical Methodology

This methodology was more and more quantitative in character and assumed the universality of social principles. In other words, methodologies developed in the West under a totally different social, cultural, economic and political situation were absolutised and transferred to India and other Third World countries. These methodologies that took the principles of natural sciences for granted, did not make allowance for the distinctive nature of social science inquiry. If we assume that it is impossible to control all the spurious interferences in social research (and this is an increasingly doubtful assumption), then it might be difficult to talk about 'reproducibility' and consequent generalisation. We only develop a partial understanding of a social phenomenon and this seriously limits our ability to generalise. Therefore, a major argument against the utilisation of

⁶ I. P. Desai, 'Craft of Sociology in India—An Autobiographical Perspective,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (n. 8 February 14, 1981), pp 247-248.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 246

knowledge generated by social research is its lack of applicability in particular settings. As the director of the Amul cooperative said recently,

Technocratic approaches to improve productivity in our villages cannot put the tools of improved productivity into the hands of our poor, rural majority. Thus, increasingly, in our search for a key to rural development, we leave aside the conventional economists and technocrats and we turn to the sociologists. Then we encounter a paradox: the professional sociologist is very good at describing a social structure, at measuring attitudes to change, at diagnosing male/female roles and so on... But all these sociological exercises do not seem to be of much help, when it comes to putting some equality into the power structure, or modernising attitudes to change, or freeing women from the bondage of traditional ideas about men's and women's roles.⁸

To that extent, those interested in social change in a particular setting need to move away from this type of professionalism and initiate their own research process in that setting. It is because classical social research has neglected the issue of change of social systems except as one more subject of study. It has not only been indifferent to this issue but also actively punished those who attempted to combine the two purposes of understanding and change by labelling their efforts 'unscientific'.

Another argument against researchers' involvement in social change is premised on the misconception that research is value-free. Since all change, especially social change, is based on a normative vision of the 'desired' and since the researcher's task is to be objective and value-free in pursuit of his inquiry, how can one expect him to combine the process of inquiry with the process of change?

The underlying fallacy in this argument is the naive assumption that inquiry is value-free. Neither social research, nor even inquiry in the natural sciences is value-free. The researcher not only believes that the natural phenomena are orderly and therefore can be researched, but he also adopts a framework in order

⁸ V. Kurien, *Productivity and Rural Development—Some Economic, Technical and Social Considerations* (New Delhi: National Productivity Council, 22nd Foundation Day Lecture, February 1980.)

to collect observations. These frameworks are as much normative as those held by social researchers.

Moreover, the myths of value-free inquiry and the non-normative role of the researcher have led to the dehumanising and catastrophic utilisation of knowledge. The overwhelming obsession of researchers with 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' has resulted in the development of nuclear missiles, biological poisons and psychological brainwashing. Other studies have shown how the standards of professionalism in the social sciences set by foreigners, have in fact led to a colonial control of institutions and knowledge.⁹

Finally, there is an ethical issue that has been largely neglected in classical social research. The practice of classical social research resulted in complete and exclusive control of the process and outcome of research by professional researchers. The researcher develops knowledge based on data collected from individuals, groups and organisations in a social setting. Those individuals, groups and organisations do not have any control over the knowledge generated from the data obtained from them. They are only the 'objects' of research.

And the researcher is neither accountable to them nor responsible for the use of knowledge thus generated. A researcher can do that in the natural sciences without any ethical considerations because the subject-matter is natural phenomena. Can we follow the same argument for inquiry in social phenomena?

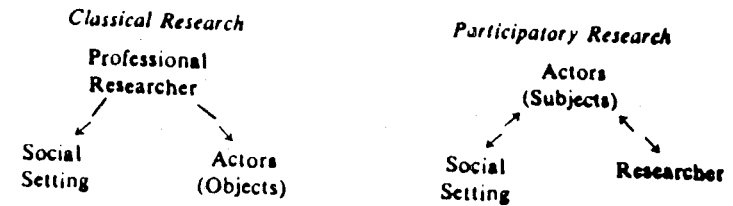
Participatory Research

In the light of the above frustrations with classical research, it may be valuable to analyse the issue of control a little more in depth. In various types of research approaches, what is chosen and who chooses? Figure I can give us some idea. (see next page)

As Figure I shows, classical research emphasises professional control over the generation, utilisation and elaboration of knowledge—hence the need for new approaches. Participatory research and evaluation maintain that the actors in the situation are not merely objects of someone else's study but are actively

⁹Zafarullah Chowdhury, 'Research—A Method of Colonisation,' in Rajab Tandon, *op cit.*, pp. 16-25.

Figure 1: Control over Knowledge-Generation and Elaboration Process



influencing the process of knowledge-generation and elaboration. To that extent, the participatory approach is an effort to check the present trends of (a) professionalisation and centralisation of knowledge in its generation and utilisation since it can be used to manipulate the actors of a social setting without their having any control over it; (b) the neglect of the actors in the situation not only as sources of knowledge but also as its legitimate owners.

Is this an ethical issue or ideological confusion? Probably it is a combination of both. Whatever be the case, it is obvious that if the actors in the social setting become the owners of knowledge they generate, the process of this elaboration can itself become an important step in awareness-building and social change among the oppressed.

If we broadly classify research types into the three categories shown in figure II (see next page), then it is easy to understand how participatory research approach differs in some very fundamental ways. Academic research is what most professional researchers are engaged in and what most research institutes reward and encourage. Policy/evaluation research has become increasingly popular over the last two decades. An administrator, policy-maker or government agency commissions a research study in order to satisfy some of the administrative needs. This client is, by and large, outside the problem or area he wants researched by a professional researcher.

Participatory research has been set against these two types on the three key steps in a research act: choice of the problem, choice of the methodology and choice of the outcome. Figure II highlights, somewhat dramatically, this issue of control in research. Academic research has emphasised unilateral control by the professional researcher on all steps of a research act.

Figure II: Distinctions between three types of Research Process

	Academic Research	Policy/Evaluation Research (Commissioned)	Participatory Research
1. CHOICE OF PROBLEM			
What?	Choice based on the interest and discipline of the professional researcher	Choice based on client's administrative needs	Choice based on immediate problem situation
Who?	Professional researcher	Client (who is outside the problem area)	Jointly by the actors in the problem situation and professional researcher
2. CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY			
What?	Experimental research designs, use of reliable instruments, statistical analysis	Quasi-experimental field research designs, use of reliable instruments, statistical analysis	Consensual-validity-based research designs, use of empathic instruments, multiple analysis methods
Who?	Professional researcher	Professional researcher	Jointly by the actors and the professional researcher
3. CHOICE OF OUTCOME			
What?	Publications (Presentations in 'learned' seminars)	— Report (to the Client) — Publication (if the researcher negotiates)	— Changes in the situation — Increased knowledge base — Increased capacity among actors to inquire into and change their situations
Who?	Professional researcher	Client (primarily)	Jointly by the actors and the professional researcher

Participatory research and evaluation is an approach where this control is jointly shared by the researcher and the actors in the problem situation. While the former gives an absolute value to the minority of theorizers in a society, the latter begins with trust in the knowledge which the common man possesses. What has been said by some authors about the sociology of knowledge can equally well be applied to participatory research:

Theoretical thought, 'ideas' *Weltanschauungen* are not that important in society. Although every society contains these phenomena, they are only part of the sum of what passes for 'knowledge'. Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of 'ideas' and the construction of *Weltanschauungen*. But everyone in society participates in its 'knowledge' in one way or another. Put differently, only a few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort... To exaggerate the importance of theoretical thought in society and history is a natural failing of theorizers. It is then all the more necessary to correct this intellectualistic misapprehension. The theoretical formulations of reality, whether they be scientific or philosophical or even mythological, do not exhaust what is 'real' for the members of a society. In other words, commonsense 'knowledge' rather than 'ideas' must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist.¹⁰

The Main Issues

Before going into the details of some of the implications of this fundamental emphasis in participatory research and evaluation, it might be worthwhile to enumerate what a participatory approach might entail concretely. First of all, in its broad and loose meaning, it has been an ongoing process in India. As mentioned in the above quotation, the label may be given by theoreticians, but its practice is quite common in groups engaged in the process of re-awakening the weakest sections of our society. As examples of such efforts one may mention the organisation of landless labourers in Dhulia district of Maharashtra that has used a similar

¹⁰Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality - A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, Reprint 1973), pp 26-27

methodology in identifying the records of people whose land was illegally alienated from them.¹¹ Another well-known case is the Chipko movement in Uttar Pradesh where, as a result of the people's reflection on the causes of the 1970 floods, deforestation caused by some industrialists, the forest department's refusal to let the local poor use the Ash trees for their needs and the permission they granted to commercial contractors and industrialists, the people organised themselves into a resistance group. A community forestry scheme based on the right of the local people to the forest produce and the maintenance of its environment was born out of it.¹²

The relevance of this characteristic of a participatory approach is not merely to recognise that, while the label is new, the approach has existed over the years, but also to accept the fact that while labelling of concepts is an activity of professional researchers, ordinary people somehow do not see their approaches in similar conceptual frameworks. Participatory research is, therefore, a new approach for professionals and a pragmatic one for those in the field.

This poses significant questions for the development of a participatory method. For example, do we have a single, well-defined and well-articulated approach? Are we clear that the range represented by those engaged in participatory research and evaluation (from professional researchers located in universities to semi-literate field workers in the village) necessarily implies tensions which need to be addressed in an inclusive manner?

We do not as yet have clear-cut answers to all these questions but can only think of tentative steps. Figure III is an attempt to chart the steps of an 'ideal' participatory approach.

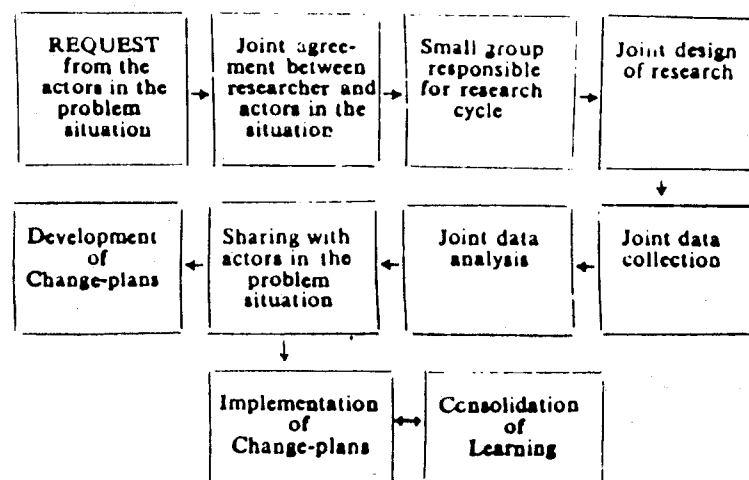
One major element missing in this 'ideal' model is the ideological/normative stance. To the extent that participatory approach is an attempt to break away from unidirectional control of the professional researcher, it has to be consistent in its definition of 'actors in the problem situation'. Therefore, participatory approach is solely in response to and for the fulfilment of the needs of the less powerful, weaker segments of a social setting and is part of a process of their growth into consciousness.

¹¹'The Story of *Shramik Sangathan*' *How* (n. 1 June, 1978), pp. 24-28.

¹²Gopa Joshi, 'Afforestation of Deforested Himalayas,' *How*, 4 (n. 4, 1981) pp. 11-14.

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become imperative when one does not erroneously attempt to create a dichotomy between the content of humanity and its historical forms. The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection.¹³

Figure III: Steps in an 'Ideal' Participatory Research Approach



Some comments related to Figure III are needed here:

(i) The initial request in an ideal participatory process may come from the powerful actors in the situation. But in reality, this may not be so. The request may come from someone powerful within the situation, or outside it. Yet, the researcher can transform it into a participatory process by following some later steps, provided his ideological stance is explicit.

¹³Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, Reprint 1980), p. 41.

(ii) Various steps outlined in Figure III appear to be one-shot, fixed ones. In reality, a participatory process has to be cyclical and iterative. For example, joint agreement may need to be worked and re-worked many times, over the entire cycle.

(iii) As presented here, various steps in the participatory process assume the involvement of an outside researcher. In reality, groups of actors in a particular setting may go through the entire process without any assistance from the outsider. In fact, effective participatory process must have the increased capacity of the actors in the situation to inquire into and change their situation as a valued outcome. To that extent, an outside researcher will become redundant soon.¹⁴

(iv) As presented in figure III, the participatory process may appear identical to Action Research. However, there are two significant ways in which participatory research is different. First, the ideological stance and emphasis on making the researcher's value-premises explicit are generally not mentioned in the action research approach. Second, action research can be, and is being, undertaken without the participation and control of the actors in the situation. In essence, then, action research becomes another method in the exclusive control of the professional researcher.

The Participants

A related characteristic that deserves mention here is the range of people and their diverse motivations to enter into the participatory process. We can see the participants at two levels i.e. professionals and the common man, especially the oppressed.

At the professional level, in the Indian context, there are at least three sets of people and motivations. One set comprises those who have been trained professionally in the empiricist paradigm of traditional social science research. They have moved into participatory research due to frustration with the existing forms of research. For this set, the reality has remained untouched and unchanged despite tremendous development in research technology. They notice that despite the increased volume

¹⁴For more on it see, 'The Activist's Credo' (Excerpts from the Report of the Workshop on 'The Training and Methodology of Training for Activists' prepared by Kamla Bhasin and Valant Palahkar Lakshmi Rao), *Journal of Education*, 23 (n. 5, December 1980), pp. 249-251.

of printed material, the life of ordinary people has remained unchanged. Moreover, the institutionalisation of research in the universities and other such institutes has led to a monopolistic control over research, on the one hand, and a distance of research from ordinary people on the other. For this set of researchers, such irrelevance of social science research is intolerable in the context of a poor society like ours.

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

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

At the level of the oppressed sections, the participants are predominantly rural. The size of the rural population in India and in other Asian countries, as well as the complexities of developmental dynamics, have contributed to the overwhelming rural context of participatory research in this country, or for that matter, in the Third World as a whole. The best examples of this process are, in fact, from rural areas. As examples we may mention the Joint Irrigation System among tribals in Southern Rajasthan, *Gram Vikas* in the Ganjam district of Orissa or *Bhumi Sena* in the Thane district of Maharashtra.

This rural context has contributed to a much better understanding of the processes involved than would have been possible in an urban professional atmosphere. Moreover, Indian activists

and researchers have been able to learn from similar experiments in other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America and have been able to contribute to learning in these continents. In that sense, it is considerably different from similar experiments in Europe and North America and can at best compliment them since they are, by and large, urban in character.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

It should be clear from what has been said above that the participatory approach is not value-neutral but is ideologically committed to the weakest sections. It has a necessary relationship with social transformation and action while classical social science research has conspicuously avoided any active involvement. It is this close linkage between social action and its political implications that has scared many professional researchers from adopting a participatory approach. These professionals work on the assumption that research should be value-neutral.

However, one can question the validity of such an assumption. Though scholars may consider themselves objective, the system within which they work cannot be politically neutral. Research in social settings has always been political and either maintains, explains or justifies the *status quo* or provides data to those who want to question, examine or transform it. Moreover, studies have shown that many apparently Charitable Foundations such as Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller have in fact been used as tools of American foreign policy though the scholars concerned may not have been aware of it. The decision-making process, the nature of funding and the type of institutions they helped to build up all indicate a definite policy.¹⁵ What has been said about the above foundations can be said also about many national institutions and the funding policies of many other countries.

On the other hand, participatory research and evaluation cannot be considered merely one more mode of community development. In the Indian context and in the Third World as

¹⁵Robert F. Arnove, 'Foundations and the Transfer of Knowledge—Implications for India,' *Social Action*, 31 (n. 2 April-June, 1981), pp. 144-173.

a whole, the participatory approach is increasingly becoming synonymous with the processes of liberation of people. The involvement of poor, marginal farmers and landless agricultural labourers in the twin processes of participatory evaluation and social action have resulted in enhancing their self-confidence and ability to take collective initiatives in their common interest.

While it is different from the classical community development approach, participatory evaluation can contribute towards the liberation of people only if it is associated with some form of participatory social action. The challenge to researchers as well as activists is 'are we prepared to accept this as an operational definition of the participatory approach?' The researcher who accepts this definition has to commit himself to an approach that is closely linked with action. One cannot demarcate separate identities of participatory research and community development without asserting the elements of participatory social action.

To the extent that participatory research is invariably associated with some form of social action, it has very clear political implications. To use the participatory approach in identifying land alienation with the organisation of landless tribal labourers is to link inquiry with the political dynamics of the setting. To join with the farmers to engage in the social analysis of their existing situation is to raise political pressures about the existing structure. To develop an alternative health care system which favours the rural poor is to enter into direct conflict with those whose interests are challenged. It is so because the process of social control is a political process.

Differences in the ability to make rules and apply them to other people are essentially power differentials (either legal or extra-legal). Those groups whose social position gives them weapons and power are best able to enforce their rules. Distinctions of age, sex, ethnicity and class are all related to differences in power, which accounts for differences in the degree to which groups so distinguished can make rules for others.¹⁶

The participatory approach, therefore, by its commitment to the underprivileged as well as to social action, enters into a

¹⁶Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders—Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pp. 17-18.

political arena where questions of method and validity become pluralistic. It is because the rural Indian, for that matter the Indian and Third World context, is primarily unorganised. The underprivileged, whether landless labourers or urban slum-dwellers or women, are primarily unorganised. In a large measure, their state of poverty, exploitation and helplessness are related to this non-organisation.

To initiate a participatory process with such underprivileged groups means to initiate the process of organisation-building. Unless this process leads to genuine organisation, one cannot think of a genuine participatory approach. In fact, in the absence of an organisation, the participatory research efforts can become tools of unilateral manipulation by an outsider. To that extent, initiating participatory research efforts with unorganised groups requires an initial effort in developing a rudimentary form of their organisation.

If there is this initial effort, many instances have shown that the participatory research effort itself contributes to the building of an organisation of the people with whom this process is started. By the sheer process of attempting to bring a group of small marginal farmers to analyse their own situation, temporary organisations of farmers developed in the tribal areas of Southern Rajasthan. In other words, this poses some questions about the methodology of the participatory approach. To the extent that Indian and Third World societies are unorganised in comparison with more developed countries of the West, any participatory research effort in the poor nations has to be simultaneously an effort at building organisations. This is not necessarily the situation in the rich countries.

Development of Knowledge

Another question that arises from the above discussion is: how to develop authentic, valid knowledge? The participatory process tends to lay emphasis on authenticity as opposed to validity. The concept of validity as defined by the classical research paradigm is inappropriate for several reasons. First of all, knowledge about a social setting is not equivalent to information obtained from it. The meaning attached to that information is more important. Any representation of social reality is contingent upon such meanings that actors attach to their reality.

Secondly, the impact of historical contingency on knowledge derived from social settings is too critical to apply to universal constructs of validity. Existing criteria of validity are concerned with the generalisability of the outcome of research.

Participatory research, on the contrary, is potentially an attempt to generalise a *process* of research, instead of its outcome. To that extent, the criteria of validity need to focus on the external generalisability and internal consistency of the research process itself. What can be some initial elements of such a concept of validity? One can enumerate the following among many other possibilities:

(i) *Relevance*: Historical, temporal and spatial.

(ii) *Researcher calibration*: Sensitivity of the researcher; emphasis on the calibration and reliability of the researcher as opposed to an instrument or a method.

(iii) *Convergence*: Emphasis on consensus of issues, multiplicity of methods and congruence between processes and outcome.

(iv) *Inclusion*: Context, actors and researcher. Emphasis on looking at the research approach as a social process and managing the confluence between the aspects of the setting, actors in the setting and the researcher.

How can we build an alternative concept of validity based on the stance that participatory research and evaluation emphasise generalisability of the research process itself? This is one question that still needs to be studied, because though many groups in the field are involved in the participatory process, not sufficient work has been done at the macro-level.

Moreover, if the generalisability of the research process is emphasised in the participatory approach, what is the outcome of research itself? It can be at different levels:

(i) Immediate social action and change is one such outcome. The actors in the research process engage in a common effort to transform their situation since they become aware of the causes of the present state and their own potential to be agents of change.

(ii) Increased knowledge about the particular social setting is another outcome. Unlike in the classical system where the outside researcher has the monopoly of knowledge, in the participatory approach it is available both with the researcher and the

actors of the social setting. This enables the actors to begin a new decision-making process based on this knowledge.

(iii) Increased capacity among the actors in the situation to inquire into and change their situation is another important outcome. This is the result of the new self-confidence they gain as a result of the initial common search for knowledge and combined effort at action. Persons who were till then considered incapable of being anything more than servants and implementers of the orders of the powerful (and at the research level, objects of an outsider's study), are now considered capable of analysing and understanding their own reality. This leads to a new self-image and increased potential to learn and act.¹⁷ This is the educational aspect of the participatory approach where the actors in the situation learn how to learn; deuterio-learning occurs in the process.

If these are the potential outcomes of a participatory approach, what happens to enhancement of knowledge? Viewed from a classical researcher's point of view, there may not be increased knowledge since in this system the end-product is a professional report. But the participatory approach leads to a different kind of end-product, though a macro-research type of report need not be excluded. The main outcome of the participatory approach is increased knowledge about the social setting that is available both with the researcher and actors in the situation. Is this not enhancement of knowledge, or, is such enhancement exclusively the task of the professional researcher?

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to study the frustrations experienced by professional researchers from various points of view. There are the ideological issues of the use made of the knowledge generated, the ethical issues of using the actors as objects of study and leaving the control of knowledge in the hands of the professionals, and the political issues of the use that is made of this knowledge by those who fund the research programme. It

¹⁷ J.M. Horedero, *Rural Development and Social Change: An Experiment in Non-Formal Education* (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1977), pp. 32-35.

is the realisation that the present professional approach to research is in fact a reproduction of our unjust society in which a few decision-makers control the rest of the population that has led many to move away from the classical methods and experiment with alternative approaches.

Many others have shied away from participatory research since they consider it a political process. If the researcher really wants to find an alternative to the present system which has not led to any social change in spite of increase in printed material, he makes his ideological stand explicit. If we get involved in research efforts that assist the less powerful and the weak, the so-called research process becomes a political one.

However, those who shy away from the participatory approach because of its political implications do not seem to realise that research in social settings has always been political. It either maintains, explains or justifies the *status quo* or questions it, though the researcher may not take an active part in changing it. We may not be aware of the political aspects of our research efforts because we never believed that our inquiry was normative or we never made our ideological stance explicit.

A transition to the participatory approach requires some basic attitudes on the part of the researcher. If the researcher or the activist, as the case may be, practises participation in his own work, it is much more likely that he will be able to facilitate participation of the people in various research efforts. On the other hand, it is doubtful how an authoritarian personality of the researcher can encourage a participatory approach with the underprivileged.

In other words, the values of the researchers have to be in congruence with the values of the participatory approach. He has to believe in the basic strengths of the people and has to cherish democratic values in the proper sense of the term. The behavioural skills required to encourage and sustain participation of people must be possessed by the researchers. These behavioural skills become critical in the context of the focus on the underprivileged sections of our population. Since a dominant characteristic of the underprivileged is their inability to and fear of participation, greater effort is required to facilitate the participation of such sections.

These are some of the challenges of participatory research and evaluation in our country. By their very nature they are macro-challenges. But we need to deal with them both at the macro and micro-level through a combination of research and action aimed at empowering the marginalised sections of our society.