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Sharing our limited experience for trainers: Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Learning methods

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MYRADA was introduced to the PRA/PALM method in 1989 at a 5-day camp conducted for the staff of its Microwatershed Project at Gulbarga. This was followed by another workshop at Talavadi Project where senior staff from all MYRADA projects participated. Since then the method has been used extensively in every area of MYRADA's interaction with the people. Since this method integrates well with MYRADA's overall approach, it took off faster than expected. During 1990-1991 the thrust of MYRADA's PALM/PRA programme has been on rapid exposure, fostering innovation, building up teams, analysing experiences and constantly upgrading skills.

Some of the significant features are:

- the variety of areas in which PALM/PRA has assisted in making participation more effective;
- the discovery that people can collect far more accurate information, order it, correct it, analyse it and start the process of development if given the opportunity to do so;
- the discovery that a PRA/PALM exercise can be an enjoyable experience for all participants; and,
- the emergence of small and marginal farmers as resource persons in PRA/PALM exercises.

• Why PRA/PALM (P/P)?

The MYRADA approach has been one of trying to understand traditional practices and systems in rural areas, and the logic and values

that underlie these. PALM complements and integrates well with this approach.

The approaches and methods hitherto used to assess rural situations, from planning to evaluation - which give sanctity to surveys and quantifiability in terms of figures - are being increasingly questioned, as 'experts' begin to realize that their findings are limited, biased, and usually outdated by the time they are compiled, processed and presented.

There is now a growing realization of the need to understand and appreciate traditional management systems of livelihood, values, skills, and technologies (even if some have been dormant) which have evolved over centuries. Other realizations include the fact that the time chosen for a village visit may be convenient for the outsider but not for the people, and that while staying close to the main road is most comfortable, the truth is usually some distance away from it. The period when programmes were scrutinized through the framework of a particular ideology is also rapidly passing. Some problems, though, are more difficult to overcome. For instance, it is difficult for outsiders to understand that they carry with them a package accumulated over the years which we call a 'Cultural Burkha' preventing them from seeing, relating to, and empathising with the rural people.

It is also true that the instruments generally used in assessment and planning are totally unfamiliar to the people; the methods demand data from the people but not their participation, since data can be neatly quantified and tabulated; but what does one do with people who may have ideas differing from those of the outsiders? (We choose to

overlook the fact that if people have managed to survive under conditions of vulnerability and scarce resources it could surely be taken to indicate that they are good managers). Limited time allocated for the field, schedules with breaks for lunch, tea, and return to base, all contribute to restricting interaction.

Just as capital and raw materials are extracted from the villages to generate wealth elsewhere, so too, data extracted from the villages provide 'experts' with a halo of authenticity over which they superimpose their expertise.

We do not look at PALM as a method to be 'used' by outsiders to collect data and order it in pre-arranged formulae and frameworks, but rather as a participatory experience in which both insiders and outsiders discover a certain level of empathy, which can become creative over a period of time, if carefully followed through together, right up to a shared analysis and understanding of all that is discovered through observation and interaction.

PALM/PRA can be reduced to gimmickry. It can be ridiculed easily and often is; 'rangoli and goat droppings' say some critics. Yet the people in a watershed created a watershed model and plan in a few hours with rangoli which was accurate, colourful, and above all, their very own; something that 'experts' took weeks to do on paper which the people could neither translate on the ground or understand.

• **Number and ratio of participants**

One of the early lessons we learnt in P/P was that entering a village in large numbers is counter-productive. Therefore, during the preparation we request our village contacts and the NGOs/MYRADA projects hosting the exercise, that they should ensure that the number of participants from the village consist of at least as many persons as there were 'outsiders'. Even better is a 1:2 or 1:3 ratio in favour of the villagers. This gives them confidence of numbers apart from enabling them to participate actively, volunteer information, take pains to make us understand and cross verify information among themselves.

We realised that the village participants have to be compensated for the time they spend with the outsiders. How can this be done? One way is to arrange that all meals are prepared near the village and shared with the participants; other ways may be found, but cash compensation which may destroy any sense of effective participation should be avoided.

There are others who join in the exercise children form a sizeable number. We provide them with necessary material to do their own mapping and encourage them to explain their exhibits to the village. They also share the food and are excellent resource people especially in identifying different fodder grasses, trees, high school dropouts and handicapped etc.

- Outsiders - Mix: it is preferable to have a blend of people who are new to P/P with those who have had experience with the method and exercises. Both new and experienced participants however, should be keen and willing to learn new things. We have had 'experienced' outsiders who knew everything and ended up lecturing instead of listening and learning. Bored outsiders who join the programme late and leave early, do not contribute much; they are a distraction and an unnecessary load on the programme.

We once had a mix of disciplines from different institutes: anthropologists, community specialists, economists, doctors - but there were problems as each group had its own agenda and in general wished to collect information/data. That is why it is necessary that participant outsiders are seen by the people as intervenors who will continue to live in the villages and follow through with the villagers to implement the objectives they have set, providing support where they require it and ask for it.

If the focus is on a particular area, health for example, it will be useful to have a medical person participating, but as a facilitator, not as interviewer.

In every case, however, we need to distinguish between an exercise in which

outsiders are primarily 'learning' the PRA/PALM method and absorbing its culture, and an exercise which initiates a process towards sustainable development. It is advisable not to hold any exercise which is purely 'a learning one'; there should be a clear objective of follow through in every case. This is why it is advisable to hold P/P exercises in villages where contact has been well established and in an area where it is clear that most of the 'outsiders' will continue to live and work. A few 'learners' can be included in every exercise but their agenda should neither be the only one nor should it dominate.

- Villagers - Mix: this dimension of P/P has not been given adequate consideration though areas of concern have been identified. There are, as a consequence, more questions than answers and among these several inadequate ones.

In one village where the host NGO had not established a significant presence, a large farmer made every effort to disturb the P/P exercise. Was it because he was not involved with the P/P or did he feel threatened? Or did the NGO leadership and the farmer have a leadership conflict? We did not discover the reasons.

Certain exercises tend to select particular participants¹. For example; the time line usually relies on older people, though in one case the younger/middle-age group insisted on taking over from the old man once he had reached the period from where they could recall their history.

Seasonality of credit requires both men and women participants as each require credit for different purposes. Here again to identify the sources and cost of credit seems to require a homogeneous group of participants; if any of the larger farmers, shopkeepers and middlemen are present, information tends to be distorted as they

are usually the credit sources exploiting the people.

Children unexpectedly emerged as effective participants in P/P - exercises on trees, forestry, homestead trees, on the number of dropouts and handicapped in the village.

Women model and map well, but seem to hesitate when asked to participate singly on wealth ranking exercises. Random choice of participants in wealth ranking has not been successful. In many cases we have selected literate people in the 'middle income group'; in many others from the literate 'poor'. In most cases where the 'informants' were selected on the basis of their credibility in the village, we have had similar results/analysis on cross verification. The degree of confidence of the person, level of literacy and character are important. Whether wealth ranking is more accurate if done in a group superimposed on a village model, or by an individual in a private location with slips of paper is another area where we need to explore further. What seems certain is that wealth ranking using slips of paper by a group is less accurate than when done by a selected individual in private. Yet when done by a group superimposed on a village model, the results are strikingly close to reality.

• **How villagers view PRA**

The above comments indicate that the villagers must see that the P/P exercise is more than a training for outsiders if it is to be authentic and if it is to initiate a process of sustainable development.

A P/P exercise will raise curiosity and above all expectations - which have to be carefully managed. If it is seen as a condition for grants, the exercise will become a farce. We have to spend time with the villagers before the exercise to explain its purpose: " learning experience for all'; 'a participatory exercise for all'; 'the beginning of their organized efforts towards sustainable development based on their strengths, traditional values and managements systems' (not on our strengths

• ¹We hesitate to call them 'informants' since the word tends to strengthen the bias towards data collection. Participants collect information, order it and analyse it.

and packages). But commitments are often required; these however are not in terms of funds, but of instilling confidence in the villagers that outsiders will continue to be with them and to support them, to build on their strengths and to overcome their weaknesses and to develop an appropriate strategy to achieve their goals. The commitment therefore is more in the form of 'personal involvement' with their effort than of monetary inputs.

In one exercise the outsiders 'extracted' commitments from the people and made commitments to them as various needs were identified and expressed. But as no funds or projects were committed at the end of the P/P, it built up tension among the villagers who felt that they had wasted their time over 4 days. In another case there was substantial confusion in the host organization as to what P/P on tank rehabilitation really meant to achieve. The outcome of the P/P in this case was a shift in focus from the tank desilting exercise which the particular NGO was contemplating, to treatment of a very degraded and large upper catchment which the people actually wanted. The people were clear about it; the NGO was not; and hence could not respond to the demands that were expressed either through an outright commitment or through a negotiated agreement. In both cases we felt that we had played with the people's emotions.

What have made our people sceptical are the short visits of politicians/officials who promise them several projects but who disappear after a few hours and are not seen again. True, in a few cases instructions are given to lower officials to implement the promises, but the delays inherent in the system ensure a long, long wait - they prefer therefore not to start hoping - because it will lead to despair. We have become a nation of 'waiters' - we wait for everything and everybody. Importance and status is often demonstrated by making people wait. Respect for the villagers is the basis of their effective participation. We cannot raise expectations for which they have to wait to be fulfilled. It must be made clear to them that they have embarked on a process of their development through one or two or more P/P exercises - and this process will develop according to their schedules and as fast or slow as they want it to. Outsiders are there to

support them, to 'wait' on them and not to be 'waited on'.

• PALM/PRA and conflict

There are groups and individuals in every village with conflicting interests. One PALM exercise identified that 50% of the conflicts were related to land. Apart from these open conflict situations, there are latent situations of oppression which are also the basis of conflicts. For example, if money lenders charge an exorbitant rate of interest as well as make other demands, it is a situation of oppression, but is accepted as it appears to be the normal custom in the village. Marketing farm products and dealing in provisions are other major areas where oppressive transactions take place and are considered normal. It is these latent situations which must also be exposed.

Can PALM exercises bring these to the surface? They can, provided the selection of village participants in each exercise is made carefully, and the conditions under which discussions take place are non-threatening. For example, if our objective is to find out more about conflicts over land use (it is use more than ownership which affects the poor) and sources of credit, the choice of informants needs to be restricted to the poor; whether in groups or individually or both has still to be worked out.

There is a tendency, however, in PALM, to focus on issues that can yield hard data rather than touch upon relationships. Exercises have progressed on seasonality of credit rather than sources, on availability of credit rather than interest rates and obligations attached, on traditional uses of trees rather than who exploits the forests, on resource identification rather than on identification of people controlling the resources. Yet, with a little restructuring of exercises, a little effort at going beneath the surface of information provided and a few exploratory questions, it is possible for relationships to come to the fore.

A careful study of the potential use of PALM is required. On the one hand, it will weaken the PALM methodology if it is considered the

only valid and appropriate way and therefore is applied to every single area; on the other hand, the potentiality of PALM is still far from adequately explored.

• **Duration**

The duration varies depending on the purposes/objectives of the programme. The range may be from a few hours spent 'investigating' a specific topic such as 'Marketing of Groundnuts' to a few days (usually 4-5). The latter would be for a more intensive and comprehensive interaction within and between various aspects of village life. It is strongly recommended that PRA exercises for a day or less should be avoided as they do not allow the participants time to interact and empathise. If the duration is short, the tendency is to collect data for the outsiders' purposes - not to initiate a process of discovery and of growth in confidence to solve their problems.

However, 4 to 5 days too can at best result only in villagers and outsiders developing familiarity with and respect for one another. PALM represents an attitude and a culture that has to extend much beyond 5 days spent on familiarisation with people, methods and exercises; it has to enter into every facet of interaction, into every 'Plan' that is being made and every programme that is being implemented or evaluated.

• **Entry or re-entry**

Most of our PRA/PALM exercises so far have been based in villages where we have already established good rapport. It was therefore a re-entry rather than an entry into an entirely new area. Can PRA/PALM be used as an entry? The answer is not yet obvious, but we doubt if it will be effective if used to establish an entry point.

PRA/PALM however is useful to launch a process towards sustainable development; it makes people aware of latent strengths, helps them at least to set attainable goals to achieve what they want their children to become or what they want their village or habitat to look like in the future (which is often what it looked like 30-50 years ago) to develop a strategy to

attain these goals which is usually based both on local management systems and values which have been lost or dormant and on alternative systems which they can develop and manage, given an opportunity to increase their skills and resources. Seldom do they think of a strategy in the short run that is integrated with the major system, for example, if they need credit they do not look towards banks and cooperatives which have failed to meet their basic and urgent needs; they rather tend towards small functional groups, raising and managing credit which an outside catalyst (NGO) can assist in forming and in providing with necessary skills.

• **Equalisers**

No matter how hard we try to initiate a PRA/PALM exercise in an atmosphere of participation, the dominant image of outsiders is one of bringers of 'gifts', 'packages' and 'expertise'. On our part too it is difficult to get rid of our cultural baggage which we have accumulated over the years, which at the minimum makes us feel more 'qualified' - after all have we not passed several competitive exams and interviews? We need to find ways to help ourselves and the villagers to progress towards 'equalising' this relationship. Not that one exercise will achieve this objective; several are required to help all of us to move towards equalising, even if we never really achieve it perfectly.

One exercise we have found useful is to identify the various activities in the village (basket making, milking cows, chappal making) and allow each outsider to choose one of them. He/she then spends time learning this trade, with the villager teaching him/her to do it. The 'outsider' often realises how difficult it is to perform what seems easy and primitive, and the villagers develop a sense of confidence as their skills begin to have 'value' and 'status' in the eyes of people around. Care should be taken however to avoid activities which tend to mix and therefore blur objectives: to ask men participants to carry water which is traditionally a women's job has little learning experience and is much more an exercise in shifting traditional roles. Other activities to be avoided are those which are urgent and where the farmer would suffer loss,

for example, if we try to persuade a farmer who is ploughing his field to teach an outsider, he could suffer a loss as in many cases the bullocks are hired and there is no time to lose in training for the sake of equalising; the outsiders participation will be taken more as a nuisance and an intrusion than as an exercise in equalising.

• **Empathisers**

Initially we organized a few 'social' games at some point during the introductory sessions of the first day. Gradually these became an integral part of the exercise and the frequency increased to at least once daily, in the evenings. A higher level of enthusiasm accompanied by a greater degree of camaraderie resulted. We once took along a few indoor games and a volley ball set and the village youths insisted that we play for a while before resuming discussions; they came back refreshed and the atmosphere acquired the character of a discussion between friends. At a recent PRA/PALM in Andhra, we broke at least 3-4 times a day either into a group song, a dance or a game. This made a positive difference in the participation, the quality of discussions and the output.

We found that if outsiders stay in the village throughout the exercise a really strong rapport is developed as the degree of sharing extends over many more aspects of village life which are more intimate to the villagers than their work. Sleeping in the village is an important event; it avoided having to rush back for lunch and dinner, it gives the outsiders the opportunity to meet with the villagers in the late evenings when they have time to 'socialise'. Our women staff are regularly mothered by older village women who insist that they have a bath and sleep next to them; we have not had any problems concerning their security so far.

We have found the village 'grows' on us and any initial apprehensions/institutions (mainly toilets and baths) have disappeared. In many cases indeed, it was a renewal for our staff who come from village backgrounds but had now 'progressed' in life and had 'grown' in alienation from their own communities.

• **Useful tips on protocol, location, organisation, and materials**

- We do not think that P/P is an exercise to establish a 'point of entry'. It needs preparation primarily through personal contact with the village over a period of time - at least 6 months. To use P/P as an entry point without prior contact (or with a very brief period of preparatory work) will yield results similar to those flowing from a traditional 'survey'. The degree of effective participation of people in modelling, mapping, assessing, resources, etc depends to a large extent on the rapport and empathy built up and existing between 'outsiders' and 'insiders'.
- As mentioned earlier, P/P should not be restricted to a 'learning' exercise from outsiders. Hence it should not be repeated in a village where people have already participated in one P/P exercise after which little follow-up action has been done. If a P/P exercise is held for a second time in the same village it should focus on evaluation of how the plan has been implemented, on problems and issues arising from the process of implementation.
- Selection of a 'resource faculty' from among the villagers strengthens the message that they are the teachers. It will not suffice however to merely choose one or two people. This is the common practice of most visitors from government or other officials; such people play the role of 'informants' more than that of 'resource faculty'. This difference must be made clear to the people.
- If the village is large, it is advisable to explain the purpose of the exercise and the schedule to the leaders of the village; in one exercise this was over-looked, and they misunderstood the purpose of the P/P resulting in several efforts to sabotage the exercise.
- Outsiders should live in the village throughout the exercise; it enhances rapport and helps them to 'feel with' and to empathise with the village in every segment of their daily lives. Most villagers will offer hospitality; the woman participants are usually taken care of by older village women who make it a point

to ensure that they are looked after. A school or temple is also a good spot to camp; and if it is not raining the open spaces are ideal. Shamianas² do serve a purpose, but tend to give the exercise a festive look; on one occasion people mistook a P/P for a wedding reception!

- Eating with the villagers is important. Simple food which they are accustomed to can be shared by all the participants. Sometimes food is prepared outside, carried to the P/P location and given only to the 'outsiders'; this must be avoided at all costs. Food should be shared by all; it could be brought from outside but must be similar to what the people eat; avoiding non-veg food. Try to organize the food module properly and well in advance. Rushing around at lunchtime to bring food, disturbs the exercise. Leaf plates are the best utensils.
- Materials are required for modelling, mapping, seasonality, etc. Avoid supplying materials which the villagers are not familiar with or which they hesitate to use - like felt pens and large sheets of papers; they know paper is expensive and to force them to use it cramps their style as they fear mistakes which would waste the sheet. Materials brought from outside should be familiar to the people, like rangoli; left to themselves the people use sticks, stones, seeds, beads, twine - even goat droppings.
Try not to carry the materials with which the villagers are not comfortable: cellotape, coloured paper, felt pens, gensets are out!
- Briefings are short, usually done soon after breakfast, followed by the information of sub-groups for each exercise or topic. The briefing can be accompanied by supplementary handouts (notes and illustrations of concepts, methods, outputs of previous P/P exercise). Visuals greatly enhance the quality of briefing. A sub-group could have one person with experience/skills in the subject of the exercise. Short 'buzz' sessions of 10-15 minutes are also recommended. Topics could vary. Some suggested subjects are: 'What I hope to get

out of this programme', 'How should we plan to go about this exercise', 'Dos and Don'ts in interviewing', 'What went wrong yesterday?', 'Why do we need to do this particular exercise?', 'What method should we use for which topic?' One of the recent introductions made by MYRADA to the methodology was the early morning review sessions and the individual write ups. While the former allowed for sharing of experiences/new things learnt, the latter allowed for a reflective write up (not more than 1 page) of the previous days experiences. This write up has 3 parts: a) process; b) content; and c) new things.

We find that one hour spent on the review and write up has greatly enhanced the learning and the quality of the exercise.

- Evening hours (after 6 pm) are usually set aside for presentations of the days' findings by the villagers who participated in each exercise. These are the times when most of the villagers are comparatively free after the days work is done. Each sub-group in turn presents the information it has gathered. Presenting this information in a large evening forum has the advantage that the information is up for everyone's scrutiny and is subject to correction. Thus there is a reasonable chance that at the end of the day we have an end product that is accurate and reliable, having been refined several times over, from the sub-group discussion stage to final presentation. Such gatherings are lively, with the village folk correcting one another and arriving at a consensus on issues/events/practices and other information.
- Finally, in at least 50% of our exercises we have been unable to get sufficient representation and participation from women, landless, harijans and in some cases minority communities. We need to focus more on ways and means of solving this problem.

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• ²A Shamiana is a temporary cloth roof used for providing shade.