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PRA exercise in an Indian village: a retrospective evaluation of the first exposure to the process

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• Introduction

Gandhigram Rural Institute (GRI) was established in 1956. Right from its inception it has been trying to promote casteless and classless society through extension and research. The Institute recognises the primacy of people in rural development and has always put people first. Its extension villages are mostly in remote areas. The participants have been, by and large, the weak, the powerless and the poor. People are always consulted; they analyse their own problems in a village gathering; fix their own priorities and offer their own solutions. This approach has brought local people and faculty members closer.

GRI has experimented with several people-oriented approaches such as quadrangular models, women melas, University at the Village Doorsteps and so on. In the early 1990s, Participatory Rural Appraisal was included in GRI's repertoire.

Recently GRI organised its first PRA workshop in the field¹. The objectives were as follows:

- to give villagers the opportunity to analyse their own problems, and through debate and discussion, to indicate possible solutions;
- to enable the staff and students to learn about several approaches and methods of PRA through participatory learning; and,

- to help the PRA team understand the socio-economic conditions of the people, their perceived needs, problems, priorities and so on.

The village

The village selected for the PRA workshop was Pillaiarnatham - situated seven kilometres on the north-western side of Gandhigram. The village has 327 households with a population of 1650. The Institute has been working with the people of the village through *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (Farm Research Centre) and *Mather Sangh* (Women's Association). The Women's Association is running the University canteen. The University has supported the cause of downtrodden women in the village by giving training in various trades to increase their employment opportunities. There was therefore already good rapport between the villagers, particularly the women, and the University.

PRA participants

The PRA team was a well-composed multi-disciplinary team. There were staff members from the Departments of Agriculture, Extension, Rural Economics, Home Science, Rural Industries and Management, Rural Health and Sanitation, Rural Sociology, Youth Affairs and Gandhian Thought. There were also field organisers and assistants in rural development, pre-school education and from the Farm Research Centre. There were students and trainees from Area Development and Rural Development. It was a perfect blend of staff and students from different departments and faculties. In total, there were 25 people in the PRA team. In addition, the

¹ Reports on later village PRA exercises are available from the author at Gandhigram Rural Institute (see also Endnotes for a review).

Vice-Chancellor of the Institute spent almost the full two days with the participants.

From the village, 60 women members of the *Mather Sangham* (Women's Association) participated. Five men from the village also joined in.

• The first day

The day started with a prayer followed by a lecture/discussion session on the genesis of PRA, methods and approaches of PRA, PRA in relation to other methods and so on. It was meant as an exposure session for those who have no previous knowledge of PRA and its methods.

Next the group was divided into three sub-groups.

- Sub-group 1 chose the task of tracing the history of the village and identifying the major events that had taken place in the past, such as:
 - how the village got its name;
 - the year the school opened;
 - the year the first election was held;
 - when the village was electrified;
 - advent of hospital, bank and communication facilities; and,
 - first use of chemical fertilisers.

Child rearing practices, widow remarriage, intercaste marriage, family planning methods and crop cultivation were also discussed. The exercise went on for four hours. Village women actively participated in the discussion and recorded the events chronologically.

- Sub-group 2 analysed the trends of change in the village over a period of 30 years. This included population, family size, wages for men and women, literacy, caste, animal population, alcoholism, dowry, education of female children, medical facilities, housing, prices, use of fertilisers, improved seeds, irrigation and so on.
- Sub-group 3 did a seasonality exercise. This covered important aspects such as rainy days, total rain, crops, agricultural labour, income, expenditure, debt,

migration, festivals, food availability, illness etc.

The time spent on each exercise was between four and five hours. The participants from the village sat throughout the exercise and their participation was full and complete. PRA team members from the Institute were fully engrossed in the exercise and some of them even skipped lunch. Afterwards, all three sub-groups met and shared the information. This was followed by a lively discussion where the women articulated several of their problems - dominant problems being drinking water distribution systems and housing among the *harijans*.

Reporting and discussion went on for about three hours. In the evening at around 6pm, the PRA team from the Institute met separately to discuss how the process went. Of particular importance were whether there had been any problems in gathering and sharing information and whether villagers participated freely without domination from outsiders. The observations made by the PRA team on the problems were as follows:

- Sometimes questions were asked incoherently, or before the previous ones were fully answered. Thus questions were rushed and PRA members jumped from one aspect to another, making recording difficult.
- The village group consisted mainly of women. Problems related to men could not be gathered.
- Absence of old people, especially in the group which did trend change, led to the paucity of historical information.
- The village group was largely represented by the *Harijan*, so the problems discussed turned out to be the problems of the *Harijans*.
- Information about the PRA schedule having been channelled through the higher strata, it could have contributed to certain forces of selectivity in the choice of participants.

- Village women attended the meeting with high expectations.
- In certain cases high-caste women tried to dominate the low-caste women in the discussion. Lower caste groups still had many problems which remained unexpressed at the end of the exercise.

The team then discussed which methods to choose to probe the problems of the people further. It was decided to go in for village modelling to understand the structure of the village in general, and to analyse the problem of drinking water distribution. It was also decided to map the village, especially the *harijan* colony, to understand the housing problem.

• The second day

In the early morning of the second day the PRA team went around the village in small groups to learn about the village structure. After this the team, along with the village women, gathered to discuss their plans for the day. Two groups were formed.

Village modelling

The first group did the modelling of the village. The water distribution problem was depicted in the model. It was found that the *Harijan* did not have even a single water tap in their colony (40 households), whereas each non-*Harijan* street with 25 to 30 houses had two or three taps. The *Harijan* have to walk a distance of about 500 yards to fetch water, but they are not always permitted even to do this.

The group discussed this problem thoroughly and the PRA team members mainly became passive spectators. There were arguments and counter arguments; the women discussed alternatives and finally agreed that water connection should be given to the *Harijan* colony. The expenditure involved was also discussed. The *Harijans* agreed to share part of the expenditure. The Institute also promised to bear part of the expense. A problem which had remained for long was discussed and settled within four hours through this technique. The Women's Association and extension department of GRI have taken on the follow-up work.

Village mapping

The second group did the mapping of the village. They decided to only map the *Harijan* Colony for two reasons:

- to focus the problem of housing; and,
- the size of the village and the shortage of time made it impossible to draw a map of the whole village.

The group included a woman surveyor from within the village. They sat in a common place chosen by the villagers and started drawing the map. As they started sketching they found it difficult to locate the houses, so they decided to go to the *Harijan* Colony, where they saw each house and drew the map. This enabled the group to see the appalling housing conditions for themselves: space was very limited, there were houses within houses. For instance there was a house with a plinth area of six square metres. Within that house three families lived. 43 families lived in an area of 200m². Most of the dwelling places were huts with thatched roofs. A day's fodder for a pair of bullocks formed the roof for many houses. There were hardly any streets and practically no drainage system.

• Follow up and evaluation

Maps and models were explained in a common gathering by the village women. Information and data arising out of the model and map were discussed in detail; queries were raised, explanations were offered, additional information was provided, problems were defined, alternatives were spelt out and discussed, the best alternative was chosen. For all these discussions, the PRA team served only as a catalyst.

Immediately after this exercise the members of the PRA team discussed the entire process in a separate session. They felt that it had gone well. Villagers had done the modelling and mapping without interference and domination by any PRA member. The team had merely acted as a facilitator.

Following this, the PRA team members were asked to evaluate the workshop. Some of the

observations made on the PRA technique were that it:

- is a revolutionary method;
- helps gather information quickly;
- is interesting;
- is easily understood and followed by villagers with no orientation whatsoever because they don't have to do anything other than act naturally; and,
- is thus a good way to identify the hidden talents of the villagers.

On the mechanism of the training course, they commented that:

- a smaller village would have perhaps yielded better results;
- each member of PRA team should go round the village before he/she does anything in the village;
- two days are not enough; and,
- members of the team should stay in the houses of villagers and not in a separate place.

Apart from the workshop, the departments of Rural Industries and Management organised a demonstration/exhibition on income generation projects in order to show to the villagers the availability of a wide range of income-generating opportunities. Later in the evening the Cultural Cell of GRI presented a programme covering various educational themes relevant to dowry system, female infanticide, alcoholism, illiteracy, casteism and so on. The next day the village women came up with an excellent cultural programme themselves.

• Conclusions

On the whole every member of the team seemed to have enjoyed the time they spent in the village. Each member felt that villagers' problems could be analysed in a relaxed way and that solutions could be found immediately. They felt that PRA developed close rapport between the villagers and the PRA team, and any distance between them was quickly bridged.

Villagers gained self-confidence by taking part in PRA exercises. Women who did not speak

at all during the first day, started contributing on the second day. They understood and analysed the problems systematically. They argued, quarrelled, shouted amongst themselves, but finally agreed upon needs, priorities and solutions. This prevents solutions from being imposed from above.

Last but not least, the 'learned' teacher learned a lot from the so-called 'less informed' rural folk.

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