

11

REFLECT in practice: literacy and change in India

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· Introduction

YAKSHI is a small NGO based in Secunderabad in Andhra Pradesh, India. It is committed to working with grassroots organisations to promote participatory approaches to development. Over the past five years, YAKSHI has offered technical support to Girijan Deepika (GD), an independent tribal peoples' mass organisation working in East Godavari District, and run by local people. This support has focused on finding practical means for strengthening participatory processes.

YAKSHI and GD decided to experiment with the REFLECT approach in 1995. They saw it as a way of promoting sustained dialogue at a community level and integrating the learning of literacy with the strengthening of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems.

Preparations

At an early stage it was decided that REFLECT should not be introduced to the communities as a literacy programme, as there had been many negative experiences of literacy programmes in the area. Rather, facilitators were recruited from the communities with a view to collectively analysing local problems. In the process of local research, they discovered that an indigenous system of community interaction known as the 'Gotti' was in decline. The Gotti was a traditional forum where people would meet to discuss local problems. It became clear that, if reactivated, the Gotti could offer an ideal forum for people to engage in dialogue.

In most villages, the Gotti had declined, parallel to wider processes of change, particularly concerning the local economy. Over the last

decade, traditional food crops had been undermined by the government policy of subsidising rice, which led to outside companies 'selling' cash crops. Tobacco and cotton were introduced with many promises and in the early years, people made large profits and planted all available land with the new crops. In later years, input costs rose as more fertiliser and pesticides were needed and when prices slumped on international markets, over 80% of households fell into debt. The impact on community life was devastating, as most rituals and cultural practices had been linked to the rhythm of the land, particularly the planting and harvesting of traditional food crops. There was no longer the space or time for meeting in the Gotti; communal interests gave way to individual pursuits in an increasingly monetised economy.

The reviving, or rather, re-inventing, of the Gotti was a priority task for YAKSHI/GD, undertaken through a campaign using street theatre, music, dance and painting. The facilitators developed a play that dramatised how the Gotti functioned, emphasising the importance of active and equal participation.

With the Gotti tradition reactivated, REFLECT could be introduced. The first step was for a team to develop and adapt PRA tools that would help to focus debate on critical local issues. Further local research was undertaken to facilitate this process and each Gotti completed its own process of problem ranking (see Figure 1). The ranking process identified the following major concerns: agriculture, health, forests, land, electricity, roads, education, drinking water, and irrigation.

Ten REFLECT circles were started in 1996. Facilitators were recruited, mostly young people from the communities who showed an interest

and commitment to GD's goals and who had creative communication skills. They were given minimal incentives, not salaries. Circles started meeting three times per week.

Challenging the cash crop economy

Agriculture was consistently highlighted as a major concern, resulting from the rapid and recent changes that had taken place in the area. A series of PRA tools were designed to bring out key agricultural issues, starting with historical maps, contrasting present agriculture in the village with that 30 years ago. This was followed with a crop matrix exploring the uses of each crop. Most Gotti analysed over 20 crops, classifying their use for food or cash. This led to separate matrices, analysing the advantages and disadvantages of different cash crops and food crops.

Cash crops were rarely identified as offering benefits other than income, but required considerable inputs, e.g. land, plough bullocks, seeds, capital, market, water, pesticide, labour, and had led to many losses. One Gotti identified the following disadvantages: indebtedness, no food or proper markets, suicides (drinking fertiliser), lack of fodder for livestock, new health problems (e.g. fertiliser contamination, tobacco related diseases: TB).

In contrast, food crops were seen to be useful for encouraging communal work, providing food security and fodder for livestock and poultry, maintaining soil fertility, producing some cash (if sold) and preventing debts (as inputs were low). The disadvantages related to predators and the vulnerability of some crops to heavy rains or winds.

When all circles had completed a full analysis of agricultural issues, they were encouraged to identify possible solutions and actions. The cumulative analysis lasted several weeks resulting in substantial planned actions. Many Gotti decided to plant 50% of their land with food crops - reversing the trend towards complete domination by tobacco and cotton. Seed banks were established to preserve and multiply traditional food crops; demonstration plots were set up to grow crops without fertilisers; and indigenous water sources (ponds and small tanks), which had fallen into disrepair, were rehabilitated.

Figure 1. An example of a graphic constructed by REFLECT participants showing the level of analysis undertaken by local people. (Photo: D. Archer)

Holistic views of health

Once the agriculture theme was completed, the planning team of YAKSHI and GD developed PRA tools to address health issues, including health calendars and disease severity ranking, analysing which diseases cause pain, death, indebtedness etc.. Local health knowledge was visualised by drawing healthy and unhealthy trees to explore the roots of good health (e.g. fertile land, environment, mixed food, hygiene and exercise) and ill health (e.g. contaminated water, no nutritious foods, bad habits such as drinking and no exercise).

Local foods were classified by each Gotti according to why people choose to eat them (e.g. easy to cook, tasty, filling, cheap, social status, locally grown, nutritious etc.). It became clear that nutritious foods had low social status and this affected health. Using a timeline to analyse changing patterns of health over time, it was clear that health and diet changes were linked to agricultural changes. A parallel and related process involved people losing

confidence in indigenous medicine, with traditional medicinal herbs and plants in decline and many healers giving up their practice. Additional analyses concerned changes in animal health due to new diseases, water contamination and changes in weather patterns.

The holistic nature of the analysis which most Gottis reached, was impressive, with people identifying the inter-relatedness of problems. This process led to:

- reinforcing the return to growing food crops;
- the organisation of traditional healer camps and training workshops in the preparation of herbal medicines;
- vaccination camps to protect livestock and poultry; and,
- GD training local para-vets (local people given basic veterinary training).

The Gotti and literacy

The Gotti is now a vibrant forum for community debate and, as an indigenous, albeit revived, institution, offers much hope for sustainability. The Gotti will not come to an end when the literacy learning has ended, as its wider function is clearly embedded in the community. It is a space “to sit and talk”, “to share our happiness and sorrows”, and provides “an opportunity to reflect”.

The REFLECT methodology sits comfortably within this space and helps to structure and reinforce the interaction. Literacy learning has been interwoven with the Gotti discussions. The graphics produced by the Gottis have become key resource materials for those who wish to learn reading and writing. The wider activity of the Gotti also reinforces literacy as it provides practical uses for literacy. Moreover, as we begin to see literacy as something more than just the use of pen and paper, the Gotti has a much wider impact on “literacy”, strengthening people’s capacity to communicate.

There is a range of follow up activities which have already started. For example, over 250 traditional songs have been recorded, with family and villages histories, traditional stories, sayings and dances also being documented. The recording of local knowledge of medicinal

plants and herbs will be linked to new, locally managed income-generating projects.

The Gottis facilitated the introduction of participatory methodologies associated with REFLECT, but a question remains: how did the people feel about the process of learning to read and write; didn't people feel alienated at the point that this came in? Didn't they feel tricked? It appears not. The Gottis often attracted most of the adult population of a community to engage in discussions. However, in each community, only a certain number of adults chose to learn literacy. In many other contexts, this could have been regarded as ‘drop out’ or an indicator of failure of the literacy programme. The participants perceived it quite differently. As one Gotti member observed:

“Palm oil is an important product here and one youth in every five households can climb the trees to tap the oil. One in five is enough. It is not necessary for everybody to have the skill. The same is true of literacy. As long as we have enough literate people in the village, we will manage”.

The normal pattern of a Gotti meeting would involve a large group meeting to construct graphics and discuss issues, with only perhaps half of the group staying on to choose key words from the discussion and use them for learning to read and write. The choice of words to learn was left to each Gotti, with the facilitator keeping a record. Emphasis was placed on maintaining the participatory mode of behaviour at this stage. Participants were asked to act out words by shaping their bodies into letters and form words by moving around.

Gender concerns

Promoting participation of women proved hard in the early stages. Gottis had traditionally been male dominated and people’s memories of the old style Gotti could not be transformed simply by using drama. Change was made harder because the facilitators were generally young men (there were few older people or women with sufficient education levels) and as such, they lacked status locally. Some elder men were able to impose their vision of the Gotti (as a place where women were largely silent) on the young male facilitators. This had to be addressed at different levels:

- case-study research on the role and position of women in various areas of tribal society (e.g. agriculture, education, village politics), focusing on power relations, decision-making, violence and change;
- four day gender training workshops for REFLECT facilitators;
- incorporating a gender dimension in all materials, drawing on the research;
- 'melas' (one day fairs) held in each village, involving posters, songs, dance, drama and discussion about gender issues;
- formation of all-female Gottis in 6 villages; and,
- designing needs-based development programmes for women (including training women in the organisation and management of resources).

Next steps

REFLECT Gottis are operating in 16 villages and YAKSHI/GD plan to start REFLECT in a further 15 villages. In the initial villages, a new phase is being developed. PRA tools are now being developed to address forestry issues and, in future, environmental issues, credit and gender relations. The issues raised in Gottis are also being disseminated more widely in the local area through the 'Gonthenum' campaign. This uses exhibitions of posters and pictures, short dramas and a series of small booklets to share the outcomes of Gotti discussions and raise concerns for the attention of others. This is a key part of the process of documenting indigenous knowledge systems and integrating them with contemporary knowledge systems. One major effect is a strengthening of the wider literate environment, making literacy increasingly useful and relevant to local people.

In line with the principles and processes of REFLECT, GD and YAKSHI have placed a high priority on staff development, holding training workshops and organising fora for the exchange of experiences. Training has varied from 'Collaborative Women's Leadership' to 'Puppetry', and there is a constant spirit of search for new experience and learning which can help to develop their practice further and in new directions.

YAKSHI and GD have also deepened their links to wider tribal groups, particularly with the Integrated Tribal Development Agency in East

Godavari which is now planning to use REFLECT in 5,000 community learning centres in the District. UNDP has been keen to adapt the REFLECT experience to women's credit programmes elsewhere in Andhra Pradesh. YAKSHI have shared their experience with other NGOs in India in a 5 day orientation workshop on REFLECT in Rajamundry in 1997 and more recently, with literacy workers from across Asia in the South Asia Literacy Forum on 'Innovation and Diversity'. YAKSHI and GD are now acting as a key reference point for organisations developing REFLECT in other states in India. Indeed, the YAKSHI/GD experience has been influential on evolving debates between REFLECT practitioners locally and internationally, acting as a good example of how the REFLECT process, in its broadest sense, operates at every level.

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