

4

Participatory genealogies

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• Introduction

Genealogies are an important anthropological method. They provide an account of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors. It is a statement of the way in which individuals are, or assert that they are, connected with one another through marriage and common parentage.

Genealogy is an analytical tool used for studying kinship - descent groups, households and their fission, marriages, kin terms, inheritance of property and transmission of status. It has also been used for understanding migration, inter-generational mobility, marriage distance, changes in the names of people, etc.. It has the potentiality of being used for a variety of other parameters studied over generations. Experienced ethnographers advise fieldworkers to commence their fieldwork with genealogical methods for it not only yields substantial information on households but is also helpful for establishing rapport with people.

Although the genealogical method has traditionally studied kinship, it has scope for usage in the field of development. However, there are few reported instances of the application of this method for development purposes (but see article by Mosse and Mehta, *RRA Notes* 18).

• The process

To develop a genealogy, the fieldworker identifies an elderly informant (referred to as 'ego'). The fieldworker asks the informant the

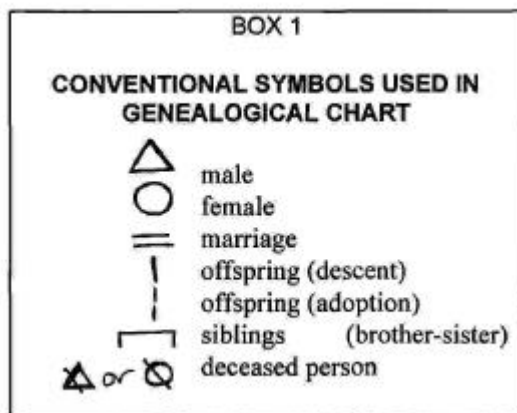
names of people, their biological relationship to him or her, and how they are referred to by him or her etc. The fieldworker notes down the information and compiles a chart, which is known as a genealogical chart. Thus, in the traditional approach the role of the informant is limited to providing information in response to questions posed by a fieldworker.

This contrasts with PRA, where local people participate actively in collecting and analysing data and using it for planning development initiatives. The use of diagrams, symbols and local materials makes the process relevant to local people and provides an opportunity for others to participate.

Experimenting

During a workshop organised on 'Participatory Evaluation' at URMUL Trust (an NGO working in western Rajasthan, India) in January 1997, the participants (who were fieldworkers), were introduced to genealogies. The brief exposure was limited to explaining the conventional symbols used in the genealogical charts (see Box 1) and explaining key features, including:

- offspring are arranged in descending order from left (oldest) to right (youngest);
- in a patrilineal society (which is the most common case), the descent is traced only from the males. The women (sister/daughters etc.) marry out and are shown as migrating out using an arrow; and,
- once a genealogical chart is made, any other information can be collected and depicted on the chart.



The workshop participants were asked to pair up and prepare a genealogical chart of one among them. The charts were displayed and examined by the participants, helping to clarify any doubts. The participants also worked in groups of four to work out the application of genealogical methods to their work.

During the field work part of the workshop, a group of participants tried the method in a village. They found it useful and collected additional information, including educational status, land holdings, crops, ownership of camels and camel carts, and the changes in mobility through time. Through collecting additional information, the participants realised how genealogies can form the basis of an evaluation methodology, as those people who have benefited from an intervention can be marked on the chart.

However, one of the major observations was that villager participation was quite limited. The control of the process was with the information collector. The basic question remained - how can this method be made participatory?

• **Increasing participation:
participatory genealogies**

Two approaches to making the genealogical method more participatory include:

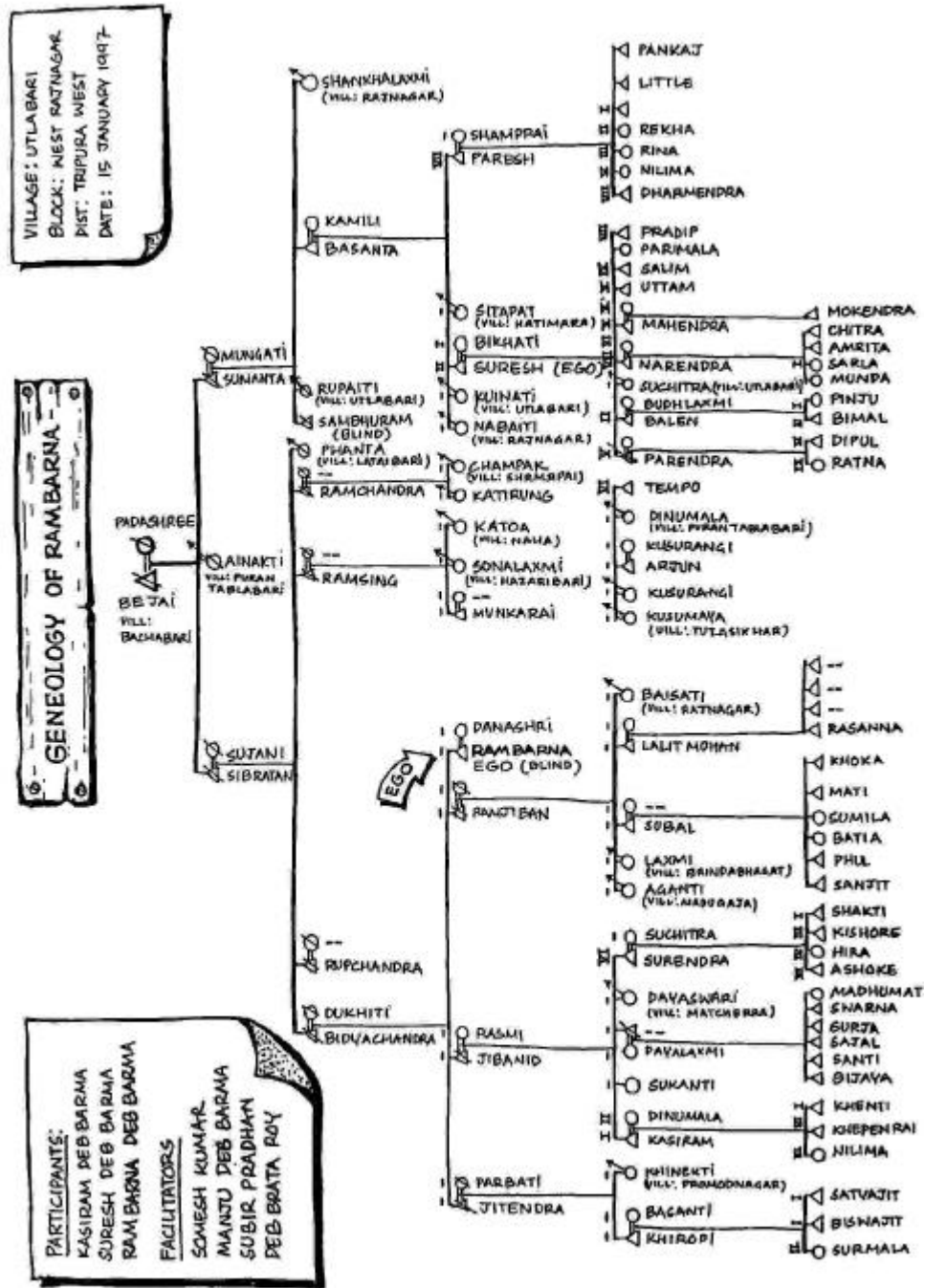
Informant draws the genealogical chart

The informants can be asked to draw the chart after explaining to them the basic principles, purpose and symbols. The obvious difficulties with this approach as experienced include:

- Unlike social mapping where people themselves draw the map based on their perceptions and daily interactions, the genealogical method is based on memory and a structured reconstruction.
- Unlike social mapping it is difficult to convince illiterate (and elderly) informants to draw charts which are complicated.
- The process of recording a genealogical chart is complex and even experienced researchers have to cut and erase frequently before arriving at a draft chart.
- Local people may not find the process very interesting. By-standers are rarely excited by the approach and tend not to get involved.

Bearing in mind the difficulties mentioned above, the second approach, which relies on symbols and local materials, may be preferable.

Figure 1. A genealogical chart prepared in Tripura West, January 1997. It consists of 6 generations and 121 members (see Box 1 for an explanation of the symbols used). The educational qualifications and migration patterns were obtained for each person named on the chart.



Informants use local materials to depict the genealogical chart

The use of various types of seeds, colour powder, chalk, small sticks, threads etc. can make the process of drawing the chart simpler and more interesting. It also provides opportunities for by-standers to get involved - by pointing to a particular seed, by-standers could identify who a particular person was and provide more information.

In the exercise shown in Figure 1, the informants used different coloured flowers and seeds to depict men and women. Additionally, thin bamboo sticks, paddy straw, strings and match sticks were used to depict offspring and siblings. Small cardboard papers can be placed under the seeds giving the name of the individual. Other information can be collected and depicted, symbolically or in writing. Where there were mistakes on the diagram and changes had to be made, the informants could easily remove or move the objects.

• Scope of participatory genealogies

Entry point and rapport building

Experience shows that the method can be an excellent entry point activity and helps build rapport. It helps the facilitator to know a large number of people in a village and how they are related to each other. In some areas, a majority of the families in a village and at times even the whole village may be related to one another, the hamlet may be a large descent group.

Group formation

A clear understanding of how various families/households are related (as seen from the genealogical chart), may be helpful in the process of forming groups to undertake other PRA activities.

Conflict resolution

The method may help in developing an in-depth understanding of various issues and underlying currents. It may thereby facilitate in

conflict resolution in villages and amongst families.

Collection of information

The genealogical charts can be used to collect and depict information on various aspects including education, traditional skills, land holdings, livestock, age at death and cause of death, female infanticide etc.

Mobility and generational change

The method can provide information on the mobility of different groups of people and how this has changed through time.

Thus, participatory genealogies provide a method for studying how families are related and how changes have taken place over generations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the villagers of Uta Bari, West Tripura, District Tripura, Ms Ganga Gupta of URMUL, Ms. Manju Debbarma of Tripura Adivasi Mahila Samiti, Tripura, Mr Subir K Pradhan, Mr Debbbrata Ray of DKVK of West Tripura and Mr R.C.M. Reddy, IAS, N.R. Sarkar and Anil of Development Unit, World Bank Aided Project, Tripura for their significant contribution in developing this method.