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The Thippapur experience: a PRA diary

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• Introduction

We report on a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) conducted over two and a half days in the village of Thippapur, of Cherla Mandal in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh State in India. It was selected because Thippapur is an entirely tribal village, virtually cut off from the rest of the world by being located in the interior of the forest. We wanted to see the applicability of PRA in an isolated tribal village for plan preparation for local development by the villagers. The present paper, however, touches some of our experiences with respect the methods used.

• The village

Thippapur is a remote tribal inhabitation close to the Madhya Pradesh - Andhra Pradesh border, surrounded by forest on all sides. A country track connects the village to its mandal[1] headquarters. There is no public transport available whatsoever and the village is yet to be electrified. All the houses in the village are thatched and the only two pucca buildings are the G C C[2] Depot and the school.

• The people

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[1] An intermediary administrative unit between the village and district.

[2] Girizan Cooperative Corporation (Girijan = Giri: Hill, Jan = population). A Corporation meant to purchase all the forest produce collected by the tribes. This is to avoid middlemen exploiting the tribes by ensuring markets to their collected produce and fair prices. A wing of it is D R Depot (Daily Requirement Depot) which keeps all groceries needed by tribes and supplies them at reasonable prices.

The people are from an ethnic group called 'Koyas'. There are 63 households in the village divided into two clusters with a distinct gap in between. To a common eye they all look alike. But a deeper probe did reveal that a rigid social stratification exists between them. Koyas have a social hierarchy which has four communities in all, each having a specific status in their society. They are Dorasetty Koyas, Linga Koyas, Koyas and Gothilla/Gutta Koyas - in that order. Thippapur is inhabited by the Koyas and Gothillas. The Koyas look down upon Gothillas who are settlers from other places and there also exists a distinct gap between their hutments.

• Enter the village

In order to reach people as individuals rather than officers, we made our visit to the village in-cognito. We left the jeep and with only a few people accompanying us outside the village, and entered it on foot. Our first acquaintances in the village were children! A flock of them playing on and under a huge tamarind tree at the very entrance and their agility reminded us of little monkeys. When we approached them with the best smiles, a majority of them ran away at least for 1/4 of a kilometre and stopped. We had no other way but to force another smile and enter the village.

The houses of the village are located on either side of a country track which passes right through the village. As we entered the village we saw a few Koyas, but there were no traces of any curiosity on their faces. Their apathy gave us the first shock. Our attempts to enter into their community proved to be futile. However, we kept on cheering the children who are in good numbers in any corner of the

village. To our fortune, a few of them were willing to walk with us and so we proceeded further with them in order to see the whole village first.

As mentioned earlier, there is a gap between the houses making the village look like two distinct pieces. As we ventured to enter into the other part with our companions, suddenly we heard the adults of the front part of the village shouting at their children and saying something to them in Koya dialect. Since we couldn't comprehend the language we asked the children what it is all about. They explained to us that they are being warned by their parents not to enter this part of the village. To a question as to why they are asked so, these kids ran away without telling anything, leaving us in utter perplexity. The only problem that came to our minds was 'Naxalites'[3] which indeed made us think twice before taking another forward step but thankfully enough that was only momentary. We moved ahead.

As we entered this Gothilla inhabitation, there was not just the apathy, but also a lot of hostility towards us. Despite our repeated attempts to speak to them, people remained cold and silent. We settled down with a family which was sitting under a tree, the male member was busy making a wooden implement. We looked forward to break the silence and the opportunity came after some time when we got a chance to help him in making the wooden implement (by the co-author) and do up the hair of the woman (co-authoress). But this could hardly be claimed any breakthrough because, our repeated appeals to let us have an entry into their house were flatly turned down. Also we noticed that through they claimed that they just cannot follow Telugu, they do understand it and can reply. (The Koya tribe speak their own dialect but know Telugu language reasonably well).

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[3] There are a band of insurgents concentrated mostly in the Dandakaranya belt of forests in India. They are follow Marxist - Leninist - Maoist ideology of class struggle and annihilation of class enemies. They fight against the existing system to bring in the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist brand of social order.

- **The initial despair**

It was almost for 4 hours that we were roaming in the village and trying to establish rapport with the villagers, and we were increasingly thrown into disheartment. Then we pondered over the whole experience and wondered whether PRA is of any applicability in a tribal village whose lifestyles and culture are so vastly different from others. Also we reviewed whether we missed any opportunity to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them'.

- **The ice is broken**

We came back to the GCC building where we planned to camp since it was already 2.00 pm. We had not carried any lunch along since we thought that we could make some arrangement in the village itself. But after the wishers of hectic effort, it was clear enough that camping in the village was not going to be any cake walk. So, we had to send our people to fetch food for us from the nearby mandal headquarters. By the time we finished our lunch, it was around 3.30 pm. Many villagers who were not there when we landed in the village had come back. Many of them gathered in front of the GCC Depot as if to fetch their provision. But their big numbers showed us that our presence began to be felt in the village and perhaps they are interested in interaction. We greeted them and introduced ourselves by our first names and explained to them that we wished to live with them for a few days to study their life and understand their problems. This received a positive response and there was a preliminary exchange of information. While it was going on we noticed more and more people gathering. So, we proposed that we may all sit under a tree, since the afternoon was very hot, and carry on.

- **...and we were accepted**

We all settled down under a big tamarind tree and the initial curiosities raised a high pitch. We learnt a great deal about their culture, practices, etc. A little later we asked one of the slightly grown up children to come forward to distribute the toffees we had with us. The distribution evoked a lot of happiness and satisfaction among the adults, and perhaps

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they are more convinced that we are 'friends' only. Consequently, the situation relaxed and conversation became more open and serious.

• Splitting into small groups

As the conversation became more serious, we noticed only a few people were sitting close to us and talking, the rest were non-participant bystanders. We thought should this continue, some of them might completely lose interest and depart the group. So, three of us (two authors + a helper who is also a Koya) divided the whole group into smaller sub-groups so that we could engage all of them and not miss any information. The natural accessibility phenomenon of woman engaging women, men for men was followed. Fortunately, the conversation got focused automatically on more personal difficulties. One group tried mapping and the remaining two separately on seasonality, Venn-diagramming etc.

• The mapping

When we expressed our desire to know about their village. Many villagers started explaining us what is where by naming the direction and indicating them also. Some of them used their fingers to draw on the ground to explain to us. We offered them a sheet of paper and a few sketch pens and requested them to draw a map of the village. But, they refused to do so saying that they are all illiterate and so can't handle paper and pen. We had to convince and encourage them that there is no special difficulty in using them and they can be used with equal ease as they do with finger on the ground. After some time, the youth agreed to take the lead and in no time many more were drawn towards it. Initially they found colours and paper inhibiting perhaps as reflected in their reluctance and also in using a register to draw straight lines representing the road. Gradually the traditional wisdom came out and they did the job with utmost reverence.

The mapping went on very systematically. They firstly drew the road and placed houses either sides of it exactly as many houses as they are on the ground. Although all houses have scattered all over, they represented them in linear order. Other features like their agricultural fields, tanks, streams and location of hand pumps and other community structures were depicted on the map.

The mapping not only helped us understand the village but also opened new concepts in understanding the capabilities of these people. If we help/facilitate their traditional wisdom and reduce the levels of inhibitions, perhaps we will have much more to learn from them.

We broke after the mapping was done since it was already 6 pm and women expressed their need to attend to household work. So, the rest of the time we spent discussing their seasonal activities with the few people who were left with us.

• We are one

During the daytime conversation, we tried to explore their lyrics and dance styles, which they enjoyed explaining to us. So, it was decided to have a session that night. Unlike the non-tribal villages, in tribal villages, people go to sleep very late. Around 9.30 pm when it was all pitch dark (since the village is not yet electrified) the Koyas expression of life and culture began in the light of camp fire. A few men tied bells around their ankles and beat drums heavily, and women sang on a slow rhythm. Men and women danced together and separately. While the dance of men is heavy matching the rhythm of the drums women moved their steps gracefully to their simple harmonies. We ourselves joined in the festivities. The joining of hands and steps bridged the gaps and the jubilant members for the first time cracked jokes with us. Perhaps the feelings of 'us' and 'them' gave way to the concept of 'oneness' and we carried it on till midnight when we were exhausted.

• Helping the silent to speak

Next day, we had no difficulty gathering people soon after they woke up; many of them came to us. We expressed our desire to see the things on ground as they exist. As we were discussing the plan of action, we noticed again that the dialogue is captured by a few and a majority of them shutting off. So, we divided the group into two - one entirely comprised of those who are vocal and the other of those who are keeping silent; and took them separately

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for a round of the village (not exactly a transect).

A few hours of going around with them walking through their fields and forests was extremely enlightening. Even the ones who kept quiet in the beginning explained to us thoroughly in the simplest language where they wanted a check-dam on the stream, why the tanks bunds height has to be revised, why sluices have to be shifted etc.

- **Thippapur method: an alternative to Venn diagramming**

- We requested the villagers to name the departments they interact with regularly. We encouraged them to recollect the names. We noted down all the names.

- The villagers were asked to select stones representing various departments. The stone size was to be proportionate to the importance they attach to each department (i.e. the bigger the stone, the more important is the department/institution to them).

- When stones were selected and named accordingly, we asked them again and clarified/confirmed.

- During the next part of the exercise, we made a small circle on the ground and said it represents their village. We then asked them to place the stones in or near the circle. The guiding rule was that the degree of proximity is proportionate to the liking ('ishtam' in Telugu) they have for each department. The closer a stone is placed to the circle the closer the department is to their hearts.
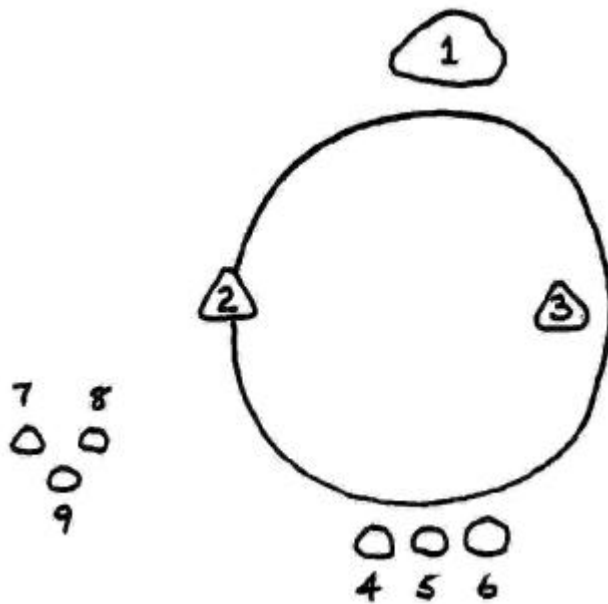
The villagers were very quick to grasp the concept. Selecting and placing the stones evoked a lot of discussion among them, but quick consensus too. This helped us understand two aspects simultaneously. How important a given institution is to their lives, and how far the same department succeeded in reaching them. Interesting revelations emerged. For example, ITDA[4] which was

recognised by them as the most important department (biggest stone), was kept just outside the village. Similarly, the Forest, Excise and Policy Departments were kept very far from the village (their conflicts with them are well known). Their own system of village elders is the most dear to them and was placed inside the circle representing the village. The GCC got a place on the fringes, perhaps representing an acceptance of their services but as an outsider (Figure 1).

- [4] Integrated Tribal Development Agency which operates in areas which are having tribals as predominant inhabitants. As the name suggests, it is a government agency looking after the welfare of the tribals through its development activities.

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Figure 1

- **The Village model**

The villagers had already explained during the round of the village what they want for the development of village, especially with respect to irrigation, agriculture etc. This had been incorporated in the map they drew earlier, but we thought, presenting the map to the whole village would not only be confusing, but also difficult to comprehend. Making a model of the village on the ground was thought to be a better option. It was almost evening. Most of the villagers were out to the nearby weekly market. We thought instead of waiting for others, we would make a beginning that might attract others. The children came to our rescue in realising this idea. When we asked them to make a big square using small stones besides the road, they participated with great enthusiasm. This activity attracted a lot of people and at this point, we explained to them that a village model that was to be made. Again their participation and method of modelling was fascinating. They marked the road, demarcated forests, borewells all around. They used stones to represent houses names and twigs to represent important trees. Locally available material - different colour soils, sand, stone, twigs were used. For marking all the changes/proposals they wanted for the village, a pink colour powder which we had carried from outside was used. While a few of

them were actually making, many of them present also gave a number of suggestions. After completion, they presented a village plan to the villagers which evoked a lot of discussion regarding their development proposals and after discussions changes were incorporated in a few cases.

- **The resentment**

However there was some resentment among some of the villagers because, they felt that they are asked to do the same thing time and again i.e. what they wanted and where. Because, initially, it was mapping the previous day, transect in the morning and modelling in the evening. We felt it was true! We should have avoided one of them......perhaps mapping.

- **Wealth ranking**

To understand their concept of wealth with the idea that it might help us in developing insights into their outlook which would also help us examining the ongoing developmental programmes vis-a-vis their concept of economic growth.
The exercise involved the following steps:

- A list of all households in the village was prepared on the basis of the names

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available with the GCC Depot Register of ration cards (on which commodities are sold to them);

- Some names have been written individually on small slips;

- A few villagers (6 of them) who were interested were invited for the exercise and asked to categorise their people on a wealth scale from the richest to the poorest; and,

- After all the slips were sorted, 3 slips were selected from each group and villagers were asked to explain why they did place each one in a particular category and not in the other. They were allowed to make any changes whenever they felt like.

  Their criteria of wealth generally was based primarily on size of the agricultural holding and a little on the number of animals owned. The animal husbandry and collection of MFPs[5] actually contribute significantly to their economy and bail them out in lean periods. Still it is the largely land which gives them higher/lower status. Perhaps this is the reason why they were insisting all the time only about irrigation facilities whenever they talked of their problems and plans for development.

For ration cards, the villagers show themselves as separate units but are still perceived as a single household by the villagers. As we had used the list from the GCC Depot to save time which was premium for us, it created confusion at times.

- **The seasonality analysis**

This analysis was done to know the income - expenditure dynamics of Koyas vis-a-vis the seasons. The precise objective is to identify the stress periods and their survival mechanisms during that time. But, whenever we asked them as to when a particular event/activity takes place, the reply invariably was "we do not know". After sometime, we realised that it is not really 'not knowing', but since the method of time keeping between

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- [5] Minor Forest Produce. These are Beedi leaves, Gums, Honey, some kinds of seeds, nuts etc. on which the people collect and market.

them and us was different, they were simply being negative perhaps because, they knew that they could not say it in our time scale. Therefore, we decided to represent the time to them in their scale as far as possible. We went about it as follows:

- We took the broad seasons known to them - Summer, Winter and Rainy season;

- We used their festivals as the markers on the seasonal time scale;

- For our sake we superimposed their time scale on our 12 month January-December calendar. Thus, a scale which can be used by both of us was produced - i.e. they spoke in their terms and we plotted them against our calendar;

- We identified agricultural activities (labour, harvest), MFP collection, wage employment and husbandry practices as major income accruing activities and plotted them; and,

- The main expenditures are marriages, diseases and festivals. Marriages and festivals mean heavy expenditure to them because of community feasts etc.

We found that every family in the village was in debt. These loans taken were generally for consumption purposes. The moneylenders were the shopkeepers from Cherla town and a few landholders from other villages. The rates of interest varied from 24 percent to 50 percent per annum. It was interesting to see how the animals and birds they reared were used during the stress period. They had a solution for the problem in form of an assistance to them in form of a revolving fund placed at the disposal of their village elders (a traditional institution). They wanted an amount of Rs.25,000 and also wanted to form their own rules etc.

- **Review**

We felt that our desire to learn about their local medicines, beliefs in super-natural forces and more on seasonal issues could not be realised due to time constraint.

The third day, we devoted to the review of our work, preparing an Action Plan based on what

villagers suggested to us during the earlier two days.

We were particular about preparing an Action Plan in the village itself rather than writing it in our office and then returning because:

i.   We felt that if some information gaps existed, they should be filled there and then; returning a second time would involve a lot of delay;

ii. After sometime, the plans may not be as spontaneous or represent what people need or want; and,

iii. Above all, the chances of forgetting are significant.

The moments of leaving the village were memorable. The people wished us well and asked us to keep visiting them.

• **Lessons**

Some broad lessons and points to ponder:

- The initial difficulties of 'breaking with villagers should not deter us.

- Two days is not enough; a day more might have been optimal. Due to the short time available the seasonality analysis was just done by us on their giving the information rather than them doing it themselves. Many other areas remained unexplored.

- Children are always a great help.

- Being the best judge of the situation, and bringing changes in the methods to adopt to the situation is the essence of the PRA techniques and too much emphasis on the methodology aspect is not called for.

- A failure of ours was with respect to involving the Guthila Koyas, who were somewhat less open than the other Koyas. The problem is more acute in caste villages where close identification with one caste groups may mean loss of many others.

- The paper and colour pens etc. though attractive also work as inhibitors - methods more familiar to the villagers and having more visual impact are preferable.

- Having a woman as one of team members was a great advantage in involving women, which is difficult for an all-men team.

- Going for a subtle entrance into the village without informing the people in advance may be a great experience in itself, but whether it is required we could not finally reach a consensus. But if a government official goes after making his schedule known, it somehow an expectations and the people generally start behaving as they think they are expected.

- How their traditional institutions can be fruitfully linked with the government agencies for selecting people and projects, and for grounding them has yet to be explored fully.

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