



## REIMAGINING PARTICIPATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

*“We eat what we are given, sleep outside the house near cattle, and serve our master. We are indebted to him and his father, for life.” (Circa 1972)*

Community development programmes in India began right after Independence. These programmes recognized the importance of cooperation among families in a village. When practised in a social setting with unequal relations of power, cooperation became subordination. Fruits of development are enjoyed only by the local powerful families. Development cannot be ‘delivered’ from outside.

*“We await visit of the officer to find out what to cultivate this season.” (Circa 1977)*

People must develop themselves.

Top-down development programmes are made relevant only when bottom-up process of acquisition and demand is mobilized. PRIA has developed its approach to social mobilization and participation of the oppressed and excluded households, which entails facilitating social learning, so that the poor and the exploited can begin to develop a sense of individual and collective agency<sup>[1]</sup>. People’s participation, even within a group of similar families, must confront internal relations of unequal power. Women remain invisible, inaudible, inactive; their agency ‘assumed’ by the men in their families (father, husband, brother, son).

In the early 1980s, PRIA’s efforts at social mobilization of rural women was anchored in literacy and non-formal education programmes; they found their voice in front of ‘delivery’ officials. PRIA’s approach utilised Gandhian and Freirean principles of learning from experiences of everyday life to support their agency. With Dalit and tribal communities, PRIA’s facilitation of social learning for participation also entailed recovering self-respect and faith in their own knowledge<sup>[2]</sup>. Re-gaining voice by the poor and marginalised, therefore, also needed rehearsing their own expressions, idioms and languages.

By the end of the 1980s, it became clear that institutional spaces were needed for authentic participation of the poor and marginalized in development. Social forestry, primary education, and wasteland development were some of the early large-scale public programmes where implementation structures included ‘beneficiaries’. PRIA’s considerable efforts at advocacy with international agencies (UNDP, World Bank, Sida<sup>[3]</sup>, DFID, et. al) and national ministries

(Rural Development, Human Resource Development, Health and Family Welfare,) resulted in formal policies and detailed guidelines for the participation of 'target groups' as 'primary stakeholders' in the design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of such development programmes.

Public officials were only trained to 'deliver' a pre-designed programme; their capacity to 'facilitate' participation was supported by PRIA in several states. Field level development organizations had practical skills in community participation, so participatory training methodology developed by PRIA in the 1980s provided them principles and methods to systematize and deepen the same<sup>[4]</sup>.

By the early 1990s, participation of stakeholders was 'mainstreamed' mostly as information sharing and consultation with beneficiaries, but participation in decision-making at local levels remained a mirage. The national and global trends towards constitution of local governments with explicitly defined leadership roles for women and socially excluded families presented a new opportunity for deepening participation. PRIA's large-scale interventions supported building capacity of elected panchayat (and later municipal) leaders (especially women) to undertake participatory planning of various development programmes (especially around education, health, water and sanitation) became a vehicle for seeking accountability of service providing agencies and officials<sup>[5]</sup>.

At the turn of the millennium, PRIA's strategy of supporting participation in governance began to prepare both demand and supply sides of securing entitlements and delivering services. Gradually, participation of 'beneficiaries' began to enter urban development programming and agencies (especially around water, sanitation, housing). Even in cities, the focus of participation was limited to poor, vulnerable, slum communities and households. Citizen participation in governance (beyond a voter and a beneficiary) was clearly articulated by PRIA around this time and promotion of active citizenship (rights and obligations of all citizens) and civic leadership was extensively supported by PRIA<sup>[6]</sup>. New legislative mechanisms (like Right to Information, Right to Education, etc.) created opportunities for wider citizen participation in everyday governance. This created opportunity for a global coalition on 'right to participation'<sup>[7]</sup>.

The changed demographics brought large numbers of educated and digital savvy urban youth into the public arena by 2010. Focusing on youth participation explicitly required supporting their agency around their own interests and agendas in 'age-revering' societies. Rapidly increasing digital access to information and mechanisms to participate mobilized such youth; yet, massive digital divide (with all hardware and software aspects) across countries and communities reinforce unequal relations of power and obstructed capacities to participate by a vast majority.

Citizens' (netizens'?) participation largely focuses on securing rights from state authorities, but practice of horizontal citizenship (of rights and obligations to fellow citizens) and expressions of solidarity remain blurred. From seeking participation in democratic governance of society, PRIA's efforts began towards 'democracy in everyday life'<sup>[8]</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 has exposed the divisive and self-centred under-life of society, significantly reinforced through digital 'echo-chambers' of 'un-social' media.

Re-imagining participation in the post-pandemic era, therefore, requires promotion of respectful nurturance of human and ecological diversities, under-pinned by universal values of justice, equality and liberty. Technology needs to serve the right to participation of, and by, all in co-designing individual and collective futures, in everyday life, locally and globally.

- Will meaningful, authentic and transformative participation of hitherto excluded remain a mirage in face of increasing inequalities?
- How can authentic and inclusive participation be enabled in digital spaces and platforms?
- What strategies can support active citizenship and meaningful participation of youth, including adolescents?
- How can elected and appointed representatives be held accountable through a process of direct participation?
- How capacity to 'voice' and capacity to 'listen' be re-balanced, such that voice does not become mere noise in the system?

These, and many related questions, confront us as PRIA prepares to redesign its efforts on the very foundations of participation it began 40 years ago.

#### **References:**

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