

Knowledge as Power: Participatory Research as Alternative

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In the situation of inequalities of which the majority of our country's citizens are victims, the search for the bases of power leads us to one factor that is not easily acknowledged, viz. knowledge as power. Physical force and economic strength are tools of keeping others under control. Political power reinforces such a situation of power and powerlessness. In recent years, particularly since the growth of organisational sciences, the monopoly of knowledge has functioned as a major factor reinforcing the division of society into 'haves' and 'have-nots', or the powerful and the powerless.

This paper will therefore try to attempt an understanding of knowledge as a source of power, its monopoly as a mode of keeping people divided and under control and of strengthening the already powerful. It will then try to find a solution in the form of participatory research which values people's knowledge as against externally imposed scientific knowledge which can be monopolised by only a few.

Knowledge as power

In the early period of this century, the 'haves' or the powerful exercised direct control over the land and other resources of

the 'have-nots' or the landless. This was true both at the international and the national levels. Internationally the colonial countries exercised direct political power in the colonies in order to exploit their resources as raw materials and their people as markets.

They were able to manipulate the 'have-no's' largely because they exercised this direct power which many a time was reinforced with physical force. While this form of control still continues in a country like India, a more subtle form of control has also emerged since World War II. This is the form of control that is exercised through knowledge.

Knowledge has increasingly become a major source of power and control. The very process of thinking and valuing of the ordinary people is being indirectly influenced through the control and use of knowledge (Gaventa 1980). This also allows for an indirect and remote control such that New Delhi and Washington D.C. can control the destiny of those living in far-flung villages. This control is made possible through professionalisation and the monopoly of the means of communications and of social control. Economy is being controlled by a few persons in a country and by a few decision-makers in the rich countries. These persons are able to use all knowledge to their own advantage in order to maintain their economic and political control over the rest of the world or over the remaining groups in their own country.

This exercise of power through control over knowledge has been further consolidated with the help of more organised research enterprises. The ordinary persons and the 'have-nots' have been facing two forms of assaults in this regard. Firstly, their own knowledge, the popular knowledge, has been completely devalued with the rise of modern professional knowledge-producing enterprises.

To establish such control, the dominant section needs to discard centuries old popular knowledge as superstitions. This is most evident in the case of health care, for example, where traditional health care practices have been made to appear meaningless with the rise of modern medicine. This devaluation starts from the experts, who in the process of establishing the reign of the modern knowledge producing enterprises, have

Today, however, the poor are denied access to housing because housing laws ensure that only those who can afford to buy land at the exorbitant price fixed by real estate speculators. They are the only ones who can draw up a plan according to the housing legislation, get it approved and invest a big amount in a short time to build it. In other words, only the rich can afford to own good houses. The traditional knowledge of building houses has been rejected as illegal and unscientific. The poor who cannot afford the modern houses are forced to live in slums amidst squalor and be evicted as illegal encroachers and criminals (de Souza 1978: xxiii-xxiv).

Participatory research as an educational process

If social change implies people's collective participation in determining their own destiny as mentioned above, then knowledge is a necessary ingredient in that process. If people can learn to value their own knowledge, and produce as well as use new knowledge, then it will be a contribution to the process of their empowerment. Participatory research is based on this basic philosophy of empowering the 'have-nots' through their involvement in both valuing their existing knowledge and producing and using new knowledge.

Participatory research has been demonstrated to act as a powerful educational experience for those involved in it. This educational experience takes place in several ways as described below. These experiments in alternative have been attempted by several activists. While describing the process, we shall discuss some of these experiences.

1. Existing popular knowledge is recognised and valued

Participatory research starts from the assumption that ordinary people already possess some knowledge. Some elements of this knowledge may be distorted, and some may be authentic. This, in fact, is also the starting point of adult education. Adults are already having some understanding and information. They do not start from a clean slate. This recognition is reinforced in participatory research and its

done so at the cost of popular knowledge. The 'cult of expertise' has acquired much more significance in recent years and this has been supported by the institutions of research. Over a period of time, the 'have-nots' themselves begin to devalue their own knowledge and mechanisms of producing that knowledge, which have been relevant for their survival and development for several centuries (Joseph, Desrochers and Kalathil 1983: 67-73)

Secondly, ordinary people have been systematically denied access to either the knowledge produced by experts or the means of production of that knowledge. In fact, the research enterprises have created such an impression that ordinary persons are not considered capable of creating their own knowledge. This is further fortified with degrees, scholarships, institutions, etc. Unless one has been 'properly' trained through long schooling, one is not considered capable of producing any knowledge (Tandon 1981).

Briefly, professionalisation and monopoly of knowledge do not merely exclude the weaker sections but make them weaker than they were. They not only deny them access to professional knowledge but deprive them of what they already had. Thus, herbal medicines are considered unscientific and only allopathy is declared civilised medicine. In reality, however, the allopathic health care pattern ensures that it is limited to a small elite and the majority is deprived of any of its facilities. But deprivation even of their traditional medicines leads to the deterioration of their health. Another case of professionalisation depriving the poor of what they had, is housing. To quote L.M. Menezes (1985: 85),

Barring real estate development and government housing for its employees as well as the general public (which is of recent origin), the vast majority of housing in India has always been self-constructed in some form or the other. . . for thousands of years, people in India have been building for themselves, without engineers and architects, the most elegant, aesthetically pleasing, economically durable and functionally efficient houses using indigenous material, techniques and resources.

significance to their ongoing survival and development underscored. It is this existing knowledge which is daily used by the people in their ongoing struggles for survival. And this existing knowledge is examined to identify the elements that are disparate and those that are authentic. In participatory research, the synthesis of popular knowledge with existing scientific knowledge strengthens the educational experience of the people (Vio Grossi *et al.* 1983).

An example of such revalorisation of popular knowledge is the case of the women's unit of *Seva Mandir*, Udipur. Their training programmes are issue-related. Beginning with issues concerning women and children, they go on to try and understand the basic causes which deprive them of their rightful place in society. Thus, their non-formal education is based on the assumption that women are capable of running their own affairs and of understanding the factors that govern their lives. As an example, one may mention the case of social forestry which they initiated and implemented. The implementors of the country's law had taken for granted that only men were producers and they alone could own land. Hence, when the women's group approached the sub-divisional officer, he refused to allot land to them because 'we do not allot land to women, only to men, only to those who plough the field and are heads of households.'

The women, however, knew that they were the ones who worked the most and that they were capable of selecting trees which their families needed. Hence, they could be owners, and they challenged the sub-divisional officer to prove that the law did not allow them to own land. They threatened to go to the Supreme Court and charge him with discrimination based on sex. Their knowledge of their situation enabled them to acquire land from the sub-divisional officer who had accepted the male domination of society which has been legalised by the professional law makers. The women who knew the household needs and the local situation were able to decide what type of trees could grow there, how their irrigation could be organised as a group, and how 90% of the seedlings could survive as against the scientific plantation measures that result in hardly 40% survival. They needed land for this and their knowledge

of law which forbade discrimination based on sex supplemented and supported their popular knowledge and enabled them to acquire land in the name of women. They were thus able to work out a community forestry project that catered to their needs and helped them to grow as a group. The women consulted the forest department about the availability of plants and their nutrition needs. But it is they who drew up the plan of trees, bushes, herbs and arranged for the saplings and seeds. They are the ones who were able to find ways of keeping goats off the land without starving them because they knew the local situation and knew how to keep a balance between various needs. The normal solution of the forest department is to protect trees from people and from goats. In other words, the people and animals are deprived of their food and no alternative is provided by the so-called scientific forestry. But the women who knew how to plant trees according to the local needs were able to cater to the needs of both and ensure the survival of their goats as well as 90% of the plants (Srivastava 1985: 150-152).

2. New knowledge is built on the existing knowledge

The starting point for creating new knowledge is the existing knowledge of the people, particularly the authentic elements of it. As people begin to appreciate what they already know, they are more open to seek new information. This desire to seek new knowledge is enhanced if it is done in the context of concrete problems which the people are facing. The people will be motivated to create and use new knowledge if they see its relevance in solving some concrete problems that they face.

A case in point is the Women Workers' Forum of Madras which was facilitated by the Swallows of Sweden and Denmark. In 1967, after beginning a *Batik* centre and forming a co-operative of women, the outside facilitators wanted to take either legal action against moneylenders or open a literacy and health education centre. But the local women viewed the moneylender not as a wholly exploitative element but also as a part of their community and as a social institution serving the function of providing credit in an emergency. Official financial

institutions are inaccessible to the poor and the victims of exploitation know that the moneylender is the only source in case of need. Hence they could not accept a purely legal solution of banning moneylenders till an alternative was found. They even viewed him as a benefactor but they wanted to be free from loans. Hence, a debt releasing fund was formed and other insurance schemes had to be initiated. Slowly, a workers' co-operative and savings bank emerged and the people began to take control over what they had saved. It is at this stage, i.e. in 1979, that the women felt the need of literacy. Initially, it was a middle class need of outside facilitators. It is when the women had grown sufficiently as a group and needed to keep the accounts of their savings bank and of their production centre that they thought of the literacy class, not when outsiders wanted it (Srinivasan 1981: 78-79).

3. People learn to exercise control

The process of participatory research puts emphasis on the active participation of ordinary people in generating their own knowledge. This encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. It is this active posture which constitutes a powerful impetus for learning to exercise control over their own lives. This is particularly so since participatory research explicitly calls for and promotes the exercise of control by the people themselves (Brown and Tandon 1983).

An example of such a situation can be found in many aspects particularly in social forestry. For centuries, the people have kept a balance between environmental and their own nutritional and other needs. They have viewed nature as a renewable resource and have survived on it without destroying ecology. However, what is called scientific forestry has deprived them of their basic needs in favour of a small minority from outside to whom natural resources are only a raw material and a source of profit. Today, several groups have risen all over India that have revived some of the traditional practices in order to protect the existing forest or fishery resources and in the process safeguard both their surroundings

and themselves. These are the groups which have centuries-old 'popular' knowledge of their surroundings and know that trees are not only a raw material but are essential for the people. In other words, the environment is not only trees and animals but above all the survival of the people. Its deterioration leads to the impoverishment of the weaker sections and it is these sections that have come together in several places (the best known among them being *Chipko* in Uttar Pradesh and *Appiko* in Karnataka), to protect their surroundings and the people who survived on them. This has at times forced the Government to change its approach to forestry (Agarwal and Narain 1985: 338-340).

4. It becomes a collective process

One of the elements of participatory research is promotion of collective responsibility for seeking new knowledge. Unlike classical research, it does not encourage individual production of knowledge. As a result, people learn to get together, collectively seeking and analysing information. Many a time this forms the seed of a rudimentary organisation of the people. This has been the particular experience in those situations where 'have-nots' are not yet organised (Fernandes and Tandon 1981).

A case in point is that of *Gram Vikas* in Orissa. For years the people have suffered under the moneylenders to whom they had mortgaged their fruit trees on which they had to survive. Slowly, through the influence of *Gram Vikas* they realised that the law did not bind them to the moneylenders. It is not merely this knowledge that freed them, but the fact that they acquired it together in a group. The process of learning was one of reflection on their situation and the realisation of their strength in unity. This slow reflection and realisation of their strength helped them to stand up to the moneylenders, free themselves from their clutches and eventually gain ownership of their trees (Madiath 1985: 125-129).

5. It creates informed options

The very process of collectively analysing a given situation

throws up various alternatives. As part of the process of analysis, options are debated on the basis of concrete information. As a result, people are able to accept and reject options on an informed basis. This creates a sense of empowerment which is based on the confidence that information has been understood and interpreted.

An example would be the case of ASAG in Ahmedabad. They began with the government housing programme which was more budget and bureaucracy oriented than client satisfaction or people's participation oriented. Though the people gave most of the money either in the form of loans or free labour, the government considered them mere beneficiaries of the rural housing project. They were not considered capable of taking a decision for themselves. ASAG, however, was convinced that people who had to live in the house knew well what they wanted. Hence, they involved many of them from the very first stage of designing the house though it is considered the prerogative of an architect. Its result is that the people not only accepted the idea of housing but even viewed the project as their own. Unlike in many other places where nearly 60% of the houses are sold within a year after occupation, in this particular case very few houses have been alienated. In most places the new owners have added new rooms to the house thus showing their ownership not just legally and physically but also psychologically. The housing design is based on the needs of the community and is meant to encourage them to grow together (Shah 1977: 143-152).

6. Actions emerge out of this analysis

In other words, the very act of involvement in the process of analysing a given reality creates a sense of ownership of that knowledge and willingness to transform that situation. The people are able to take concrete actions as part of their involvement in participatory research. In fact, participatory research is normatively linked to the transformation of the situation of the 'have-nots'. As a result, acting as a legitimate form of knowing and learning is emphasised.

The educational aspects of participatory research are elaborated above. Participatory research is essentially a self-initiated and collective process of inquiry. It builds expertise and awareness among the 'have-nots', it encourages action and experimentation by them to transform their reality and it creates a sense of empowerment and organisation among them.

A series of simple steps are taken in conducting participatory research. They consist in a group of people first agreeing on a common statement of a problem. Some common problems, for example, are landlessness, low income, indebtedness, sickness of children, etc. The problem should be stated clearly and concretely.

Only stating a problem does not lead to action. The group should express interest in solving it. Sometimes, problems are identified merely because someone asks them about their situation. This step should ensure that there is a willingness to understand the problem in its entirety and its underlying causes, as well as an attempt to solve it. Questions like: "Why do we want to solve the problem?" "How will we benefit if the problem is solved?" may help in clarifying this.

Such, for example, were the questions asked by the Working Women's Forum, Madras which we have described above. When outsiders first suggested a literacy class, their main question was "how will we benefit from it?" They did not see any use from it at that stage because their main problem was loans from the moneylender. They could not see how literacy could solve the problem.

It is when they see the benefits of an alternative that they begin to take decisions. One can notice it in the literacy programme of the Working Women's Forum and of many other centres. The middle class workers who organise these classes conclude that the poor are not interested in making progress and refuse to cooperate with the development workers. Their solution is to try and motivate them to change, on the assumption that the real problem is the KAP-gap, i.e. lack of knowledge, of right attitudes to development and of scientific practices. Their solution is to give the poor new knowledge which, it is assumed, will change their attitudes and will lead

to new practices. In this context the refusal of the women to cooperate is a genuine decision because they know that it is not beneficial to them at that stage. One can find other examples, as for example, in family planning. While the upper class decision-makers are convinced that the poor are irrational in their fertility behaviour, studies (Mamdani 1972) have shown that villagers have their own rationality which may not be that of the urban elite that thinks of the poor, not poverty, as the real problem. But the villagers to whom children are an economic asset, have a rationality based on their need. Filling the KAP-gap according to the urban understanding of the problem cannot lead to any results.

What is important is to remember that knowledge is power. Hence revalorising popular knowledge is an important step in empowering the powerless. It can be a part of a process enabling the marginalised sections to acquire some rights which they have been deprived of till now. They can be instrumental in building a community of the poor. For example, knowledge that the anti-social elements employed by the landlords to suppress the landless agricultural labourers has helped some bonded labourers to resist repression. Knowledge of the law on the abolition of rural debts and of bonded labour has been an important factor in helping the poor to liberate themselves (Baxi 1985: 116). When this knowledge of the dominant systems has gone hand in hand with a greater value given to popular knowledge, the community has been able to grow as a result. Such, for example, has been the case of many community health projects that made use of traditional medical systems as a tool for non-formal education and leadership building (Narayan 1985: 76-78).

Conclusion

We have seen in this paper how knowledge is power. Through the monopoly of knowledge, the dominant sections have been able to keep economic as well as political power in their own hands. Thus, the knowledge producing educational and other systems as well as service systems such as health, housing etc. have been monopolised by the same dominant

groups which kept economic and political power in their hands. They have treated the resources of the poor only as a raw material and have further impoverished the already powerless sections of society.

It is in this context that participatory research is viewed as an alternative in the community building and empowerment process of the powerless. The struggle is between the 'haves' who have kept all power in their own hands and the 'have-nots' who have been deprived even of what they had without in any way getting access to professional knowledge and the power and riches that go with it. In other words, their situation has deteriorated. Hence we view revalorisation of popular knowledge and research that functions as a tool for reflection and mobilisation as a possible alternative. We have mentioned several experiences of voluntary organisations that have attempted such a process. Many of them are localised and small experiments which need to be studied, analysed and made known. Many such experiments are needed if an impact has to be made on the structures that ensure the powerlessness of the majority in favour of a small powerful minority.