Participatory strategies for adult education and social inclusion

By

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Participatory research triggers processes of empowerment with India’s most marginalized people who are not only discriminated against because of gender and poverty but also because they belong to the scheduled caste, a politically correct term for what used to be known as the untouchables. Working with these women breaks the circle of the monopoly of power that had them excluded. The best way to overcome and change this reality is “becoming aware of the reality, and learning about it”. Nishu Paul and Priyanka Dale describe the different stages of this experience. They both work for the Action Learning Initiatives of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

Participatory Strategies for Adult Education and Social Inclusion

“Sunita lives in Lehrada village of the Sonipat district in Haryana. She is working with a network of women in Haryana, called ‘Sanjha Kadam’, and is doing her higher secondary education. As she thinks back, she says she used to be a very shy girl who did not feel comfortable when talking to people. There was an internal quest within her why she was not able to convey herself to others. On speaking to one of the facilitators from PRIA, she said: ‘I was not confident that whether whatever I am saying is right or not. So I preferred to stay silent.’ Nevertheless Sunita has enthusiasm to learn and looks forward to learning spaces. Since she has been working with the ‘Sanjha Kadam’ on various women issues in local areas, one of the constant challenges for her was community mobilisation and understanding the community needs in order to work on the issue more coherently. It was through various programmes of PRIA that she came to be a part of the action learning group, wherein the group was engaged in a participatory research process to develop a broader understanding of the issues concerning them and to act upon those issues through use of participatory tools like social map, problem tree, or focused group discussion. During one of the follow-up meetings, Sunita stated that getting engaged in the research process helped to remove her hesitation about talking with higher authorities. Learning about tools like a social map, problem tree, focused group discussion etc., engaged her in data collection and discussions with people of different levels: school-going students, their parents, school authorities and sarpanch. These interactions made her learn the skill to ask relevant questions and to develop her own perspective on issues of scheduled caste, and enhance her knowledge on important issues like educational vulnerability from the people’s perspective. The entire process has boosted her self-confidence, and now she is actively working on the issue of violence against women in Haryana through direct association with PRIA.”

(This is the case of Sunita from Sonipat district, Haryana. She now works with “Sanjha Kadam”, a network of women, directly involved with PRIA)
Context

In the Indian society, socio-cultural stratification has its roots in the foundations of caste, class and gender. Despite the enactment of constitutional acts to prevent labeling a person or a community on the basis of their caste identity, the practice has not experienced many significant changes over the years. Protective and development measures to detach them from the stereotyped identities of the untouchables, has in general met with serious restraints from the upper-caste members of the society. A lot of efforts from the side of government, civil society organisations (CSOs), and social activists have been directed to addressing the situation. But statistics on the overall developments of scheduled castes, with reference to specific and intersectoral development, reveals that they still live in a state that reflects disparity in all the indicators of human development.

The situation is grimmer among the Scheduled Caste (SC) women and girls because of their dual vulnerability – one for being women and second for belonging to the most marginalised community in the societal structure. Vulnerability of SC women gets trifurcated if they are poor. Fifty-one percent of SC women in rural areas and fifty-six percent of urban ones live below the poverty line. The employment options available to SC women are few. Other than working as exploited or bonded agricultural laborers, caste discrimination compels the most uneducated and illiterate Scheduled Caste women into degrading work, such as manual scavenging and manually cleaning dry latrines.

The everyday discrimination of SC women is further marked by mental, emotional and physical violence, which only raises the need to empower these young women to access the possibilities and opportunities that exist to safeguard them. One of the powerful ways is to engage the young generation of Scheduled castes in the process of self-reflection towards the issues and needs of the Scheduled Caste. The process requires involving the change-agents in understanding the problems of SCs through the voices of SCs themselves and to help them to critically analyse the situation and develop a holistic understanding of the issue. In order to hear those voices from the people, there is a need to significantly involve them in a participatory manner.
Towards this vision, the initiative adopted by PRIA used participatory research as a tool to accelerate the participation of young Scheduled Castes women in the process of social change, particularly in the context of gender and caste discrimination in the society. It was a joint initiative of PRIA and Dr. Ambedkar Study center, Kurukshetra University, Haryana wherein twelve SC women were engaged in research and policy planning so that they can play a more meaningful role at the local level. This initiative not only helped the women in generating their own knowledge about the existing practices of social discrimination in the society but also motivated them to challenge some of them. The academic institutions involved in the process found deeper meaning in their role of addressing issues that would influence policy dialogues and outcomes, particularly in the SC community.

**Participatory Research as a Tool for Social Change**

Knowledge has always been a major source of power and control. It has functioned as a factor reinforcing the division of society into “haves” and “have nots”, or the powerful and the powerless. Monopoly of knowledge has been accorded as one of the reasons for continual subjugation of the poor wherein production of knowledge, its certification and dissemination are
controlled by intellectual elites. The struggle to break this monopoly requires new tools which challenge the myth of elite control over production and use of knowledge.

Participatory strategies of social transformation have emphasized the participation of the people themselves in bringing about the desired power distribution. Participatory research is a method of inquiry, learning and change wherein becoming aware of the reality and learning about it is believed to be an act of changing that reality. This exercise thus involves the community in the entire research project, from the formulation of the problem and interpretation of the findings to planning corrective action based upon them.

**Engaging Scheduled Caste Girls for Social Change through Participatory Research – About the Initiative**

The initiative began with a training needs assessment conducted in five districts of Haryana, primarily to understand the perceptions of young SC women about the challenges that exist at the individual and institutional level, while accessing the schemes and benefits meant for them. The learnings from that assessment were used to develop a course module for a 3-day intensive training workshop. The workshop was attended by 30 SC girls who collectively identified education as one of the most important tools for their self-development. During the workshop itself they felt that due to caste and class discrimination SC girls get excluded from the educational processes. The training workshop helped to identify 12 young women who further wished to study the causes of educational exclusion in their area. Both PRIA and the university supported this effort of the girls and provided them with support. These twelve young women between the age group of 18 to 30 years, from 5 districts of Haryana (Sonipat, Ambala, Sirsa, Fatehabad and Kurukshetra), were involved in the entire initiative. Most of them are studying in colleges and universities while others are working in community-based organizations.

**Approach and Methodology**

These young women chose to explore the educational vulnerabilities of SC children in five districts of Haryana. The title of their research was “Primary Education and Dalit Children: Status in Five Districts of Haryana”.

From each district, researchers (SC women) selected 5 villages on the basis of such criteria as SC population, SC headed villages, vicinity of high schools, availability of government schools etc. Once the villages were selected, respondent groups of SC and non-SC children, parents of SC children, school authorities and village heads of the chosen villages were identified.

**Methods of Data Collection**

The researchers used participatory research comprising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A combination of conventional and new methods were used to elicit relevant and timely data in the most efficient ways possible. They were involved in qualitative discussions with the community, which helped them to dialogue with people involved in development on both ends (to one set of people who are involved in development and the other set for whom development is being done). This helped them in developing analytical skills and experiencing
realities more consciously. These potential young researchers were introduced to data collection tools such as focused group discussion, the “problem tree”, interview schedules or documenting case studies.

Stages of Research

Before formally beginning research with the women, it was necessary to build a common understanding of the objectives of undertaking that research, and what to do with its results. The process started with a workshop to jointly develop the research design and prepare research tools for data collection.

a) Developing the research design

The basic information to frame research questions came from the earlier study done by PRIA in five districts to identify the individual and institutional challenges for accessing educational resources provided by the government of Haryana. Once the basic design was prepared to carry out the research, a detailed plan of action was prepared to set timelines for each activity. This was the time for the researchers to prepare sets of tools to collect data in the field. Orientation on research tools was given to the young SC women.

- **Stage 1 – Social Mapping:** To talk about sensitive caste-based issues, people need to have trust in the researchers as well as the organization that they are associated with. Among the sample villages, there were villages where the women had to put in efforts initially for building rapport with the villagers. A social/resource map was used as a tool for both formal and informal interaction with villagers covering social, economic, cultural and political aspects of the life of the people living in those villages.

- **Stage 2 – Analysis of Social map:** Once a social map was prepared, analysis was done on the basis of the location of scheduled caste groups, the availability and accessibility of resources to them, and the number of schools present. The results of this analysis were shared with the villagers in order to validate the collected data, but also to help them understand their immediate environment.

- **Stage 3 – Focused group discussion (FGD) in SC habitation:** After informing the Sarpanch and the people concerned about the discussion and its purpose, focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in SC habitations. The purpose of FGDs was to engage people in discussions over SC rights and violations in terms of educational vulnerability of SC children. The discussion was facilitated by the researchers after they were given orientation on all of these tools.

- **Stage 4 – Construction of the problem tree and analysis:** After conducting FGDs, participants were asked to form pairs of two (if the group is larger) and they were requested to discuss any three main problems related to the educational vulnerability of SC children. Most of the problems identified by the community were related to socio-economic factors affecting the wellbeing of the community. Problems related to the attitude of parents, government officials and elected representatives were also prioritized in a few places. Among these three prioritised problems, the group selected the most critical problem affecting their lives and which they wanted to work upon immediately.
The problem tree was prepared on the basis of this identified problem and its cause and effect relationship.

- **Stage 5 – Data collection from School:** The researchers selected the schools that they had identified in the village. Preference was given to higher secondary schools. In cases where there were no secondary schools, high schools were taken into consideration. The principal of the school was approached and informed of the joint initiative of PRIA and KUK University primarily by these young women. Data collection from the school involved the following steps:

- **Stage 6 – Interview Schedule:** Data were also collected through an interview schedule from the following groups:

  1. *Drop-out children, belonging to SC category:* From the initial interaction in a village, four drop-out children belonging to the SC category were identified and interviewed about the reasons and challenges they faced in continuing education and such relevant questions as mentioned in the designed interview schedule.
  2. *Parents of Drop-out children:* Interviews of the parents of these four dropouts were taken, guided by the interview schedule.
  3. *School authorities:* Interviews of four school authorities, including the principal and three school teachers (two female and one male teacher) were conducted in each village. Their perspectives on the educational vulnerability of SCs, the enrollment and retention rates of SCs in their schools, and suggestions for improvements of the educational system were recorded.
  4. *Village Head (Sarpanch):* The Sarpanch of the village was also interviewed in order to understand the Sarpanch’s view of the educational status of SCs, benefits and schemes available for education to SCs etc.

- **Stage 7 – Case Study:** The young researchers documented a case study of drop-out children after in-depth interviews with them. From every village, one case study was documented which presented the details of a drop-out SC girl in the village. These case studies gave detailed contextual analysis of the factors affecting the educational process of SC children, particularly girls.
b) Data Analysis

After data collection, a two day workshop was organized for the girls to collectively analyse the data and prepare a draft report on the basis of the findings. The method used for data analysis involved:

- Providing theoretical knowledge on data analysis and how to develop the master sheet;
- Handholding support to quantify the qualitative responses, giving codes to the responses and filling the codes in the master sheet;
- Handholding support was provided to calculate frequency.

To make it convenient for the researchers and to help them understand the process of data analysis, they were made to analyse the data district-wise and in their own groups, rather than having a collective analysis of the state. The FGD and the problem tree were also analyzed by the researchers using tools of observation from the process report that they had prepared following each FGD. They compiled the major findings and gave a presentation on it. On the basis of these presentations a detailed report was prepared by them.
The whole process helped them to understand the scientific procedure of reaching conclusions of various research topics and also helped them to identify and prioritize issues concerning the people researched. This process also gave them confidence that research is not a tool which can only be applied by intellectual elites but that they themselves are also capable of doing it if they are given the necessary inputs.

c) Post Research

- **Reflection meeting with Researchers**

One month after the research process, a reflection meeting was organized for the researchers. This was to capture their collective and individual experiences. They shared the challenges faced by them, what they had learned from the entire process, and what they thought to be the future steps of action.

- **Sharing at National level**

A small workshop was also organized at national level where the researchers were able to present their work and reflect about the process. During this national meeting, the women presented the major findings from their study and also their reflections on their experience with the use of research as a tool for social action.

**Outcomes and Lessons Learned**

The importance and efficiency of action research lies in the fact that it establishes an equal partnership between the researchers and the participants, and at some point or other both parties develop a better understanding of the context. It is only through a collaborative consultation and reflection process that the process of critical understanding and analysis can begin.

**Outcomes for SC women**

The entire initiative not only helped in building the capacities of SC women as researchers but also acted as an eye-opener for the community and, most importantly, for the academicians. Initially, when this process started, not only the girls themselves but the academic facilitators were in doubt about the ability of the girls to use research as a tool for community benefits.

Staying in the university campus, traveling from their districts and villages to the university, interacting with faculty members and students, all these experiences served as major boosters for these girls to get involved in research work, something considered as “elite” in their communities.

Constructing the problem tree and other such tools helped them to develope deeper insights into the root causes of exclusion and envisage the impact on the community. The entire process engaged them in reflective discussions and analytical observation of their own realities.

Building capacities of women through participatory research was ensured at three levels:
• **Building Perspectives** – not only about the research objectives and their significance to them and the outcomes of the process but also on issues like gender discrimination, exclusion of particular communities from developmental processes, constitutional safeguards and others of similar significance.

• **Building knowledge** – on understanding the processes of participatory research, on various data collection tools, on various schemes and issues concerning dalits.

• **Building skills** – to articulate and prepare their action plans, to take the initiative of collecting data from various villages of the district on their own, to communicate with different interest groups, and to establish contact with different institutions.

Since the methods used were participatory, the discussions did give the communities food for thought about the educational status of dalits and about ways ahead to improve the status and quality of education. Suggestions were put forward by them, and they engaged in dialogue processes through group discussions that helped them to determine the direction for future action. This entire process involved them in reflective discussions and brought them to critically observe their own realities.

The entire initiative helped the researchers to gain new knowledge, build perspectives and sufficient skills so that they qualified to work as change agents in their communities. They explored the realities consciously, and they were capable of channeling critical thinking into action.

**Outcomes for the academic partners and facilitators**

As discussed in the above section, the whole process started with doubts about the ability of the dalit women to conduct a well-designed research study. This was the first time the university was getting involved in any study wherein the researchers were not trained researchers. The academic partners were worried about the authenticity of the data and also the ability to prepare master sheets for data analysis. But contrary to these skeptical expectations, the group of girls not only prepared the details of the research design and guides for using the tools, they did the entire data analysis and presented their report at a public gathering.

The data gathered by the girls along with the case studies presented the reality of educational exclusion of the dalit children in schools. These were important results for the Center for Ambedkar Studies of Kurukshetra University, which plays a key role in the disbursement of scholarships and other educational benefits to the community.

Initially, the center felt reluctant to simplify methods, terminologies and formats in order to support the girls in conducting research, but after listening to the insights and knowledge of the girls about the process of exclusion, discrimination and their affect on their lives, they were quite ready to adapt and reframe the entire research design. The university not only eased down their entire system of data analysis, but also supported the girls in the field during the time of data collection.
Lessons Learned

The entire process was conceived as an educational process both for the facilitators and for the researchers. The close and active interaction between the respondents mainly dalit and non-dalit students, the parents of the children and the authorities involved in the management of educational systems at local levels ultimately aimed at action towards solving the problems at hand.

Literacy course, Source: Nishu Kaul

The most challenging task was to simplify the research process and make it interesting to both the learners and the community, so that they were prepared to accept the girls as researchers. Even while conducting focused group discussions in schools and villages, emphasis was laid on retaining the interest of respondents by using energizers or some fun games. Researchers were consciously trained to involve the respondents in such activities, so that they became able to face the challenge when collecting data on their own.

After initial data gathering, the Dalit girls involved in the process started to work on the problem areas themselves. They started to interact with the parents and school authorities and discussed the problems which dalit children face when they attempt to complete their education. Their
commitment with the issue and their involvement with the communities were very visible in the entire process.

The creation of knowledge and its application are always seen as something which only professionally trained experts are able to do. Participatory research breaks and challenges this notion of knowledge production. When the idea was conceived to prepare dalit girls as researchers by professionally qualified experts, the only outcome envisaged was the skill building of the girls. But as soon as things started moving, the entire process took the shape of a social investigation process with full and active support of the community members. Discussions, dialogues followed by action for development and an educational process of mobilization for development were initiated. In the end, we could see mutual respect for the capabilities and the potential of the girls growing among professional experts, communities and among the girls themselves.

**Conclusion**

This is just a beginning for the girls who are now equipped with a new set of skills which help them to analyze their immediate environment more critically, and also to relate the factors which are affecting their lives to the outer world. They have started to demand the rights to which they are entitled, and to call for reforms in the overall institutional mechanisms so that they will provide the conditions which are necessary for the development of their identity rights. The girls are now ready to share what they have learned with the communities and with the institutions which are working for the development of SC communities. They also wish to undertake similar experiments in their own communities and play the role of social change agents. But this will require further support from the various actors, from civil society as well as from local government institutions, from the media, from local academic institutions, and, most importantly, from their own communities.

**Notes**

1 Haryana is a state in India. Formed in 1966, it is one of two newly created states carved out of the greater Punjab Province
2 A sarpanch is an elected head of a village level statutory institution of local self-government called the gram panchayat (village government) in India and Pakistan.
4 Scheduled Castes are the Indian population groupings that are explicitly recognized by the constitution of India under article 341, previously called the “depressed classes” by the British and otherwise known as dalits in India.
5 The Center for Ambedkar Studies is an academic wing of Kurukshetra University based in Kurukshetra district of Haryana.
7 Sarpanch is the head of Gram Panchayat. Gram Panchayat is the constitutionally formed local governance institution existing at the village level.
8 Providing someone with guidance, assistance, encouragement or aid.