PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL (PRA) : BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY AND APPLICATIONS IN EXTENSION RESEARCH

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Since last two decades most phenomenal changes occurred in the development scenario is paradigm shift in approaches to bring real stakeholders under the preview of formulation and implementation of development programs. The emphasis under new paradigm is learning from field, learning to respect and recognize field knowledge and experience, listening to alternative perspectives, appreciating other people's reality and learning through "hand on". Field results have amply showed that the conventional approaches and solutions to development issues are increasingly becoming less effective and are seldom yielding the desired results. Such paradigm shift is taking place across civil societies, state institutions, donor agencies, project management, research bodies, technology development institutions and other sectors related to social development. The winds of changes are on and there is a realization in most quarters that the challenge of development lies in its relevance to the people, as participants/citizens and development initiatives are best sought in the realm of people-centered development (Sah, 1999).

Background of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) :

Most prominent conventional methodology of development approach i.e. Questionnaire survey is mode of development from above which basically reflects worldview of specialists and consider stakeholders as passive entities neglecting their worldview (Mukherjee, 1995).The disillusionment emerged on development scenario due to unsatisfactory results obtained from large scale implementation of conventional approaches (Chambers, 1997) gave sufficient impetus for evolution and development of field oriented methods since 1970s.

However, prior to that in 1950s and 1960s it was widely believed that all it took to improve the economic situation of developing countries was financial inputs and modern technology. In the 1970s, however it became clear that transfer of technology did not solve the problem of most people in developing countries. Development workers and researchers began to understand the complex relationship between environment, economy, and policies in rural societies and began to view and tackle the various aspects of rural life as part of an integral system. It was realized that a system develop through adaptive change rather than by linear progress, that it is dynamic and its part interact by influencing each other. It is not possible to effect change in one element of the system in isolation without affecting the other parts. Consequently the system as a whole has to be understood in order to identify and help bring about desired changes. Thus the farming system research (FSR) was evolved.

Along with the emergence of FSR and shortcomings of questionnaire survey, new

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research technique was developed to achieve more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of rapidly changing and highly uncertain societies and communities, called **Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)**.

Meaning of PRA :

PRA is a research and development technique developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by researchers in international development as an alternative and complement to conventional sample surveys. PRA is a way of learning from and with, community members to investigate, analyze and evaluate constraints and opportunities, and make informed and timely decisions regarding development projects (Theis and Grady, 1991).

PRA is a means of collecting different kind of data, identifying and mobilizing intended groups and evoking their participation and also opening ways in which intended groups can participate in decision-making, project design, execution and monitoring (Mukherjee, 1997).

Principles of PRA :

1. Triangulation–A form of cross checking. Accuracy is achieved through diverse information and different kind of sources of information, not statistical replicability. Triangulation is done in relation to composition of the team, sources of information and mix of techniques.

2. Multidisciplinary Team–The members of the PRA team should have different skills and backgrounds. The different viewpoints of team members will complement each other and will provide a more comprehensive picture, which gives deeper insights. The PRA team should always include women and, whenever possible, community members.

3. Mix of Techniques–The PRA techniques are taken from a wide range of possible tools, which are tailored to the specific requirements of the study. PRA is concerned more with analysis of difference rather than looking for representativeness of results or data collected. It is looking for diverse rural events, different processes and forces explaining various relationships in rural communities (Mukherjee, 1993).

4. Flexibility and Informality–Plans and research methods are semi-structured and revised, adapted, and modified as PRA fieldwork proceeds. Nothing is rigid with PRA, flexibility and informality provides better opportunity for consideration of community worldview by outsider in the PRA team.

5. In the Community–The main aspect of PRA is learning from, with, and by members of the community–PARTICIPATION! Most of the activities are done jointly with community members or by them on their own e.g., planning, mapping and analysis.

6. Optimal Ignorance and appropriate Imprecision–The PRA avoids the unnecessary detail, accuracy, and over collection of data which is not really needed for the purpose of PRA. The team asks itself: "***what kind of information is required, for what purpose, and how accurate does it have to be***?"

7. On the Spot Analysis–Learning takes place in the field and the analysis of information gathered is an integral part of the fieldwork itself. The team constantly reviews and analyzes its findings in order to determine in which direction to proceed.

8. Offsetting Biases and Being Self-Critical–The PRA team actively seeks out the poorest, women and other disadvantaged groups in remote areas, during worst time of the year, at any time of day, and avoids talking only to the well-off, the better educated, the articulate, and the men. The team also has to be careful to analyze its own biases in order to prevent PRA from

turning into development tourism and collecting of rumors.

PRA Methods :

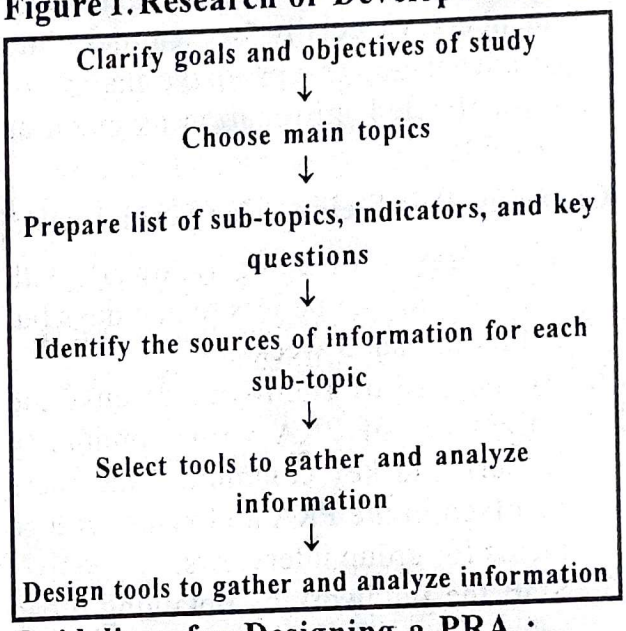
There is continuous discovery of participatory methods that tries to provide appropriate expression of particular issue focusing utmost attention on the ease in use and expression by community members. The whole methods can be divided broadly into two categories:

(i) Methods Supportive of PRA–The outsider is active in data generation and collection with little or no involvement of the villagers concerned. Under this category primary and secondary data review for gaining knowledge of rural situations is the method, which support the PRA and provide checklist for further analysis with PRA methods in the field. The direct observation of the rural situation can also be supportive method of the learning process in a PRA exercise.

(ii) Methods With Direct Participation–Under this category of methods, the villagers are involved right from the beginning and it is they who perform their own analysis and generate data. There are different PRA methods involving direct participation of villagers viz., semi-structured interviewing, focus group discussion, preference ranking and scoring, pair wise ranking, matrix ranking, transect, diagrams, pie-chart, mapping, time trends, venn diagram, innovation assessment, problem ranking etc.

Application of PRA–Success of PRA much depends upon the way in which it is designed and put in the field for its implementation. Understanding the principles and methods of PRA is not only pre-requisites for success of PRA in the field. There are dos and don'ts about which PRA team must be aware before practicing the PRA in the field situation. First step in this direction is to have a well-articulated plan of research or development activities (figure 1) with which a PRA team is concerned.

Figure 1. Research or Development Plan



Guidelines for Designing a PRA :

1. In developing a plan distinguish clearly between different levels: topics, sub topics, key questions and indicators to avoid confusion during the fieldwork.
2. Start with something easy, as this makes the team and the informants more relaxed (design the plan and tools accordingly).
3. When clarifying goals and objectives, topics and sub topics, sources of information, indicators and designing the research tools, run through a list of questions starting with: what, why, who, for whom, how, where, when, what for, which, with what.
4. Review secondary sources, interview key informants and use your own knowledge to identify the main topics, hypotheses and key issues of PRA.
5. Establish a framework of reference, which is then filled in with more detailed information like a puzzle. Clarify what needs to be understood before moving to the next level of knowledge.

6. Move from the material to ideological and from general to specific topics.
7. Think of analysis early on, using an analytical tool throughout the PRA.
8. Think of ways to involve community members, (specially women and other disadvantaged groups) in the analysis of the collected information as much as possible.

Carrying Out Fieldwork : Guidelines :

1. The duration of doing fieldwork with PRA should not be less than 4 days but not more than 3 weeks.
2. At the site of fieldwork discuss the objectives of PRA with community leaders and key community members involved in the PRA and make arrange ments for group interviews.
3. Start the fieldwork by obtaining broad background information, which will form a basis of knowledge for further inquiries.
4. Start with something simple (e.g., direct observation, key informant interviews, non-controversial issues) before approaching more complex issues and more sophisticated methods.
5. Identify and carefully select community members and key informants.
6. Keep checklist to remind team members of important issues, which need further inquiry.
7. Make use of six helpers viz., **who, what, where, when, why and how**.
8. Structure research time to allow for team interaction, changing the agenda, and free (unplanned) time.
9. Make a plan for every day of the fieldwork based on the analysis of collected information. Don't continue collecting data without a clear plan.
10. Review fieldwork daily with the team, going over all notes and evaluating the fieldworks and the methods. Discuss what mistakes were made, what lessons were learned, and what needs to be changed. Avoid the dangers that team members learn wrong behavior pattern and wrong ways of using tools. Team leaders should keep a list of frequent mistakes made during fieldwork and remind the team to avoid them.
11. Adapt to unpredictable situations and turns constraints into opportunities (e.g., if a group of people gathers during an interview, turn it into a group discussion).
12. Present your analyses to key informants to confirm and cross checks your findings and conclusions. If your analysis is wrong this will let you know.
13. Don't lecture. Look, listen, and learn.
14. Be self-critical. Ask yourself: whom do we meet and hear? What do we see? Whom don't we meet and hear? What don't we see?
15. Show interest in learning from the people. Respect the community members and their knowledge. Ask for their advice and be sensitive.
16. Include women and children; don't concentrate on only one segment of the population.
17. Hold an analysis group discussion to interview and discuss the findings with community members and identify the further steps to be taken.
18. The findings of the PRA derived from fieldwork must be believable.

Guidelines for Analysis of PRA Findings :

1. Analysis is a continuous process of reviewing the information as it is collected, classifying it, formulating additional questions, verifying information, and drawing conclusions. Analysis is the process of making sense of the collected information.
2. Prepare a list of key issues and arrange your findings according to this list. Re-

arrange breakup, and reassemble pieces of data. Sort and shift through information and look for patterns, differences, variations and contradictions. Weigh the relative importance of the information. Be self-critical.

3. Formulate a series of questions based on the research topics (including new questions which may have come up during the field work) and try to answer them with the help of the collected information.
4. Discuss each subtopic in turn, summarize the results, and draw conclusions based on the information gathered during the fieldwork.
5. Use diagrams, matrices, ranking methods, and other analytical tools.
6. For further clarification tabulate the information. Tabulating also helps the team avoid relying on general impressions rather than facts.
7. Check your findings and conclusions by presenting them to key informants or to a group of community members.
8. Findings have to be consistent and must not contradict each other. Two opposite statements cannot be true at same time. If the findings contradict the secondary sources or other sources you must be able to explain why. Your findings have to be believable.

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