

LEARNING PAR FROM THE SCHOOL OF LIFE*

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1. Introduction

Motivation for Participatory Action Research (PAR) is usually generated by historical and personal impulses. My own initiation in PAR has its root in the liberation war of Bangladesh that inspired me to want to see the heroic people of the country carve out their own path of development after liberation with their collective creativity¹. My interaction with some

¹ Reading recently Rabindranath Tagore's socio-economic writings on India's independence struggle in early 19th century, I have found the same notion, expressed powerfully in his concept of "atmoshakti" (self-strength) and in his vision of the human primarily as a creative being. In my view, as I have discussed in a recent paper (Rahman 2003), these writings of Tagore, together with his own practical experiments in promoting community self-development in rural Bengal, qualify to be regarded as the roots of Participation and Self-reliance thinking and Action Research in India. It is interesting to note that my own initiation in this direction has also been inspired by the spirit of the independence struggle of Bangladesh.

extraordinary popular initiatives that sprung in various places of Bangladesh after its independence consolidated this inspiration. These initiatives, and the failure of conventional ‘top-down’ efforts at development, convinced me that development must be predominantly ‘by the people’ themselves, however short of material resources they might be. Searching for the role of outsiders in such ‘people's self-development’ (PSD) (Rahman 1994d)², through interaction with and experimentation in grassroots initiatives and reflection thereupon - i.e. through *praxis* -, PAR soon emerged as a central element in my conception of external activism to promote PSD. Simultaneously, different dimensions and questions in PAR started revealing themselves asking for conceptualization and resolution. From a professional economist I turned into a ‘**student of (popular) life**’, often coaxing and challenging life to reveal its best. In this paper I trace my learning of PAR from the school of life, and my progressive conceptualization of this kind of activism in social research.

2. Toward self-reliance and holistic awareness

I was trained in a school of development thinking which viewed ‘development assistance’ as an essential ingredient of development of so-called ‘developing’ countries. Support of the United States to the genocide in Bangladesh by the Pakistan army in 1971 repelled within me, like in many other Bangladeshis, the thought of seeking US development ‘assistance’ after independence. While the United States came back to Bangladesh after independence in the guise of a ‘friend’ offering ‘development assistance’ obviously with open and hidden strings attached to it, people and youth in many walks of life in the country were seeking a dignified path of development without surrendering autonomy to foreign powers. This urge was translated into actual development action at local levels in many parts of the country, in which people got together and mobilized what they themselves had, and initiated development action without waiting for outside assistance.³ Among these, a ‘self-reliance movement’ in 60 villages in the district of Rangpur in northern Bangladesh shone most brilliantly by its total rejection of any outside financial or material assistance from within and outside the country, moving on with

² As I view the term today, the word “self” in PSD is redundant insofar as “development” is an organic process that can be helped but not shaped from outside. I have nevertheless retained this term in my discourses for emphasis.

³ A documentation in Bengali of many such initiatives is given in Rahman 1997.

diverse development initiatives of their own, telling visitors like me that *"if we want assistance from outside then our beloved leader will have to beg for us from foreign countries; we do not want him to suffer this humiliation for us, and so we do not want anything from outside.* Obviously, to the villagers participating in this movement the 'leader' symbolized the nation itself whose humiliation they rejected. This rejection of outside assistance by this self-reliance movement stayed firm during the great famine of 1974 which hurt the Rangpur district the hardest: its 'self-reliant' villages rejected the gruel kitchens government had set up in gestures to feed the starving, pooled all surplus food found in their households, devised honourable work for those who were starving, and gave them and their families one meal a day in exchange for such work to keep them alive.

This was self-reliance awareness in its purest form, in a society traditionally given to dependence thinking, which emerged from an historical struggle for self-determination leading to independence.

As an intellectual this was revelation or confirmation to me of three truths:

- (a) that a people however short of resources they may be, can keep moving forward by mobilizing whatever they have, while those waiting upon outside resources may be wasting their time and energy and/or falling into the trap of patron/client relations with outside quarters surrendering their self-determination;**
- (b) self-reliance awareness can emerge in people traditionally given to dependence thinking and a culture of dependence and even with very meager material resources, in response to appropriate stimulation;**
- (c) development – even 'economic development' – is not a question just of economics which seemed to have appropriated the term, but is a holistic question where psychology, among other disciplines, plays a vital role.**

3. More on the role of psychology in development

About the same time as the Rangpur self-reliance movement was marching on, the teenagers of a village – Katchubari Krishtapur (KK) – in Thakurgaon Thana, also in North Bengal, launched a novel literacy drive. As strategies of their literacy campaign they assembled small children every dawn to parade through the village with slogans like *"shame to the thumb sign!"*; *"those who want to give the thumb sign get out of our village"*; they went to the clerks in various offices in the town where villagers had to go and would

give their the thumb sign for various services, and arranged with the clerks that they would ask those from their village who could not sign their names, to give the 'nose sign' instead, declaring that "*the rules had changed after independence*" ! As the clerks cooperated, villagers of KK could not face this humiliation and registered in the literacy centres set up by the teenagers. These teenage 'development pioneers' of the village went to the death bed of an old woman and told the dying woman that they could not send her as an illiterate to give her thumb sign in the register for entry into the afterworld as a migrant from their village as this would be a great shame for their village, and so she must learn to write before she could migrate!

This extraordinary literacy campaign completely wiped out illiteracy from the village within a few months, registering KK as the first ever completely literate village in the country. Once more, this was a psychological campaign - putting people to public shame for their illiteracy -, with trivial economic resources, that promoted educational development in this village . It was, furthermore, a totally grassroots innovation of teenagers - some of whom had passed and some had failed the high school -, **demonstrating that people's creativity does not depend on formal education, and given the needed stimulus can outperform the most educated in the society** - in this case, including the educational planners of the country including myself who were calculating how many mass literacy centres, teachers, stationeries, etc. would be needed to reduce illiteracy in the country by 'x' percentage points in the coming 'y' years, ending inevitably with a deficit budget to submit to foreign donors for 'development assistance' !

These two experiences together marked a turning point in my intellectual life, and I became a 'former economist' entering into early schooling as a 'student of life'.

There remained the question of whether the student with his or her pre-leanings could contribute anything at all to **people's self-development**, and the answer to this question kept unfolding from my subsequent *praxis*.

4. 'Action research' in participatory relief distribution

During the severe flood and famine in the country in 1974 I led a relief team of students and teachers of Dhaka University, which went to a number of villages in *Brahmanbaria* district to do relief work. Low-income people of the flood-affected villages there had been without food for days, and

whatever food and other relief materials we had taken there was a drop in the ocean. I decided that distribution of such scarce relief to these starving people should be done not by us but by the people themselves. As hundreds of villagers, in the first village where we anchored our boat, rushed to us in mad scramble for relief rice, I invited them to collectively identify the most starving among them to qualify for relief. Elders pushed their children to us, pleading that they had been starving for two, three or four days. I told them that there might be some child starving for four days, and shouldn't they point at him/her first? Slowly the villagers turned, and started vigorously arguing among themselves about who needed relief most. Then some of them identified one family as the worst victim of the flood. I invited the entire crowd to debate this proposal and inquire if there was a worse suffering family, and to recommend to us unanimously about the first family we should help. In the end we had a unanimous recommendation, and our first ration was given to that family. Then I asked for the next family we should help, and got a unanimous recommendation again. We helped only four families in that village in this way, and then said we had so little relief materials that we had to go to some other village with the rest, and asked them if they would show us which other villages we should go to where there was acute suffering. The villagers all cooperated, and we left them, most of them but the four families we had helped left starving. And the villagers all came to the shore and blessed us for our mission to help the neediest.

This experience in all its sequences was exactly repeated in three other villages.

In one village a well-to-do villager invited our whole team – about twenty – to take lunch at his house: were we not hungry and tired doing relief work like this all morning? As he kept pestering us I said finally, *"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? If you have surplus food in your house shouldn't you not be helping your fellow starving villagers rather than treating us who you know are well fed?"* The man kept quiet and followed us throughout our search in the village for starving families. When we were done and were alighting our boat he came to us and said, *"you are exceptional people – may God bless your mission."*

In another village I called all the women to tell them we had only two *sarees* to give in their village, and asked their help in identifying whom we should give them. The first reaction from the village women who rushed at us, again, was to claim a *saree* for oneself, showing one's totally tattered *saree* through which the body showed embarrassingly. I asked if they knew of some grown up girl who could not come out even to show this because she

had nothing on at all, and if so wouldn't they as her aunts recommend her for help first? The woman nearest to us who had been pleading incessantly for a *saree*, hung her head and turned and twisted the edge of her *saree* this way and that as if dialoguing with two sides of herself, and finally said, "*there are two girls in the yonder huts who have nothing on and cannot come out – you give the sarees to them, I do not want any*". The other women also hung their heads and agreed, and our job was done.

This momentary 'action research' taught us that

- (a) **participatory distribution of relief materials, for that matter of any materials in short supply in relation to need, is the fairest and most democratic way of distribution. It also saves external friends from making decisions for which they are obviously not competent;**
- (b) **People not used to such participatory processes need some catalytic invocation /leadership/challenge/'animation' to turn from self-seeking to a collective search for a democratic/moral order; but they can be so turned – once more, a psychological process. "**

5. From 'primary' to 'high' school in the 'school of life'

Looking for fellow 'students of life' among professional intellectuals I found deep companionship in Niranjana Mehta of India⁴ whom I met at the Asian Development Institute in 1975, and G.V.S. de Silva (affectionately called "GV") of Sri Lanka whom I met there in the following year. We decided to get together end of 1976 to write a monograph together on Self-reliance. But GV wrote to me around September that he had decided not to join us in this project, because he *only dreamt of self-reliance and had not seen it*. What a respect for practice as against abstract thinking! We cancelled our project and, thanks to Niranjana's contact with the *Bhoomi Sena* movement and organization of an indigenous tribe (*adivasi*) in Palghar Taluk near Mumbai in India, went together to study this movement that was asserting the self-determination of this tribe (de Silva, Mehta, Wignaraja & Rahman, 1979).

Preferenece of *Swaraswati* to *Lakshmi*

- *Do you know who is Lakshmi is and who is Swaraswati?*
- *Adivasi: yes.*
- *Who is Lakshmi?*

⁴ Then Director the National Institute of Bank Management at Mumbai.

- *Adivasi: rice, clothes, hut.*
- *And Swaraswati?*
- *Adivasi: Sawkar's knowledge (Sawkar is the oppressive money lender in the area)*
- *If you have could have only one of them, what is your preference?*
- *Adivasi: Swaraswati.*
- *Why?*
- *If everyone has knowledge, then no one can cheat others. Then only we can have true equality.*

We got this profound anecdote on the *adivasis* of Palghar soon after we were in Mumbai, on the importance these *adivasis* gave to knowledge vis-à-vis alleviation of their material poverty. And as we sat with their leaders to discuss their movement they told us sharply:

"We need outside help for analysis and understanding of our situation and experience, but not for telling us what we should do. An outsider who comes with ready-made solutions and advice is worse than useless. He must first understand from us what our questions are, and help us articulate the questions better and then help us to find solutions. Outsiders also have to change. He alone is a friend who helps us to think about our problems on our own".
(Rahman 2000, 33).

The urge of such oppressed people for **intellectual self-reliance** was my first major lesson in this 'high school'. Along with this was their clear articulation of **the need for outsiders to help them achieve intellectual self-reliance rather than solve problems for them.**

Thus defining a basic role for friends from outside, the *Bhoomi Sena* leaders conceptualized for us a central task, as we saw it, of 'Participatory Action Research'.

'Lok chetna jagaran'

Bhoomi Sena had the services of an outsider, Dutta Savle, an educationist-activist from the Poona Institute of Education, and also a graduate outsider-turned-insider in Nagesh Halkar working as a staff of the organization, to help raise the intellectual capabilities of its people. Their method consisted of (a) organizing '*shibirs*' (camps) in which oppressed *adivasis* were

invited in groups of 40 or so, first to share their experiences of oppression and then to analyze the structural conditions that caused and enabled similar oppression on everyone as a common phenomenon; then to explore what they could do together to fight such oppression since they were together victims of a common oppressive structure. (b) As the people thus 'awakened' took different types of collective action to face oppression in different localities, without any 'centre' dictating their strategies of struggle, the people were invited to periodically get together for sharing and together reflecting on mutual experiences to enrich each others' struggles and to initiate joint struggles if they would so decide – a process of collective struggle that was totally participatory, decentralized, democratic, and 'spontaneous' in which the 'centre' (*Bhoomi Sena* as an organization) played the role of a catalyst and facilitator only. The cycle of collective reflection and struggle together constituted the people's 'praxis', progressively enhancing their intellectual understanding that was conceptualized in the movement as "*Lok chetna jagoron*" ('raising people's awareness')⁵.

Meaning of 'self-reliance'

Self-reliance was a fundamental concept in the *Bhoomi Sena* movement. It saw both intellectual and material self-reliance as imperatives for their full self-determination and for its assertion. Self-reliance was not *autarky* for them, but a combination of material and mental staying power that could resist external domination. But they saw the need for outside help, both by way of initial intellectual guidance as well as, at times of acute material shortage, material help to survive. Self-reliance to *Bhoomi Sena* was a (human) 'spirit' that urged, as it were, to give itself expression and assert itself, but through a 'body' (brain and brawn) and an environment with their limitations which could be overcome but only progressively. In the process of overcoming these limitations the spirit of self-reliance has to unite with its opposite – dependence on outside help -, but it has constantly to be conscious of and committed to its mission. Self-reliance was an urge that was uncompromising in what it wanted but had to compromise, at times, in the process of obtaining it.

This, in turn, as we learnt, **challenged the role of outsiders who wanted to assist such people in attaining their self-reliance – such assistance has to**

⁵ akin to Paulo Freire's term 'conscientization' using, however, all-out social analysis rather than literacy as an entry point to social analysis.

be a self-liquidating task calling for the deepest sensitivity and analysis as to whether their assistance would enhance or reduce dependence, a question that must be explicitly put on the table for constant review by both sides of the relation.

People's power as 'countervailing power'

And we also learnt the meaning of people's **empowerment**, i.e. people's power. *Bhoomi Sena* had realized that as the people needed a central organization to promote people's power the people also needed their autonomy vis-à-vis such organization in order to be truly able to exercise their power. True people's power is spontaneous, unrestricted by dictates of even an organization created by the people. And there may at times be need for the people even to challenge their own organization if it exhibits centralist tendencies. In this sense **people's power is in the ultimate analysis 'countervailing power'**, fighting through its own organization – their own 'formal power' - if one exists, against other powers seeking to dominate them, but ready to fight also its own organization if such need arises. As I conceptualized subsequently, people's power as "*Countervailing power is a living, collective consciousness and a vigilance of the people against the abuse of formal power [whether of others or the people's own], and a capability to resist such abuse and to assert people's will if formal power deviates --to assert, through people's participation, that people must participate.*" (Rahman, 1981, 45; Rahman 2000, 116)

6. Participatory Research with *Bhoomi Sena*

As we were studying *Bhoomi Sena*, a 'school' of 'participatory research' (PR) as it was then being called more commonly, was gaining ground, notably through the network of the International Centre of Adult Education based in Toronto, Canada, and the work of Orlando Fals-Borda and other colleagues in Latin America. Attracted by the philosophy of PR we wanted to study *Bhoomi Sena* as an exercise in PR and asked leaders of *Bhoomi Sena* if we could study their movement in collaboration with them. *Bhoomi Sena* responded positively. We spent weeks, individually and as a team, visiting the movement and studying it with the movement's leaders and cadres, attended their 'shibirs', and held joint workshops with the movement's leaders and cadres to discuss it. *Bhoomi Sena's* cadres themselves independently collected information from the villages for the study and wrote notes in *marathi* language as inputs to the study which we

got translated for our purpose. In the end we wrote up a draft of the study and presented it to *Bhoomi Sena* for comments and *for vetting*. We asked them if we could publish the study and whether they would be co-authors of it with us. *Bhoomi Sena* deliberated on this among themselves, and told us that the study and their participation in it had helped the movement in its understanding of what they were doing and in seeking its road forward, and that they were distributing among the *adivasis* in Marathi their own notes prepared in course of the study as well as important learnings they had from interaction with us. They approved publication of the study, with some editing, as this might benefit them by way of drawing solidarity of outsiders with their movement, but that they did not care for authorship of the study .

"We acknowledge receipt of your application for friendship!"

Before leaving I asked whether they would regard us as their friends. They discussed among themselves, laughed, and said, "***we acknowledge receipt of your application for friendship!***" What a deeply careful stance vis-à-vis even apparently well-meaning friendly outsiders, and what a powerful yet relaxed assertion of self-determination!

My ‘high school’ studentship was extremely fruitful in giving me what I, and Orlando Fals Borda with whom I have had a close comradeship ever since he read our *Bhoomi Sena* study, have viewed as the basic principles of PAR. (Fals Borda 2002, 27)

7. Sensitization of ‘animators’ – Sri Lanka

Having now ‘seen’ self-reliance in *Bhoomi Sena*, GV told us, "I shall not write about it, I shall ‘do it!’" This resulted in a project in Sri Lanka conceived by GV called "Cadre Training and Action Research in Self-reliant Rural Development" launched in 1977. Mehta and I joined in an initial seven-day workshop at Colombo for ‘sensitization’ of ‘animators’ as we coined the term. As I conceptualized the term in a previous paper (Rahman 1994d, 156),

“The term ‘animation’, with its specific connotation in grassroots work, means, in the very literal spirit of the word, *animating* the underprivileged people to regard themselves as the principal actors in their lives and not as subordinates to other social classes, to stand up with self-esteem, to develop a critical understanding of the conditions of their lives and to express and

assert themselves through collective action to meet life's challenges. The central spirit behind this concept of animation in grassroots work is the view of men and women as *creative beings* and the desire to see the creative possibilities of the underprivileged people released – people who are often locked in states of mental dependence and/or apathy and do not exercise their creative potential as much as they could in a given social situation. The scope of creative action to solve problems and to face difficult situations is considerably greater for the [underprivileged] through collective rather than through individual [family] action, so that animation is particularly addressed to generating a spirit of solidarity and collective action among these people.”⁶

We conceptualized that the ‘key’ to ‘unlock’ the spirit of self-reliance of underprivileged people was an appropriately motivated and *sensitized* ‘animator’. Also that the animator should himself/herself experience (intellectual) self-reliance in order to be motivated to pass this on to the people – **this means that the animator himself or herself must not be taught but must be taken through a process of self-inquiry.** Such a process of self-inquiry would also give the would-be animator a fulfillment which s/he might also want to pass on to the people, for those who are ‘taught’ rather than stimulated to search for themselves in turn are prone to ‘teaching’ others in their charge rather than to stimulate them to search for themselves.

With this conceptualization we sought to ‘sensitize’ some twenty two recruits, selected from persons who had previously worked in different rural development projects, by asking them to search for themselves answers to

⁶ Subsequently, Tilakaratna at the invitation of the ILO's PORP programme introduced below, reviewed the studies and grassroots work of PORP in a seminal work, and conceptualized ‘animation’ and its partner concept “facilitation”, thus:

“People operate as animated subjects when they are able to investigate, critically reflect on and analyze the social reality on their own, perceive self-possibilities for change, take initiatives and engage in critical review of their ongoing actions as a regular practice. The role of animation is therefore to assist the people to build up the above capacities, and a knowledge base to think and act creatively to transform their realities.” (Tilakaratna 1987: 23)

On the term “facilitation” Tilakaratna has explained:

“While animation by breaking mental barriers begins to show possibilities for change, facilitation is a task of assisting the [underprivileged] to break the practical barriers to action. External interveners with their formal education, wider knowledge of social contexts, social contacts and status derived from affiliation to a formal organization such as a ‘development agency’, are able to act as resource persons to people's groups to help overcome some of their practical problems.” (*Op cit.*, 35)

two major questions one after the other: (1) why their previous work could not stimulate people's self-reliant initiatives – what was wrong in their project conceptions, their own styles of relating with the people, etc.; (2) if now their charge was to stimulate villagers' self-reliant initiatives how would they want to try. There were no lectures, and Mehta and I in particular told them that not being Sri Lankans we did not know anything about their village conditions, so how could we give them any guidance?

The would-be animators were stimulated, and through collective and dialogical self-reflection came to their own tentative answers to the above two questions. They were then asked to go to villages and try the way they had concluded they wanted to try, and judge themselves and by mutual peer review whether they were meeting the challenge of promoting villagers' self-reliant initiatives. In this challenge some of them succeeded and some failed. In general it was seen that those who could animate villagers' collective self-inquiry on the conditions of their lives and on improving their conditions before seeking to stimulate actual action did better (Tilakaratna 1987).

"He removed the rust from our brain!"

A remarkable case was animation work with economically very poor female coir yarn producers who were coaxed on and on to search for themselves as to why, notwithstanding the hard work they did every day, they stayed on thus, and how they could overcome their poverty, the animator refusing to give them any opinion saying that he did not know the answer which must be found within the conditions of their own lives. The coir yarn producers reflected collectively on and on, and discovered that this was because of exploitation by the trading middleman who gave them the raw material to make yarn, for which they got a very low price while the middleman sold the product that they made at a high price; they saw that they needed working capital which they did not have, to get away from the middleman and buy the raw material themselves from the market; they observed that in general they were making more yarn than in their contract with the raw material they were getting from the middleman, but were giving the extra yarn also to the middleman at the same low price. Having done this analysis they decided that henceforth they would not give this extra to the middleman and would sell this in the market themselves at the much higher market price. Doing this for several weeks they could amass sufficient working capital to break away from the middleman altogether, purchasing and selling directly from and in the market. Soon they started becoming richer, and the example

started spreading among other coir yarn producers in their village as well as in other villages in the neighbourhood.

In a study on this exemplary work Tilakaratna (Tilakaratna 1984) asked the initial coir yarn producing group: "What did the animator do to you?" They replied: "He removed the rust from our brain!" **I cannot think of a better, sharper conceptualization of the role of the 'animator', and this came from the disadvantaged people themselves – the 'animator' is one who removes the rust from the people's brain.** And by removing this rust if it was there, s/he helps create the necessary precondition for people's self-development and sets it in motion, for self-development cannot take off without self-thinking.

8. Animating values – 'Sarilakas' in the Philippines

My next lesson was from an action research project called 'Sarilakas' (self-strength) launched in four villages in the Philippines in 1979 (Rahman 1984a) that I had supported from the ILO's 'PORP' programme introduced below. The animators there stimulated the formation of organizations of the disadvantaged, which had initiated collective economic activities and were gaining in economic and social status. One animator in each of the four villages was working full-time in the project. I participated in a review of the project in 1982. I asked the organizations in each of the four villages:

"When will you let the animators go?"

The first response in each village was: *"Why should we let them go? they are so helpful to us, and we love them".*

I challenged: *"If they are so nice they are exceptional persons, and people like you in many other villages in the country need help from persons like them. What right do you have to hold on to them depriving disadvantaged people elsewhere?"*

Seeing that they were not ready for such a question I asked them in each village to reflect together on it, adding that I would visit them again after two days to receive their considered response.

I revisited each of the villages in turn after two days, and the whole attitude of the people in the project in all the villages had changed:

"We have discussed your question, and realize that we should release him/her to help people like us in other villages. However, we are not yet fully ready, and would like him/her to visit us once a week for some time so that we can learn some more things from him/her."

Another member stood up, to say:

"Not once a week –visiting us once a fortnight will do!"

This was the pattern of the replies in each of the four villages, a sense of wanting to cling on to the animator had given way to a sense of solidarity with other disadvantaged elsewhere and of wanting to share the animators with others as disadvantaged as themselves. A positive value, initially dormant, had been awakened. To me this was a confirmation, again (recall the Bangladesh flood relief experiment) that **people have the best human values within them which may not have surfaced at any time, but it is possible to awaken them by challenging them to show their best.**

The animators in 'Sarilakas' progressively withdrew from their regular involvement in these villages and eventually kept only friendly links with them visiting them occasionally, working elsewhere, and were soon thus able to develop their work into a 'movement'. 'Sarilakas' eventually became the largest non-Church-based people's movement in the country, **showing a strategy of geographically expanding with a limited number of animators by invoking people to be self-reliant early and to let go the external animators.**

9. Some other PAR exercises

Bhoomi Sena was our first experience with PR. While going through this experience I launched a series of Participatory Research projects after I joined the ILO in 1977 to create and coordinate a new programme on "Participation of the Rural Poor in Development", popularly known as 'PORP'. My own understanding of Participatory Research kept consolidating through the experience of PORP. The kind of Participatory Research we were initiating, as a contribution to PSD as our ultimate aim, had a 'subject-subject' relation of external researchers with the people concerned who shared the ownership of such research, and this inevitably united organically with people's action for their self-development. In order to distinguish this kind of Participatory Research from other kinds in which the people participate in various ways in research owned by outside researchers we started explicitly using the term 'Participatory Action Research' or PAR.

PAR, naturally, cannot be designed in advance from the outside, or else the claim of the 'subject-subject' relation would be false. The methodology of

each individual PAR process arises from the joint imaginativeness of the activist researchers and the people concerned or their leaders. Below I present an illustrative sample of the variety of methodologies that thus emerged in PORP's PAR projects.

9a. Sri Lanka : Coordinated by Tilakaratna (Tilakaratna, 1984), a participatory study of the Sri Lankan experiment referred to above was undertaken in which the basic village investigations were carried out by two teams of village cadres involved in the initiative. These teams collected data on the village households through discussions with the villagers and direct observations rather than through formal questioning. These data were placed in a number of collective discussion sessions of villagers participating in the initiative for verification, and for analysis together with the cadres and a number of outside researchers. Issues were generated in these collective reflection sessions upon which the villagers had not reflected before. This raised the level of their collective awareness and analytical understanding of these issues, over which they continued to reflect together after the research terminated, and this influenced their subsequent collective decisions and action.

9b. India: A different kind of PAR model was developed by activists involved with a tribal peasant movement in Maharashtra, India (Paranjape *et al.*, 1984). In this model the research theme was conceived as the tensions and contradictions in self-reliant development of the movement, to be explored not merely as research for its own sake but to promote their resolution. The research methodology centered on organizing a series of people's workshops for which the participants were first asked to develop polar, alternative positions on a set of major issues in the question of self-reliance, e.g. individual vs. collective self-reliance, participation in the wider labour movement in issue-based joint fronts vs. a more permanent affiliation to a larger federation. Presentation of these polar positions and debates on them by the people made the people aware of the contradictions and alternatives in their struggle and also of the need for concrete choices among alternative positions. On some of the issues thus debated, concrete choices were made in the process of the participatory research itself, and a heightened level of awareness gained in this exercise contributed to reaching a conscious or unconscious synthesis of other contradictions subsequently. The research report was translated into the local language for use by the movement.

9c. The Philippines: In another PAR study (Women's Research Committee *et al*, 1984) of a women settlers' movement in the Philippines, an activists' organization which had been associated with the movement initiated the formation of a research coordination team, with two members taken from the leadership of a fourteen-member 'vanguard group' of the women settlers and two from the activists' organization. Members of the vanguard group provided inputs into the research using minutes of weekly meetings of the women settlers, initiating group discussions with women on different aspects of their life and struggle, and preparing papers on the profile of the community, the history of women's organizations and activities of the vanguard group. These inputs were woven into two *darmas* which were staged by the women settlers, and all women participants in the movement were invited to witness these dramas, to validate the data collected and to synthesize their experiences. The final study incorporated the feedbacks that were received from the audience and discussed the benefits from the research, saying that participation in this project provided an opportunity to the vanguard group for a first comprehensive review of their first two years of organizing effort, from which the strengths and weaknesses of their effort could be identified; and that the process of research enabled the residents, particularly the vanguard group, to develop their capacity to understand immediate micro issues in relation to broader macro issues.

9d. India: PAR was taken to another dimension in a project in India in which a number of forest-based people's movements and organizations got together for joint inquiry and articulation on the subject of 'forest, ecology and the oppressed'. Coordinated by The People's Institute for Development and Training based in New Delhi, representatives of these organizations first met in a ten-day workshop to identify issues for investigation and to design ways of recording people's perceptions. They then returned to their respective areas for detailed investigations. While doing this they were also visited by members from two of the participating organizations from other areas. The data thus collected were passed on to a smaller research team composed of social activists in contact with these movements, who analyzed the data and interviewed those who had visited the various movements. On the basis of these, the above research team developed a set of case studies on the experiences of life and struggle of the people concerned, problem-wise analyses, and an analytical synthesis based on all these. These were presented in a second workshop attended by all groups who had participated in the first. The final report was prepared by the research team incorporating the deliberations of this workshop (Dasgupta, 1986)

9e. Nicaragua: In a very different socio-political setting in Nicaragua, a PAR project was undertaken in *El Rigadio* in 1983 ((de Montis, 1987) with a peasant community which had become organized, and had been trying to play its own role in the socialist reconstruction in the country. A research team was formed to undertake the initial task of investigation, composed and coordinated by Malena de Montis, an educationist, some coordinators of the National Programme of Adult Education and representatives of mass organizations and cooperatives. The team drafted the design of an inquiry into the history of the community, and a survey on the current socio-economic characteristics of *El Rigadio* – demographic, educational, migratory, those relating to production, access to land, etc., as well as those concerning the levels of organization and ideological transformation of the community. The draft design was presented to a larger coordination committee constituted for the research, which discussed and modified it. Members of the larger community were given training in survey work in a number of workshops. While undertaking house-to-house surveys they explained the participatory character of the whole exercise to members of the households, with the promise to return to them the information obtained for their reflection and analysis.

After the survey the results were tabulated in workshops where other members of the community also participated. After some tabulation was done, the whole community was invited to an assembly where the information obtained was presented on boards, and the participants deliberated intensely on the data thus presented. Finally, delegates of state institutions and mass organizations at the municipality level were invited to a meeting with the community to coordinate their programmes in the light of the findings of the survey, and to jointly seek solutions to problems. The coordination committee also planned methods for disseminating the information and knowledge obtained through the survey. It was decided to bring out a pamphlet and audio-visual documentation. For the purpose of producing the pamphlet – **the ‘people’s own research report** - members of the committee learnt to use wooden mimeographing as explained in an adult education magazine, and also learnt diagrammatic and other techniques for presenting data, and improved their writing ability even though they cared only to be able to communicate without necessarily writing full sentences care for writing full sentences.

This was perhaps the first known people's research in a 'socialist' country. Interestingly enough, one conclusion of the research was that this was real 'literacy' for the people, while the much-publicized adult education programme of revolutionary Nicaragua was criticized as a programme in which '*the people were being taught!*'⁷

10. Validation of PAR

The question of validation of PAR continues to engage the action research network even today. (See Introductory and Concluding chapters of Reason and Bradbury 2001). Reflecting on the experience of validation of PAR with *Bhoomi Sena* and other subsequent experiences in PORP I concluded that **validation rests on collective verification/reasoning/consensus that makes individual subjective statements and findings objective, and that ordinary people with their own collectively agreed verification procedures have as much claim to an objective and, for that matter, scientific character of their inquiries as professional inquiries following verification standards of one or other recognized 'school of inquiry'**

As I discussed in my presentation at the World Congress of Sociology in 1982, there are subjective biases in all research. As a matter of fact, as I discussed there, subjective bias is "inherent in conceptualizing and categorizing most human phenomenon, and full communicability of such concepts and categories requires a sharing of sensuous (subjective) perceptions – i.e. communicability at a subjective level in addition to formal definitions if they are so defined.

"There is, however, another sense in which research may be defined as objective or, for that matter, 'scientific', i.e. in the sense of the methodology and product having passed a process of *social* verification. This produces social knowledge, which is distinct from knowledge that is purely individual, i.e. subjective. Objectivity in this sense requires transition from the individual to the collective. This in turn requires that:

⁷ The Nicaraguan and two other PAR exercises, one in Colombia and one in Mexico, were launched together as part of ILO's PORP programme under the overall coordination of Orlando Fals Borda. Fals Borda prepared a synthesis of the three exercises, suggesting methodological guidelines toward data gathering and validation, critical recovery of history, valuing and using popular culture, and production and diffusion of new knowledge (Fals Borda 1985).

- (a) a collective is defined;
- (b) codes of communication (language) exist or are developed within the collective; and
- (c) agreement be reached within the collective as to valid methods of investigation, reasoning of observation and arguments.

“Research in all well-established schools has a verification system of the above nature, explicitly or implicitly, and is objective, if verified within its own paradigm. In the more advanced schools the method of verification has by now become more or less standardized, and verification is often possible by mechanical application of certain rules or arguments so that interpersonal communication may not be necessary for establishing its objectivity. It is important to recognize, however, that objectivity in this sense is *relative*, internal to the collective concerned (e.g. a research profession). For those not belonging to this collective, either because of a lack of communicability or because they do not accept its premises or rules, this knowledge either has no meaning or is not acceptable. There is in this sense no universality in any ‘science’ in so far as the entire human race does not constitute a collective for the purpose of scientific knowledge generation. If the Chinese have not followed the verification system of some Western schools in developing their knowledge, this does not make acupuncture, for example, a piece of ‘unscientific’ knowledge in the endogenous development of the Chinese medical science.” (Rahman 1982: 90-91)

11. "Excuse me, Sir, you have given a lecture!"

When I had thought I had reasonably developed my own understanding of the role of an ‘animator’ as discussed in section 7 above, I had one of the greatest lessons on this subject and one of my own pitfalls as an animator. This was in a workshop in Tagaytay in the Philippines in 1988 that PORP had organized on "Promoting Participation and Self-reliance". We had leaders from seventeen NGOs in this workshop from seven countries of south and southeast Asia to discuss the above subject, with Tilakaratna and myself as the principal ‘facilitators’. I told the participants that there would not be any lecture, and asked them to put on the board the questions emerging from out of their grassroots experiences that they would like to seek enlightenment on from each other, organize those questions themselves around major themes, and draw up an agenda to discuss them over the ten days of the workshop with two persons from among themselves to initiate the discussion in every session. The participants were stimulated, and the

workshop was an exemplary exercise in collective self-reflection, until, on one question that the participants were finding difficult to grapple with, I myself intervened and gave a long exposition on the subject.

After I finished, a soft-spoken Thai participant from the back of the hall raised his hand, and said, *"Excuse me, sir, what you have said is all very interesting, but you have given a lecture!"*

I realized what a profound mistake I had committed. It was raining outside and I had an umbrella with me. I carried the umbrella down the hall to the speaker, handed it to him, and said, *"I have slipped – you beat me with this!"*

Some time later Edel Guiza, a leading animator in the Philippine Sarilakas project, reflecting on her own work wrote to me:

"In this work you have to be constantly on the alert against the enemy, and the greatest enemy is within yourself!"

12. *"thank you for telling us that we are not poor!"*.

It has become customary to refer to people of low-income categories as 'poor' as if this were their main identity. This nomenclature to characterize them itself gives them a low, even negative, self-esteem that inhibits their assertion and taking initiatives themselves to promote their lives. I have myself followed this nomenclature for many years without thinking deeply about this, and even today have to compromise and use this term in discourses with well-meaning colleagues who have gotten used to this nomenclature. Many among such low-income people have themselves internalized this as their chief identity, and wait upon the more affluent to take initiatives to alleviate their poverty.

But there is enough evidence that I need not cite here, that many resent this characterization of themselves and have spoken out. Let me just share here a personal experience of profound moment on this question::

I was addressing a mass seminar in a rural area in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, where people of some 500 or so villages had mobilized themselves for extraordinary collective development initiatives under the banner of a people's organization called 'ORAP' (Organization of Rural Associations for Progress) (Nyoni 1991). I had by then been somewhat 'enlightened'

about use of terms like 'poor' and 'poverty', and when the ORAP leadership invited me to talk on the role of community participation to overcome *'the vicious circle of hunger and poverty'* I chose as the subject of my lecture the suggested title itself: I asked the huge gathering why they called themselves 'poor' and identified overcoming of the 'vicious circle of poverty' as their principal problem, when they were engaged in such extraordinary self-development work which the whole world was watching with admiration, and when people from near and far were coming to them to learn from them the way to development - what tremendous wealth they had within themselves to thus teach the world! I asked them to think of their very early forefathers who lived in caves with little or no clothing to cover their nakedness - people do not refer to them as 'poor' but as pioneers to start building the human civilization that we have today. Their life was the beginning of human life to move forward, and likewise the life of the people of Zimbabwe 'today' was the beginning of their newly liberated nation to march forward - why should they pull this movement backward, or constrain it, by such negative self-identification and problem-formulation? After I got off the dais hundreds of villagers, students, NGO workers, etc., queued up to greet me, saying: *"you have hit us hard, but we have appreciated it"*! But my most fulfilling reward came later when after dinner at night I was strolling in the dark outside the tent in the field where I was staying.

A heavy voice called behind me: *"Mr. Rahman, can I talk to you?"*

I turned back to see a hefty man who introduced himself as a village blacksmith involved in the ORAP movement. He talked proudly of what they were doing in the movement, and said at one point slapping me on my back with his big hands:

"Mr. Rahman, I wanted to thank you for telling us that we are not 'poor'!"

He went on talking of the ORAP movement, slapping my back twice more to say "

"Oh, Mr. Rahman, thank you so much for telling us that we are not 'poor'!"

I felt that I had lifted a big burden from his back and he was able now to breathe freely - a reward that I would not trade for anything else!

And the lesson also that this gave for PAR: **It is of fundamental importance that PAR seeks to enhance the people's self-esteem by highlighting their positive qualities, challenging them that they can startle the world, and not denigrate them as 'poor'. Poverty is only a situation in which they are placed, but the particular human being concerned may be inferior to none, and should be given this credit in the way we call and relate with her or him.**

13. 'Building and sharpening each other'.

I got my final graduation lesson in PAR when in 1990 I was in a Pan-African Workshop of grassroots development agencies hosted by ORAP, deliberating on the subject of 'training' of development workers. I rejected there the term 'training', suggesting that you can 'train' monkeys to dance to your tune but cannot 'train' humans to creatively respond to dynamic field situations, and I asked my African colleagues to search in their indigenous vocabularies if there was a term more suitable to what we actually had in mind. Vigorous search resulted in the digging out of two terms in the Bantu language - 'uakana' meaning 'to build each other', and 'uglolana' meaning 'to sharpen each other'. I have written and talked umpteen times (e.g. Rahman 1994e, 222) about these two powerful indigenous conceptualizations of PSD and, for that matter, of the relations between and with the people that PAR, in my view, must seek to restore and promote - conceptualizations that external domination of the people have sought to erase, replacing them with the hierarchical, paternalistic and dominance-dependence creating term 'training'.

I realize that 'graduation' is only the beginning of one's systematic knowledge, and one has to go on learning forever from the school of life in living interaction with it, perhaps enriching life itself by the student's inquisitive questioning and challenging. And this is what PAR, to me, ultimately is about.

14. Conclusion:

PAR, aimed at promoting PSD as it has been for me, is an intervention aimed at promoting intellectual capabilities of the underprivileged and disadvantaged, their collective self-inquiry into the conditions of their life and ways of moving forward, and the taking of collective initiatives in search of a better life. A central thrust of such PAR is psychological, to enhance the mental self-strength of the people to inquire, decide and act without waiting for outside advice/guidance/assistance, and to enhance their self-esteem to stimulate their best thinking and actions. I see the commitment of PAR, however, not just to the underprivileged and disadvantaged people but also to all humanity, and for this I wish to see PAR also to challenge these people to show their best values when shortcomings are sensed. There is evidence that the people respond, if the challenge, even if harshly worded, shows intrinsic faith that the best is within every person, and invokes with this respect that one shows one's best.

All this calls for very sensitive animation⁸ work in PAR, which needs constantly to be alert to open or hidden paternalist tendencies in the animators themselves. Animators may never be perfect and may make mistakes, but can continue improving by constant self-assessment of experience including one's own pitfalls.

Other conceptualizations of PAR, and more so of 'Participatory Research' or 'Action Research', exist, arising out of other historical-personal circumstances. In the final analysis it is a question of conscious or unconscious ideology, which may, however, dialogue and debate with each other for mutual enrichment, and also exchange methods and approaches for mutual benefit.

There is, finally, a question of what PAR may contribute to **macro social change** for those ideologically so disposed, e.g. toward PSD on a macro scale as well as to strengthen PSD by way of redistribution of social resources toward social equity. Whether PAR itself can ever become or lead a macro-social movement for change remains to be seen. But local movements generated by PAR with their enhanced critical awareness and experience in creative self-development may become a valuable component of macro forces for change. Furthermore, a macro-social change merely toward equity without enhancement of critical awareness of the disadvantaged and of their self-esteem, and a critical level of experience in

⁸ The term 'animation' is used here to include 'facilitation' as well, as conceived in footnote 6.

PSD by way of creative, humane and democratic action in collective solidarity, is liable to invite newer forms of domination and division within the society and relapse into an in-equitable order. There may never be complete answers to such tendencies; but PAR may contribute to strengthening the forces on the side of the 'good', and toward stability of social equity if it can ever be attained.

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