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Building community-based research capacity with communities: the PRIA experience

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Introduction

Indian society has been traditionally divided into endogamous hereditary groups (castes) ranked by ritual status. The castes in lower hierarchy were historically associated with ritually impure occupations such as killing, handling of animal cadavers or night soil. Social distance from upper castes was maintained by restrictions of contact and commensality with members of upper castes. Caste-based positioning created caste-based inequalities.

Marginalized citizens the world over are experiencing complex challenges of exclusion and alienation. Social exclusion involves systematic and pervasive socio-economic, political and cultural discriminations and injustices. Dominant power groups debase, dissociate, devalue and disparage the poor and marginalized social groups. In India, among social groups, one could mention low castes, women, racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. Social exclusion: (a) limits their access from the resources and opportunities to improve life chances; (b) denies them the right over their labour and productive resources; and (c) constrains their rights to access basic services for education, healthcare, housing, public amenities, recreation and, not least, the right to dignity. Socio-economic disadvantages are also linked with culture valuational disadvantages. That determines and influences the way resources, roles and responsibilities are allocated, values are assigned and power is mobilized. Cultural vulnerabilities further limit capacities to articulate the claims and concerns in decision making and governance in private, political and community spaces. There is a growing sense of frustration among youth, which is compounded when experiences of discrimination – because of ethnicity, caste, class, religion, gender and disability – are added. Their sense of alienation inhibits their full participation in society and consequently their access to fair and just opportunities for development. Social exclusion has, therefore, critical and wide-ranging implications on the issues related to citizenship and governance.

It is necessary that marginalized citizens be involved as agents of change rather than as recipients of assistance. They must participate in conceptualizing, planning and executing development initiatives to secure for themselves genuine citizenship and attendant benefits. That alone would improve their living conditions, promote their socio-economic, political and cultural interests, and ensure equitable apportionment of productive resources and growth opportunities for

them. One must, therefore, look towards substantive equality characterized by inclusion and equality and the absence of discrimination.

Education can make a difference to the lives of marginalized citizens. By providing opportunities to improve their capacities to exercise choice, education improves their chances and life situations. Information, enhanced capacities and consciousness raising give them strength to fight their exclusion; to enable them to articulate their needs clearly, as well as to negotiate the unequal structures of power from a position of strength (Ramchandran, cited in Pant, 2004). As marginalized citizens lack resources, skills and collective strength to break the cycle of their oppression and exploitation, civil society organizations (CSOs) as external facilitators, play a catalytic role by educating, organizing and mobilizing them purposively and consciously around shared concerns.

The genesis of education for community empowerment can be traced to the concept of popular education, often described as *education for critical consciousness*. Paulo Freire,¹ writing in the context of literacy, education for poor and politically disempowered people in his country, coined the term. It's different from formal education (in schools, for example) and informal education (learning by living). Popular education has a transformatory approach, which aims to mobilize and empower people, in particular those who are marginalized socially and politically, to take control of their own learning and to effect social change.

This chapter provides an account of community education methods which PRIA uses in its efforts to make development and democracy equitable and inclusive. The chapter does not claim to cover the entire gamut of educational efforts, which PRIA has facilitated over the last twenty-seven years. Instead, it uses select and representative cases to provide an overview of PRIA's community education experiences. PRIA's practices are based on the principles of participatory research and participatory learning in which the impetus for social change is premised upon and increases people's knowledge about their reality and their agency to change that reality (Tandon, 2002a, b). The Freireian method of *conscientization*, which takes people through reflection and analysis, eventually resulting in action, is central to how PRIA educates poor and marginalized groups to claim their rights and make governance accountable (Mohanty, 2008).

The overarching contexts

Decentralization and education of the marginalized communities

The empowerment of community through education and training does not occur arbitrarily. It is in the political context, which stresses certain grievances and around those, educational strategies are adopted to organize and educate the communities. The mobilization activities are understood better when seen in the broader context of political opportunities (structure). Local-level decentralization and mechanisms for political participation in public spaces of the marginalized and poor provided a new climate for citizens to interface with state.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 and 1993 ensured citizen participation at local governance institutions, such as Panchayat Raj

Institutions' (PRIs) rural and urban local bodies. In addition, there have been innovative forms of spaces of public participation and deliberation, e.g., public hearings for improving community and service delivery. Civil society groups are increasingly providing a vital mobilization infrastructure to nurture and coordinate participation in local government. They are exerting pressures on the state to play a strong, responsive role within the framework of sustainable development and democratic participation.

Without strong local self-governance institutions, decentralization will not be able to deliver the desired results of economic development and social justice. The success of local self-governance institutions depends on the efficient leadership of elected representatives (ERs). PRIA's field experiences with marginalized leadership clearly indicate that ERs continue to be marginalized on the basis of social, caste and gender affiliations. Representation and leadership are core roles and responsibilities of elected members. In order to carry out these core roles and responsibilities, elected representatives need competencies such as communication, facilitation, power, decision making, policymaking, enabling, negotiating, financial management, overseeing and institution building. The need to provide training and development opportunities to ERs from marginalized communities, therefore, becomes imperative.

Marginalization of citizenship identities and rights

Citizenship is a juridical and statutory status as well as a national identity relating to rights and duties. In theory all citizens have, by and large, equal rights and duties. By conferring citizenship on its populace, the state promises to treat them as equal. Recognizing that people are placed in unequal relationships, the state enacts legislation to equalize the social relationships. Through affirmative action, it tries to create conditions for excluded groups to take part in political decision making. Acknowledging that capacities and resources are unequally distributed across various sections, it also promotes equality of opportunities through special provisions regarding education and employment, so that people can compete as equals (Mohanty, 2008).

In practice, however, the scale is tilted against the poor and the marginalized. Further, these individuals and groups are extremely heterogeneous and have a diverse range of needs. Their subjective and contradictory experiences, which emanate from their positioning rooted in a given physical or geographical space, in a certain kind of community or social arrangement, determine the construction of their citizenship identities and their access to resources, opportunities and entitlements. Needless to say, when citizenship rights and entitlements are inhibited, withheld or violated, there is a heightening of pauperization and marginalization.

This is where governance comes in. Ideally, governance should be concerned with the restoration of citizenship rights equally and equitably. That would mean, in turn, guaranteeing equality of rights under the law, equality of opportunity and equality in access to public resources. Over the past several decades, the

state governments have made serious efforts to strengthen institutions of local self-governance by devolving powers and responsibilities to local governance institutions, actively promoting several innovative mechanisms, schemes and approaches to enable the marginalized sections of the society to claim their rights and entitlements to basic services and livelihood. Yet, it is also a fact that large sections of *Scheduled Castes* (SC) and *Scheduled Tribes* (ST),² Muslim and other poor households continue to remain excluded partially or fully from development and various schemes. The state governments have not been able to effectively counter many constraints – structural, institutional and human – which operate to systematically exclude them from accessing their citizenship rights. The statutory provisions and safeguards by themselves have failed to usher in the desired governance and inclusions. If citizens experience a gap between the promise made by the state and actual performance, they also learn that the underlying reasons for this gap relate to identity and the dynamics of exclusion encountered by the bearers of vulnerable identities such as women, low caste and tribal people (Mohanty and Tandon, 2006).

We are witnessing many forms of social mobilizations, struggles, movements, protests of varying intensity in different parts of the country, to combat exclusion and to bring about inclusion. CSOs have engaged themselves commendably in supporting the cause of social inclusion by creating wider awareness of the underlying issues; by creating and maintaining the democratic space for citizens to organize themselves, to educate and train them to articulate their voices; and by advocating the need for effective policy changes towards an inclusive polity.

Leadership training programmes

Concept

Leadership is a process where a person influences others to accomplish a mission, task or objective by providing directions cohesively and coherently. Leadership emphasizes intermediation capacities. Leaders are expected to play an intermediation role, bringing resources in terms of information, materials, expertise, funds, etc., from outside agencies, and ensuring effective use of internal resources (Bandyopadhyay, 2007). In addition, they have two significant sets of roles to play. A brief description follows.

Society building

The most important function of a leader is to contribute towards building a society which promotes equal justice to all the citizens. Leaders play three important functions towards this end: (a) mobilizing the community members for collective actions; (b) overcoming social exclusion; (c) managing differences. The purpose of mobilization and collective action may range from self-help construction work (building a road or cleaning ponds) or to exercise rights over natural resources (protecting forests) to large-scale protest activities (protest against acquisition of agricultural lands). Leaders address the issue of social exclusion within the community by facilitating the marginalized in accessing resources, knowledge

and opportunities. One of the core functions of leaders is to manage and resolve conflicts within their community through negotiation and consensus (*ibid.*).

Engaging governance institutions

Leaders engage governance institutions by: (a) amplifying the collective voice of their community, in particular, marginalized members, to gain access to and control over resources, justice and social services; and (b) engaging in negotiation to change the power relations (*ibid.*).

The CSOs, by focusing on strengthening the competencies associated with leadership roles, have played a critical role in the capacity building of leaders. They have adopted a multipronged approach for providing educational support to strengthen leadership of the marginalized. That is, a community educational programme moves beyond structured training programmes to include various other instrumentalities, such as by strengthening local resource groups, exposure visits, campaigns, networks and alliances for advocacy, and influencing public opinion, interface and issue-based meetings.

Methodologies of community education and training for leadership

The vision

Lofty as these ideals were, I really did not know how to proceed and what to do. But it was clear to me that I would use knowledge as vehicle for empowerment. (Rajesh Tandon)

The guiding vision of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia has been that spreading knowledge and giving access for the marginalized sections is a path to empowerment, in short, 'knowledge is power'. It stems from the fact that lack of knowledge, information, education and literacy has forced the already marginalized to remain powerlessness. A means to continue subjugation is through controlling the knowledge flow. It is this monopoly that PRIA has aspired to break for the past three decades. The work began with two enduring partnerships: International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) during the formative years in the 1980s, and the Institute of Development Research (IDR) during the 1990s.

In post-industrial society, information, knowledge and knowledge production are key sources of power, like capital. In a knowledge society, inequality results when people with access to knowledge exert *power over* those having little or no access to knowledge. This exercise of power perpetuates one group's domination over the other – dominant caste over lower castes, capitalist class over the labour class; white race over black race; and men over women. It determines who has access to information, thus giving that group the position to define what knowledge is legitimate, and to dominate its production and use.

Arguably, education is at the heart of the transformation path that PRIA envisions. While education is the means, a participatory model of governance is the end. It is essential to make our institutions and leaders accountable by putting control in the hands of citizens. Education should be inclusive and participatory.

PRIA's community education and training programme is based on the principles of collaboration and partnership with local grass-roots organizations. Recognizing that it has a distant urban base in Delhi, PRIA has played a cognitive and strategic role in the processes of collective action and has supported grass-roots activism in local organizations.

In its cognitive role, PRIA has provided the participatory research framework for education and training. It has been the main source of information around which training programmes are built. The participatory research framework has a citizenship perspective, too. The education and training of marginalized communities in leadership, for instance, emphasizes nurturing independent, rights-bearing citizens who articulate their concerns and priorities, access resources and opportunities and, with increased capacities, make strategic life choices.

Methodologies in the leadership training programmes

The larger vision for PRIA is to propagate people-centred development, using an inclusive model, where even the most marginalized stakeholder can represent their stake and not go unheard. So, all efforts of PRIA point at one direction – *deepening participation*. Closely linked to this objective is training, which holds the promise to actualize the potential of the chosen participant group to assert their rights in the public domain – women, youth or SC. Trainers trained in participatory methodology tend to use a blend of participatory learning and action methods such as games, play and drama; audiovisual tools are incorporated into the training sessions.

The defining component of PRIA training is its emphasis on *instilling self-awareness and empathy*. In youth leadership training programmes where participants were acquainted with the concept of self and introspection, they were asked to sit in a large circle with eyes closed and meditate on their life, their achievements and failures so far. The resource person would place photographs and pictures depicting different people and situations inside the circle. The participants were then asked to open their eyes and select two photographs which best described their present as well as their future status. This exercise was a great source of interaction and sharing among the participants as they revealed their deepest feelings about their lives and how they wanted to mould it. The participants got an opportunity to share their emotions, which helped in creating greater understanding among them and also within themselves.³

Audiovisual tools, given the popularity of the medium, are also used to communicate. In the youth leadership training programme, *Chak De!*, a Hindi movie, was shown to help participants understand the concept of *team and leadership*. At the end of the movie, the participants were asked to discuss their observations. Candidates spoke about the things they had learned from the movie, such as coordination, support, discipline, control, self-confidence, clear goals, communication, trust, determination, unity, understanding, individual aspiration and the hard work among team members as main characteristics of the team. They related the above to team building from the previous day. Similarly, in the SC leadership-

training programme, to familiarize the participants with *gram sabha* (meetings), quorums, agenda decisions, documenting resolutions and proceedings, a film on *gram sabha* was shown. This was chosen from among many films made by PRIA on *panchaya* (assembly) functioning, social audit and reservation for women in local government institutions, etc. These films support the efficacy of the audio-visual media established so far.

Given the importance of communication in public life, it is a necessary component of all training, along with the special weight for a leader, of interpersonal communication. It was often through a PowerPoint presentation that communication was defined as the ability to think, act, reflect and analyse reality, and making that reality known to others. The facilitator explained the key points in the presentation with special emphasis on preparing the content of the speech, clarity of language, presentation skills (conviction and confidence while speaking), the importance of listening to the other person, how to be prepared with questions raised by the audience, and so on. Also stressed was the importance of preparation when speaking in public.

PRIA analysis of ground reality has exposed the centrality of *interpersonal communication*. Sessions on this are mandatory in all training. Those who assume the responsibility of leaders in their respective domain need to communicate with their group to represent effectively their concerns and articulate them in the right forums. The methods used were PowerPoint presentations, video feedback or lectures. Here the use of a *game* was adjudged the most powerful means to clarify the need for clear articulation of ideas.

In the Women Political Empowerment and Leadership (WPPEL) training programme (see Chapter 10 in this volume, Case Study A), for instance, Whispering Game proved to be an effective tool to demonstrate the importance of communication. To begin with, participants are divided into two groups and seated in circles. Each would whisper a sentence in the ear of the woman next. She would then whisper it to the person next to her, until it reached the ear of the last person, who would then say it loudly for all. By the end of the game, the sentence had not remained the same. Many words were either missed or misinterpreted. So, it was explained that this was the way we communicated in our everyday communication. We often think that the other person can understand what we have said without really making an effort to make them understand. On the other hand, as listeners, we often do not pay the utmost attention to what we are being told and hence do not get the whole message.

When we speak of leadership for women, the SC community or youth from tribal communities, ignorance is a fundamental obstacle. For sensitizing any group, the telling of stories has proved to be a powerful tool: it increases awareness and gets across the otherwise complicated working of social structures. In the Youth Leadership training programme, a small sketch was distributed to participants. The sketch depicted one frog hiding under the bed and another with a stick in its hand in an aggressive posture towards a knock from outside the door. The participants were asked to identify quickly who is the male and who is the female. In almost all of the workshops, the majority of the participants replied that the

attacker/ protector was the male frog and the fearful one was the female frog. The resource persons explained that this reflected our socialization process which leads us to form stereotypes of males and females. As human beings, we unconsciously try to categorize certain behaviours as specific to males, like aggressiveness, strength, etc., while other behaviours such as caring, weakness, to females. Such categorization leads to gender stereotyping and ultimately discrimination.

Another commonly used exercise is Fishbowl, used not only in classrooms but also in community trainings. This technique raises the systematic observation powers of participants and often helps in building community by focusing attention on how a group may work together more productively. As used in SC leadership building, a small group of participants (as many as half the total) form a circle. They are then asked to conduct a discussion (subject is given by trainer) while the rest watch, pose questions, take notes and give comments about the ones in the circle. The trainer sets the ground rules once the group is established and then ensures that group members adhere to discussion skills, such as taking turns, responding to a previous person's comments and asking questions to extend thinking. Later, those outside the group come to form the circle while those in the fish bowl act as observers. This sharpens their perception powers, teaches them to think and speak in a collective, and develops a feedback mechanism. The points of interest, among others, are seeing who takes the lead, how one person supports or defeats another person's argument, what is the process of group discussion. So the central focus of this exercise remains the discussion process rather than the content.

Another method with immense potential in helping the participants get over stage fright and express themselves freely is the Cultural Programme. This breaks the ice and gets them ready for future participation in the public domain. During training programmes, all candidates are asked to participate in a cultural programme organized by PRIA. Candidates come forth and give their names for different activities such as dance, song, play, anchoring, speech, magic, etc. For the Youth Leadership programme, all 500 students joined the function; they divided themselves into groups so that everyone could perform, and then listed the activities and people participating in those activities. A major difference was observed in terms of the level of participation, as, on the first two days, very few candidates put their names forward, but by the third day, many gave their names for different activities, and a good level of enthusiasm was observed.

Another commonly used tool is *role play* (a technique in psychotherapy or training), which has emerged as a powerful instrument to demonstrate the nature of the new positions participants can assume after training. The facilitators in the Youth Leadership training programme used role play in their session on adult reproductive and sexual health. This session was designed to give insight into issues relating to their reproductive and sexual health, so they could become aware of the reasons behind changes and developments that take place psychologically and physically during puberty. Participants were told about physical changes, like the onset of menstruation, and changes in physical features in girls, to the voice breaking, nocturnal emissions, etc., in boys. The participants were also asked to do

a role play where they depicted changes during adolescent years, and how youth get addicted to drugs and smoking. This exercise greatly enhanced understanding.

Reflection and the capacity to reflect are very helpful in furthering the training objectives. For this, video feedback was often used, through the use of the previous day's video. The participants are asked to reflect on what they saw and felt, then asked to list the positive and negative points in each person's communication on chart paper. They were also asked to reflect on audience interaction.

Lessons

Recent trends in the socio-political arena in India, characterized by local-level decentralization and scope for the political participation of the marginalized poor, have provided a new climate for building and strengthening their leadership. PRIA and partnering organizations took a step forward to strengthen their leadership. Some clear lessons have emerged out of community leadership training programmes:

- Sustained or chronic deprivation of resources, capabilities and choices necessary for an adequate standard of living and enjoyment of economic, political and social rights make marginalized communities – women, youth from tribal societies and SCs – vulnerable, powerless and dependent. A social understanding of marginalization takes into account these deficits. Inclusion, therefore, implies increasing capacities and choices, and decreasing vulnerability. Marginalized communities become enabled to make strategic life choices.
- Adult education, as a tool for information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building and translation of skills into practice, assumes significance to strengthen public leadership roles. The scope moves beyond training in specific knowledge and skills to empowerment, so that marginalized communities gain confidence, esteem and become aware of innate and acquired capacities and capabilities.
- The education and training programmes for enhancing leadership skills of marginalized communities focused on cognitive change, behavioural and attitudinal changes and change in emotions. It aimed to develop an awareness of a person's potential so that they could become confident, sensitive and informed. Practical learning activities were explored to enable the participants to see alternative ways of being to reflect on their everyday experiences and articulate their needs and priorities. The training programmes also reinforced the collective identity among the participants by building the information base and capabilities.
- Learners acquired new knowledge and skills through formal teaching sessions (lecture, presentation, film and computer-generated activities). They processed information through group discussions and case study analysis. They applied what they learned through practical exercises.

Notes

- 1 Paulo Freire is known for his adult education work in Brazil. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he outlined the practice of popular education, arguing that oppressed people could reflect, analyse their situations and take action to change them.
- 2 Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) refer to the official list of caste and tribe schedules attached to legislations. These lists establish entitlement to benefits of legal protection, access to welfare schemes, especially for scheduled castes, of reserved seats in higher education, and in the legislature (both parliament and state assemblies) and institutions of local self-governance, of reserved jobs in government employment and special financial assistance for enterprise. These terms are also used in the Constitution and in various laws.
- 3 One girl, when asked to talk about herself in the present and then how she saw herself in five years, said that, right now she is like a flower, innocent and desirous, but after five years, she wants to become a known personality, to work for the betterment of people, especially women, who face inequality in life. Thus, she wants to work for others and also change the world with her work after five or ten years.