

## **Some Reflections on the Life and Limitations of Social Tools**

Many years ago, I saw my colleagues doing the Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises for watershed development planning. I kept my distance from these efforts for they were mixing it with the United States Department of Agriculture land use classification. The tools were used just to elicit information but not knowledge. It did not excite me.

By that time, I had spent sufficient time in the tribal villages, and my tribal colleagues had passed on sufficient wisdom and their worldviews. I was really fascinated first with the traditional Ahar-Pyne systems of irrigation, and then with the way Uraon people do landscaping, and Mundari people train the streams into paddy lands. The six-seven feet stream-bed terraces in Kachan village are still a fascination for me! The traditional land-use classification systems in this area embodies multiple variables – soil, slope, quality of land, moisture regimes, crop specificities, treatments required, etc. It is within such an intricate mix of knowledge systems that my colleagues were talking about the USDA's standard land-use classification. They failed to see that the systems of land classification in Jharkhand are much more sophisticated than this USDA classification. PRA exercises were part of this package of 'planning processes' that turned a blind eye to the tradition.

Back in Andhra Pradesh in the mid-nineties, I saw the popularity of these PRA exercises: the 'social map', 'resource map' and various kinds of matrices. By then, the tools were 'mainstreamed'. One was not considered a development professional, if s/he was not using these tools. Being 'participatory' was the 'in-thing' in development. For some, it was sitting on the floor, and for others it was doing a PRA. The development photographs were replete with the colorful *rangoli*. In the watershed development programs, 'social map' and 'resource map' had become two mandatory PRA exercises. They were even called the 'awareness generation' and 'social mobilisation' programs – these exercises to make people aware of where their houses are located in the village and which stream flows where!!

Later, I saw how crudely some of the leading champions of 'participation' behave in terms of giving a honest ear to what others say; and how ruthlessly they act when they have absolute power! Often I come across a breed of people claiming as being 'directly trained by Robert Chambers'. Though they caused serious irritation, what they were doing might be considered natural in the up-scaling process of PRA.

Looking back at the evolution of PRA – from RRA to PRA to Participatory Methods to a focus on ABC — I see a great dilution in the spirit and theoretical foundations. The question of what happens when the cart takes over the horse often comes to mind. The mainstreamed PRA is like a snake without stings: it will have no impact and it can at best be a good pet animal! For long, PRA has dominated the superstructure of the development sector and has displaced the earlier political thought processes. Tools are important but they cannot prepare a sculpture by themselves. Equating present-day ritualized PRA with 'participation' or 'empowerment' is killing the very purpose. These exercises are only providing legitimacy to a shallow analysis, understanding or interpretation of the complex realities of communities.

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