Two approaches to development discourse and action research

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Introduction

The instrumental approach to development discourse is focused on how the problem is defined, policy response are designed and institutional reality is brought in line with policy models. Using concepts like social capital, civil society and governance, attempts have been to theorise on the changing relation between state, market and society, whereby attempt to control and regulate technological and economic realm have given way to control and regulation of socio-cultural realm (Mosse, 2010). The pragmatic or instrumental action research presupposes the power to act for the desired outcome as being inherent to all human beings. It envisages to improve the workability of human praxis with an actor oriented, experimental and cooperative action through a learning by doing model (Johnson and Lindhurt, 2008). Taking a cyclical view of action, involves researcher and community collectively identifing an issue of local importance, developing ways of studying, collecting and analysing data about issues and taking action using locally available capacities and resources based on the resulting knowledge (Kindon, *et al.*, 2007; Smith, 2010).

Those with a more critical view, see development as a domination to be resisted with its failure being self-evident as policies are divorced from the historical and socio-political realities at the grassroots level. With its cognitive control and regulation, the rational development model expands statist power, reproduce hierarchies of knowledge, fragment, subjugate, silence, and erase the local, and neutralises poverty, while also objectifing the poor and depoliticising development (Mosse, 2010). Critical action research emancipates marginalised groups by unveiling the dominant ideologies and their coercive structures, through the generation of reflexive consciousness to liberate silenced knowledge and develop people's capabilities to critically perceive the world they live in (Johnson and Lindhurt, 2008). These action researches focus upon the 'relations of reciprocity', an ongoing process of exchange rooted in equality to integrate research to social relations through which social capacity is exercised. It involves critical and reflexive thinking about issues of power, social location, perspectives and limits of structural and organisational levels (Maitre *et al.*, 2008).

These two opposing views have been detrimental to any understanding of developmental agency, which needs interpretive communities that enroll participants through translation of policy goals into practical interests for the participants (Mosse, 2010). Such an approach to action research involves dialogue around common agenda of participatory and change oriented action (Johnson and Lindhurt, 2008). It involves collaboration with people to promote critical self awareness for individual and collective action for change (McIntyre, 2007). It involves participatory analysis and appraisal by locals to enable them to share, analyse, and enhance knowledge to plan and act upon improving their lives and living conditions (Chambers, 1994a). Such a learning from experience involves relating the emotions of experiences of the individuals

and collective action to theories of knowledge in an attempt to 'understand our understanding' (Bion, 1984). Centre for Development practice and its field immersion based action research is a similar attempt at generating collaborative knowledge about development practice by undertaking transformative actions at the grassroot level.

Master of Philosophy of Development Practice, CDP/PRADAN

Rooted in the realities of powerlessness and an inability to influence societal processes, and a lack of basic services in the third world, the Centre envisages to develop grassroot level agents of change through researched trained by the pedagogy of knowing/doing/relating. In this pursuit, we have collaborated with PRADAN, its grassroot network of practitioner and their focus on nurturing, facilitating, and promoting community based organisation. The focus is on learning through guided practice and experiment based implementation of development policies through participatory governance. The M Phil Development Practice sees students alternate between classroom instruction and field immersion. Being their teacher, mentor, and co-supervisor for the last three years has allowed me to reflect on the recurring pattern and regularity across the diverse and dispersed field and action research undertaken by them and their village collectives. These reflections are based on students sharing their experiences of their village stay and study, arrival at the problem, group formation, analysing problems, planning action, actioning research and researching action. Presenting these reflections, I have organised these reflection around three themes: ideas and their subjects, institutional structure and prescribed practice of policy model, and negotiation and strategic interactions of collaboration and compromise embedded in the materialisations of ideas and institutionalised practice.

Ideas of development practice and the inassimiable other

Ideas have a life of their own, with their meaning being located in social activity and are understood through institutions and social relation in which they are articulated (Mosse, 2010). This involves exploring ideas with power that formulate and justify idealised schematas to problematise, analyse, intervene and improve upon condition in which everyday life is lived (Foucault, 1978; 1991). It involves constructing genealogies of the development discourse to reveal how issues and realities are represented inter-textually. To facilitate such understandings and constructions, at CDP, the first semester of course work is on Philosophy of Development Practice, understanding and researching the rural, experiencing the self, development practitioner and group processes. These course offer critical understanding of the genealogy of development discourse and its inassimiable other, the rural, as well as tools to engage with, explore and question experience of the self among researchers.

Having done so, students undertake their first field immersion involving village stay and study, an intimate encounter of researchers with the life of the rural. They are embedded in their everyday life to explore, understand and establish a relation of the self with the social realities of the rural. Termed as 'arrival at the village', it attempt to build situated knowledge that enquires into how meanings and events are related to each other. It involves dialogues

between the subjectivities of the researchers and the researched (Geertz, 1973). It inserts history into events to capture thoughts and emotions and the social relation they were embedded in, to assign motivation and intention behind action to make readers feel the experience being described.

During this part of the field immersion, students follow the everyday lives of the rural world, collective walks, informal conversations about the history and culture of the villages to understand the village life world and worldview. They undertake resource mapping, spatial and demographic mapping as well as drawing daily, weekly monthly and yearly activities calendar to understand the struggle and strategies of survival of the rural populace. They have also employed extensive self-reflections to elaborate on the experience of the self of the other in the rural context, (that is, the researcher, in their own habitual practices such as eating, sleeping and work skills). The students rely on daily diaries and witness daily experiences without value judgement that enables reflexivity among the researchers. The diary becomes a useful way for organizing and examining experience and reactions to them as well as retrospective reflection upon the relation between them.

Institutional effects and subjects of development practice

Ideologies are realised and given material through institutionalised practice of function at a particular place that gives the effect of agency and/or structure (Althusser, 2006). It is materialised in institutions and their ritualised and bureaucratised procedural practice and the subjects they create. It is a process of meticulous spatial organisation, temporal arrangements, and functional specificities, and involves forms of knowledge, technologies of rule, and processes of self-formation that transform human beings into subjects (Mitchell, 2006). The resultant institutional effect is emergent and changeable, dependent on incessant transaction, and the point of strategic codification and crystallisation of an apparatus. Their transformation reflects genealogical variations at the level of object, subject, purpose and technologies of policy intervention, as well as the emergent convergence and selective retention into conditions of domination (Jessop, 2007). Execution and exercise of technology of rule is dependent on their interpretation by local bureaucrats and developmental actors, why these technologies are seized upon, understood, reworked and even contested by differently located individuals (Sharma and Gupta, 2006).

The second set of coursework at CDP takes students to look at themes like the environment, natural resources, and development; equality, discrimination, marginalisation and development; listening, learning and reflecting; and gender and development. These engage the researchers to develop an understanding about the historical evolution of diverse institutions staging development practice vis-a-vis nature and collective identities. The workshops on action research and group processes also introduce the students to group formation action to collectively engage with their respective village community to arrive at a problem to undertake action research on. It focuses on groups and the processes and dynamics, to establish a relationship with the community, and finding its inner voice to deepen the

research question collectively. Termed as 'arrival at the problem', it attempts to undertake research with the community for collaborative ownership of research, action and knowledge.

The purpose is to engender a small process of group transformation in the rural context by understanding dynamics ushered in the collective due to individual behaviours and actions. It delves deeper into the norms of everyday behavioral practice and the subjects they create by looking at the thinking and feelings of the group participants. Herein, active listening has to be the basic attitude as sensitive listening is the key to the total meaning of events as well as responding to the feelings within a group dynamic. This allows the researcher to articulate, share, and build linkages between thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as well as rationale for collaborative actions. In this immersion, the researchers engage and participate with the community to recognise and identity the most pressing concern facing the village. This involves understanding and revealing institutionalised practices, their location across blurred boundaries and hybrid spaces and subjective positions they create in order to understand and critically engage with these everyday practice. Students undertake group discussion and focus group discussions around issues of livelihood, health, education, rights, identity and subjectivity. They participate with the community doing collective role plays and skits and priority mapping in their pursuit of arrival at a collective problem. As discussion head towards a consensus, effort is directed towards understanding the institutionalised practices and their location, bureaucratic procedures, the subjects they create, and their perceptions in people's problematisation. The goal is to build helping relations that involve collectives to develop competencies for transformative group action and equip the collective or the group to develop and initiate action research.

The practice of action research

Taking a bottom-up, practice based understanding of power/agency, CDP believes that collaborative agency can be understood only where it is exercised. It is inherent in all social relations, articulated through discourses and institutionalized practice and takes place in a resistant social medium (Migdal, 2005). Herein governmental identities are embraced, adopted, adapted and resisted, scientific knowledg and procedures are negotiated and blurred by habitual practices that are locally significant and transnationally validated in developmental discourse (Inda, 2005). Herein, marginality is a subjective position as well as a site for resistance, where subaltern construct relations of equivalence across multiple sites of marginality, to pave way for plural and radical democratic political actions (Stoddart, 2007). Studying them involves issues of how and where they are performed, how people react to and interact with its everydayness and the subjective positions it engenders amongst them. These development practices are located in dispersed institutional and social networks through which they are coordinated and consolidated in daily lives (Corbridge, 2005; Sharma and Gupta, 2006).

Having done their village stay and study as well as their journey to the arrival at the problem for collective action, the researcher in their semester of course work look at wellbeing; justice; politics, resistance and transformation; collective action and action research. Through these

courses, researchers are exposed to a variety of developmental action as well as normative and philosophical values that guide, govern and legitimise these practices. In addition, they undertake critical action reviews of problems identified in their own village for collective action. Herein, action research is a collaborative self reflective enquiry undertaken by actors in a social situation to improve the conditions of everyday life. With such an understanding of collaborative action, they undertake their third and final field immersion, where they form collective and undertake developmental actions to address their identified problem in the village.

In the course of their action research, researchers form collectives to undertake collaborative action to generate awareness, go beyond the conventional in terms of identity, rights, spaces and sites, as well as functions performed within particular spaces. In doing so, they have addressed issues of livelihood and perceptions of health, using SHG model to discuss health concerns, collective dining to deal with caste, identity of single women, land rights of women, forest rights, mensturating women and the hybrid space they inhabit and local self-governance. They attempt to bring political transformation followed by social transformation, of the productive dimension of power and their subjects. The aim is to create socialised politics and politicised social transformation. The third level of transformation is at the level of the self through a non-coercive reordering of desire. Across these transformations, the aim is to engender mutually shared perception based on participatory dialogue by active subjects for democratisation of knowledge.

Thus, the attempt is to learn from below by reflecting on how we arrive at a problem, that is, identifying the wrong in any social situation, getting the community on board with this identification, the process of planning for the action and how it's actually happened to generate a body of knowledge about learning from below). In this writing of righting wrongs, the researchers draw upon their critical and analytical reflection on mainstream development discourse, engender self-transformation through a non-coercive reorganisation of desire in order to learn to relate and work with groups in the rural context. Based on such relationality, understanding action research is undertaken to effect and transform the rural community and institutions. In doing so, we attempt to generate a body of practicing knowledge while transforming knowledge practice, through engaged listening based comprehension of meanings behind events rather than participant observations about them.

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