



Learning is Changing

“We give lectures on environment issues to our students through PPTs in classrooms”, Prof Behera, Berhampur University 2021; a workshop on community-based learning methods gave him some new ideas and skills to take his students to communities to learn about natural environment.

“No information is reaching rural areas about Covid; we are worried”, senior government official in Delhi, June 2020; an online conversation with a couple of senior development professionals created the possibility of reaching out through NGOs and their community organisers and SHG facilitators, using local language WhatsApp groups.

The above snippets are a small part of PRIA’s 40 years of impactful journey.

When we began to facilitate participation, we recognised that the obstacles experienced in everyday life of hitherto excluded and marginalised persons and households were real. Sharing those experiences to figure out what to do differently was the starting point of learning.

Perspectives of Participatory Research helped us to begin to value lived experiences as knowledge they possessed. Bringing new ideas and information about participation required us to first value their knowledge. #KnowledgelsPower was PRIA’s motto since the beginning.

When we asked women to acquire literacy, or workers to demand compensation, or parents to send daughters to high school.... we were asking individuals and families to change - their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. We seldom realised that change entails ‘unlearning’ current habits, beliefs, and behaviours, so that new ones can be imbibed and practiced. This ‘unlearning’ entails risks of failures, which may be very costly and damaging. Hence, cautious, easy-paced, supportive and safe efforts are essential to mitigate risks and encourage change.

“I am too old to learn now; what will I do with reading & writing?” Meena Devi, 40 yrs. in rural Udaipur, circa 1978. She did agree to attend night classes and went on to become community organiser a couple of years later.

“Girls cannot run as fast as we boys, and they will always lose” Suresh 14 yrs. from village in Anantapur (Andhra Pradesh); a sports coaching program in 2014 for a week where boys and girls play various sports together made him (and his buddies) realise the strength girls have.

One of the effective ways to enable change is to provide a safe space for collective learnings. We called it ‘empowerment’- changing through an inter-linked processes of learning and organising.

Similarly, efforts to change behaviours and perspective of institutions require opportunities for them to ‘unlearn, learn & change’. When institutions are expected to become transparent and accountable to citizens, especially excluded and marginalised ones, we expect them to change; creating opportunities for institutional learning becomes critical for change to happen.



Institutions change when regulatory and policy environments change. To support such policy and regulatory changes that benefit ordinary citizens requires the voice of such citizens, based on their lived experiences and reflections. Inclusive development occurs when voices of excluded citizens are heard.

“The panchayat is run by the landlord of the village; we Dalits do not get invited to attend Gram Sabha; what is the use?” Selvi, daily wage worker 35 yrs. 2001 Coimbatore district; Voter Awareness campaign gave him knowledge about the responsibilities of a Sarpanch and how to file nomination; five years later, his Gram Panchayat received a national award.

“We have been working in these conditions of cotton dust for twenty years; nothing can be done to prevent TB”, Nathuram, Ahmedabad textile factory worker, 45 yrs., 1989; attended a workshop on diseases from cotton dust causing byssinosis, which can get him compensation, mobilised fellow workers, and first ever compensation was secured for 224 textile workers in the country in 1997.

“I don’t believe it; we never discriminate on the basis of gender here” young (29 yrs.) founder of a tech-social enterprise in Bengaluru, on receiving a complaint from a female employee in 2018; a two-hour one-on-one conversation with a gender facilitator enabled him to look at his own attitudes, and how he learnt them during his upbringing; he is now championing gender equality among start-up investors.

“We get our daughters married off after they finish studying up to class 6”, the parents of 13-year-old Soni in Panipat district, about to get married in 2006; discussions about girl’s health & teenage pregnancy with a local nurse, and meeting with school teacher to find out how intelligent Soni was, made her parents re-think their beliefs; Soni is a school teacher now, having completed B.Ed.”

#Knowledge.Voice. Democracy became PRIA’s motto in 2017 to manifest the same. Such change efforts redefine relations of power to enable the sustainability of change.

The Martha Farrell Foundation, set up in 2016 to carry forward the legacy and work of Dr. Martha Farrell, Director at PRIA, has been working on learning to facilitate change with the objective of preventing gender-based violence and sexual harassment at the workplace. Along with its partner PRIA, which is celebrating its 41st anniversary on 6th February 2023, the Foundation celebrates its 7th anniversary on 4th February 2023.

The conversation is meant to be just conversation. Listening to stories from our lived experiences will be the focus, enabled through forms of communication other than PPTs and monologues.

PLEASE JOIN US TO SHARE YOUR STORIES!