A new research culture for the marginalised in Bangladesh

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B bangladesh's population of 140 million is 88% Muslim, Hindus, at 10%, are the largest minority, while Buddhists and Christians each account for just 1%. In 2006, 1.8 million tribal people, divided among 40 tribes, adhere to religions other than Islam. Since the 2001 elections, as the independent human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra reports, Hindu families have been chased off their land and liberal Almohadi Muslims have been evicted from their villages attacked. The perpetrators are close to fundamentalist and enjoy the support, explicit or implicit, of the major political parties. In several cases everyone is aware of their identities but the authorities make no attempt to apprehend them.

In 2001, a group of Bangladeshi academics and development practitioners responded to the country's overall deteriorating climate and to the lack of interest shown in known NGOs in poor and marginalised peoples. They established a research support organisation called Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), to promote a people-centred participative approach to development. Staffed by both volunteers and professionals and partially funded by Dutch Foreign Affairs, RIB focuses on the poor and the marginalised, in the words of RIB Chairman Shamsul Bari, to 'humanise the poverty discourse'.

The gonobeshoks: a new kind of researcher

RIB champions a research method called Participatory Action Research. PAR is based on two principles. The first is that development and poverty alleviation efforts must be founded on knowledge. Second, that development activity is undertaken without preliminary research. The second is that this research must tap the knowledge of the poor and marginalised for interventions aimed at their advancement. This is a relatively new approach for Bangladesh, where researchers need a wider range of skills than their predecessors. They have to be able to create a conducive environment for dialogue with a community and to patiently encourage the poor to recognise the knowledge they possess and to use it to find their own solutions.

So far RIB has helped sensitise some 500 researchers to the requirements of conducting research based on people's participation, and many projects have been completed using PAR's research principles. Its primary method requires the researcher and his assistants to assign a group of local volunteers the task of identifying obstacles to development and possible solutions. As a result, ordinary people become 'people researchers' or gonobeshoks. According to RIB's 2004-2005 Annual Report, 'a large number of people, counting into the thousands, have become people researchers, by discussing subjects for community action, have already initiated financial savings groups and diminished gambling and fighting. Some communities are taking collective presentations to authorities, such as in the city of Jessore, where a group of marginalised cobbler requested, and received, authorisation to set up roadside sales outlets.'

RIB often supports the research activities of local NGOs to ensure that research leads to development activities. In November 2005, I visited ten RIB-supported research projects. One was the Grambanga Unnayan Committee (GUC), a small local NGO that since 1999 has taken up the cause of the Bede, or river gypsies. Its director, A. K. Maksud, is by training an anthropologist, while many of his GUC researcher-colleagues are development practitioners. RIB offers them training, supervision and holds regular seminars on PAR issues. GUC's research on the Bede turned out to be a good example of the RIB approach.

River gypsies: refugees in their own country

The Bede themselves estimate their total population to be 1.2 million. Official estimates put their number at around half a million, as the government does not recognise those without fixed addresses and many Bede live on boats that ply the country’s rivers. Bede livelihoods vary: small business enterprises, such as selling snake bites, snakebite treatment, snake charming and trading, and offering spiritual healing services and traditional medicines. Meanwhile, rich landlords hire servants for millions of people for whom mainstream health care is too far away or too expensive.

I visited three locations to evaluate the RIB-supported GUC Bede research project. The town of Savar, a one-hour drive north of Dhaka, is home to about 4,000 Bede, most of whom reside in boats or boat-like houses built on stilts; closer to Dhaka, the Bede in the hamlet of Salipur live on a narrow plot between the highway and the river; and in the village of Laohojong, south of the capital, most Bede have given up their nomadic way of life and live in government-built houses. These communities are visibly poor.

To conduct any research at all, the Grambanga Unnayan Committee first had to gain the trust of these communities. In Savar, a Bede engineer gained that trust by talking intermediary between the people and GUC researchers. In other communities, community headmen became PAR animators who facilitated meetings with nomadic groups of ‘boat Bedes’ to discuss issues such as education, livelihood security, gender disparity, water and sanitation, and health care. As a result of discussions with NGOs and those local Bede, who became gonobeshoks, it revealed that the Bede are severely deprived of public facilities such as food, shelter, medical care and education. More than 80% live below the poverty line on less than a dollar a day.

The increasing availability of modern medicines and the expansion of the state healthcare network have increased the Bede’s poverty and isolation. Sixty-year-old Mrs Sor Banu of Salipur explained, ‘When I was 15, we had plenty of work. Nowadays people are not interested in our medicines. If they see me walking with my sack of medicines, they often shout at me. Last week someone from whom I had tapped blood refused to allow me to run away. Sometimes they harass our girls’. Male customers sometimes ask Bede women to enter their houses to perform medical services, then lock the door and rape them. ’My only son will become a petty trader. But selling our medical tools against evil eyes, induction, cold fever, bone pain or rheum will not be sufficient’.

Between 2002 and 2005 GUC’s Mak- sud collected data from 16 different sample areas, including those I visited, in order to account for the Bede’s geographical distribution. GUC researchers then tested strategies, mainly through group discussions with gonobeshoks, to include this river-nomadic community in their own development process.

Participatory action = results

The research conducted by GUC and its associated Bede groups have not much reached. The children from these communities must have access to health and education’, the Commission asserts.

Buzzword

Development agencies today all claim to include local communities in their activities, but too often their researchers and organisers simply collect and assess data and announce their proposals. RIB has chosen a different path; for starters, it has chosen different target groups, including those passed over by donors. For example, RIB agreed to work with a local NGO that wanted to conduct research among pig farmers but was unable to secure funds from either national or international NGOs.

RIB reminds us of what Paolo Freire wrote more than three decades ago in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972): ‘that participation is an empowering and educative process. From my own Bangladeshi research experience in 1974-75, I remember the risk of favouring exploited and oppressed women to their detriment. Through my conver- sations with GUC Director Maksud and other researchers, I learned that because many local NGOs have to deal with local authorities and power holders and maintain good working relations with them in order to make any progress, they do not easily fall into the trap of a one-sided and uncritical pro- apop approach. Their research reports are often one-sided.

RIB is in vague. Many who enter the RIB premises use the word, though I’m not convinced everyone uses it with the same notions in mind. One researcher working among the Santal minority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts told me the people researchers he worked with – both men and women – had not brought up gender issues, while I got the impression gender issues were something he was uncomfortable addressing.

But, overall, I am optimistic about the possibility of a new research culture in Bangladesh. A danger of any approach is that researchers will adhere to it to the detriment of those cases to which it might not apply. I met some researchers who had become too rigidly pro-PAR. While it is a sound methodology, RIB has limitations. For research in technological development of, say, a low cost test method for elephantiasis, cross-breeding of pigs or the production of natural vinegar, PAR is not of much help in the marketing realm of the end product (pig meat, vinegar, date palm syrup). PAR is efficient when investigating the supply side, but the demand side requires additional research techniques.

Reference


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Minorities have never had an easy time in Bangladesh. Since October 2001, when a four-party coalition with strong Islamist influence came to power, minority conditions have worsened. But some small disadvantaged groups, such as cobblers, pig farmers and river gypsies, have begun to organise themselves thanks to a new research approach to development.