HILARIA SOUNDARI*

Contemporary Scenario of Participatory Social Work Research in Rural India

Abstract

Rural India, holding 68.84% of its population as per the census of 2011 (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011), stands with an outstanding model of participatory practices in social work research. As the "we feeling" is common among the rural people, indeed it becomes more feasible to enable them to participate in the research process. Based on the divergent socio-economic and cultural background of the rural Indian situation, choosing the best research practices becomes a herculean task. It may certainly enable the bringing into the limelight the struggles and strengths of the marginalized and less privileged of the rural society. The present study strives in identifying the relevant research tools for rural population, which is relatively open to the participatory research approach. It highlights the relevance and suitability of adopting these methods in social work research, especially the collaborative research practices, combining the researcher and service users' perspective which are found to be more effective and informative. The various constraints and difficulties faced by the researchers also are portrayed and examined in relation with the rural study at the grass root level.

Introduction

Participatory practices are one of the vital components of social work research in India. As the community and "we-feeling" among the people is predominant, the grass-root level researches are able to be more participative and users centered. Thus the field of social work has emerged

---

*   Centre for Applied Research, The Gandhigram Rural Institute, Gandhigram 624302, TN, India.

with a more open and wider understanding of systems, structures, policies, trends and developments in academia, practicum, research and innovation. It enables in enhancing the participation by providing a platform for researchers, policy makers, experts and relevant stakeholders to address social problems and issues. These effective responses to the changing dynamics of social work research involve several key factors, such as acknowledging the divide between knowledge and practice, learning from experience, and approaches from the scientific research perspective, documentation and dissemination of research findings. However, Indian social work research is yet to invent or formulate the relevant social work methods pertaining to Indian culture and to promote empirical research towards innovative social policy making. The present study examines the challenges of social work research and its scope in rural India. It highlights the importance of participatory research from the perspective of the less privileged and portrays the choice of tools of participatory research in the rural milieu. It also intends to display the innovations required in the effective participatory social work research in rural India.

Challenges of social work research in rural India

With the rapid social changes of the technological era and globalization, individual, family and community living are posed with numerous threats. Whilst their economic situations have become central issues for the families, sharing of resources within the family is seldom being done. In India, the fast growing unplanned cities and mushrooming towns is another major factor which affects the smooth functioning of the society.

Urban centred practicum

In India, almost 90% of the institutes and schools of social work are located in the urban area. The distanced physical proximity keeps the rural poor alienated by the urban based social work education. Even spending a week in the rural camp as part of academic studies, often this is done with high reluctance to manage this within the limited infrastructure. Large numbers of social work agencies such as older people's homes, de-addiction centres, juvenile homes, short stay homes for destitute women and mental health centres (Yanca, 2010) are placed in urban or suburban limits. Thus the social work trainees' mobility is limited to the urban areas. Thus their research arena is largely restricted to urban avenues.

Negligence of rural areas

As per the Indian national census (2011), 68.84% of the population is still living in rural India. Except for the students who have opted for community development who go for a single semester of rural placement, the professional social workers or social work trainees hardly reach out to the rural poor. In rural settings, the place of practicing social casework and group work are not often feasible. The non-availability of psychiatric clinics, geriatric care centres and child care clinics in rural India has limited the scope of holistic health for the rural population. Especially as the psychiatric patients need periodical checkup and follow up, due to distance, their mental health is being neglected. The limited exposure to the rural realities given to the social work trainees is seldom able to attract the social work professionals to undertake research in rural villages.

Scope of social work research in rural India

While Indian social progress is prioritized for its economic development, it struggles with uneven expansion of social opportunities such as regional divide, rural – urban divide, gender divide and literacy divide. Considering the regional divide, there has been a vast divide within the states. Among 35 States/Union Territories of India, only 14 were able to achieve development goals of the United Nations by 2015. For instance, in these under-developed states, malnourishment of children is even worse, as only 4 out of 29 major States of the country were able to attain development goals targets for reaching the targets for the proportion of under-weight children below three years of age.

Participatory research

Participatory research involves a whole range of powerless groups of people, the exploited, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. The key elements of participatory research involve people, power and praxis. In this regard, people are involved in the process of critical inquiry that informs the researcher. This research responds to the experiences and needs of people involved by listening, observing and taking stock of the situation. Power is crucial to the construction of reality, language, meanings and rituals of truth. Praxis recognizes the inseparability of theory and practice and critical awareness of the personal-political dialectic. People are part of the participatory research unlike the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), which

had been a bridge between formal surveys and unstructured research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation studies (Crawford, 1997). It had been systematic but semi-structured activity out in the field by a multidisciplinary team and is designed to obtain new information and to formulate new hypotheses about rural life. In this approach, people themselves collect the data and then process and analyze the information. Consequently the knowledge generated is used to promote actions for change or to improve the living standard of the rural people. In other words, people are primary beneficiaries of the knowledge creation.

Need for participatory social work research

Questionnaires used for collecting data are often proved lengthy, costly and applicable for the learned population. Tools such as an interview schedule are often used within rushed site visits by researchers to collect haphazard data from local elites. As the social work profession focuses on the target group of research the vulnerable groups are based on gender, caste and class. The details are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Target Groups of Social Work Research in India

Gender	Caste	Class
Women	Dalits	Poor
Adolescents	Tribals	Unemployed
Children	Nomads	Slum dwellers

Source: Author's compilation.

Other vulnerable groups include victims of HIV/AIDS, cancer, tuberculosis, malaria and physically challenged. The social concerns of malnutrition, anemia, diabetes, hypertension, etc. are some of the important areas of social work research. Juvenile delinquents, mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts and prisoners also remain areas of social work.

Concerns of participatory social work research

Knowledge generated by social work research can be the basis of sustainable social development. In this regard, three dimensions that demand attention and place knowledge at the service of development, convert knowledge into value via applications and sharing good practice

to ensure widespread benefits (V. Lynn Meek, 2009). These effective responses to the changing dynamics of participatory social work research involve several key factors, such as acknowledging the divide between knowledge and practice, learning from experience, approaches from scientific research perspectives, documentation and dissemination of research findings.

Combinations of professional social work

The blend of social work education, field work practicum and research are yet to find the right combinations. Often those who are teaching social work are alienated from field work realities. Those who are full time involved in participatory field work are seldom associated with the social work academicians. It has created a wider gap in the social work research. Change is a natural, but in a technological era, the changes are too rapid. In the social work profession the fieldwork is a positive factor, which exposes trainees consistently to these realities. Taking stock of these changes and converging them to the scientific research still needs greater attention. The field learning of participatory social work has a long way to go in blending it with the professional social work research. This blend of actively participating in social work practice and converting it as part of social work research can unveil the rich experience of being educated by the people at the grass roots level.

Contextualization of social work

Though the first Indian school of social work (Tata Institute of Social Science) commenced in 1936 (Chowdhry, 1964), the social work research methods or its participatory practices are still being adopted from the west and has not been contextualized or inculturated in the multicultural Indian land. There has been a greater demand for professionally trained social workers in south India especially after 2004 (Tsunami). It has paved a way for increased number of schools and institutes offering social work education and research. It has enabled the extension of fieldwork of people's participation and micro research at a different level. This enrichment of learning from across the practicum and the empirical studies can be seen as important to be shared with the larger community of professional social workers, for which the new technology including online learning, video conferencing can be applied (McCarty, 2002) in the participatory research. For the social work trainees, e-supervision can enable in expanding the boundaries of field practicum of involvement of the target population. In

the more recent trends, mobile apps and computer software are developed by schools of social work to enhance the participation and involvement of the target population, social work educators and the trainees.

Professionalization of social welfare

Social welfare administration in the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in India requires professional approaches (Sachdeva, 2007). The NGO sectors also are faced with various challenges. As the Government and foreign funding agencies have reduced their allocations, NGOs are facing an acute financial crunch. The Government has come out with strict rules and regulations, which in turn affects the enhanced contribution of the NGOs. Even the available funds in the Government can be possibly seen as being distanced by corruption and red-tape. It has limited the avenue of appointing professionally trained social workers in the NGOs sector who had been largely encouraging the participation of people at all level. As mentioned by Mariusz Granosik (2006), it is unable to meet the professional action of touching both types of realities of Government – Non Government sectors and synchronizing the bilateral needs, expectations and possibilities.

The social action model focuses on the review of social policies and practices that continue to disempower and oppress the marginalized people (Patil, 2013) in terms of their participation. But social action as a method of social work has not made much widespread impact in the recent past, in comparison with the increased practice of disaster management and development ventures. Though there are numerous human right violations such as female children's right to be born, educated and employed, they were treated more as isolated events than mobilizing the larger community.

Overcoming field realities

Despite some concerns of social work research with the participatory approach, and with the researcher being a budding social work professional, the current author in her post-graduation field work has been implementing the participatory research. Hilaria Soundari (2006) in her doctoral research with rural dalit women, who are in the lowest rung of the Indian caste system – in assessing their empowerment, found the participatory research had brought enriching information. Later in the post doctoral research on the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for empowering rural women she also revealed important realities in struggles, challenges and successes stories. In her studies, the author is highlighting the various tools in executing participatory research in rural India.

Tools for participatory research

Some of the tools of participatory research include transect walk, triangulation, social mapping, time line, seasonality calendar, trend analysis, mobility map and semi structured interview. They are presented below:

Transect walk and observation

The transect walk is undertaken as one of the initial step of entering into the village. It exposes the geographical frontiers of the locality and enables the researcher to have a panoramic view. During this walk, observation steps is an essential tool to undertake a review of physical structures, public spaces and private households. The following picture depicts the observation process taking place in the informal conversations with the rural women and the researcher.

Picture 1. Community interaction before map creation

Source: Copyright by Menaka

For instance, the transect walk and observation revealed that there were separate areas of housing in the different streets in these villages. The poor housing with no public infrastructures were the places the dalit women lived. The application of observation aids improvisation, particularly when carrying out diagramming techniques, were valuable.

Triangulation

Triangulation is simply a method of crosschecking about the information collected from each method. These are often carried out in groupings around methods, discipline, individuals or groups, location, types of information, points in a discussion, to crosscheck the data and information of the credibility and validity with the oral and written sources. In the rural areas, the perspective of any information shared by the poor, marginalized and downtrodden often vary widely from the ruling or the elite groups. From social work intervention, triangulation had proved to provide holistic portrayal to a greater extent.

Social mapping

Social mapping is a most popular method of participatory research. It is a very effective technique to stimulate the participants to recognize the wealth of knowledge and skills in all communities. It is a vibrant and dynamic tool to assess how the rural areas are far from the main stream

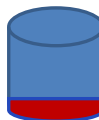**Map 1.** Social map of Kattunaickenpatti
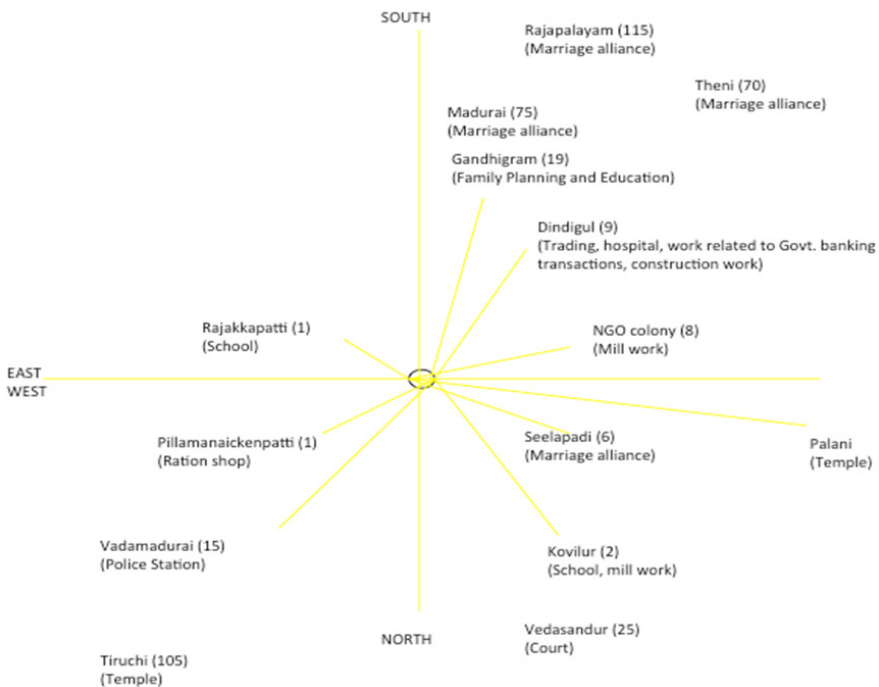
Source: own research

of life and how far they need to keep travelling to have access to basic amenities, communication, etc. The geographical distance and the lack of transport facilities have been barriers to improving their lives. Often their agricultural products and allied commodities are bought at meagre rates as they are not able to reach out to the markets easily. The social map also indicates from that particular village, how many kilometres the villagers are travelling to other towns and villages with its purpose of mobility.

Trend analysis

Trend analysis is yet another important participatory method. It attempts to study people's accounts of the past, of how things of importance to them have changed at different points of time. It is used to explore temporal dimensions with a focus on change. For instance, the water level in a village and how over the past few decades it had been increasing or decreasing can enable them to plan for further cultivation. It is also helps in understanding the dairy animals more, female birth rate, age at marriage, etc.

Figure 1. Trend Analysis: An Illustration of water level/irrigation in a village

| Period \ Irrigation	1997	2007	2017
Source of irrigation			
Number of wells	30	50	75
Water level in the well			
Mode of lifting water	Oil engine	Oil engine and electric motor	Electric motor only

Source: own research

Seasonal calendar

Seasonal calendar is a diagram drawn by the people with locally available material to provide a model of trends in the main activities, problem and opportunities of the community throughout the annual cycle. Moreover it indicates the level of rainfall, time of planting or harvesting and

the season of the fish catch. For the researcher it enables prediction of social and economic trends of that milieu. Based on that they are able to make necessary arrangements too to plan for their productive activities and to be prepared for the adverse situations.

Figure 2. Seasonal livelihood activity of fishing
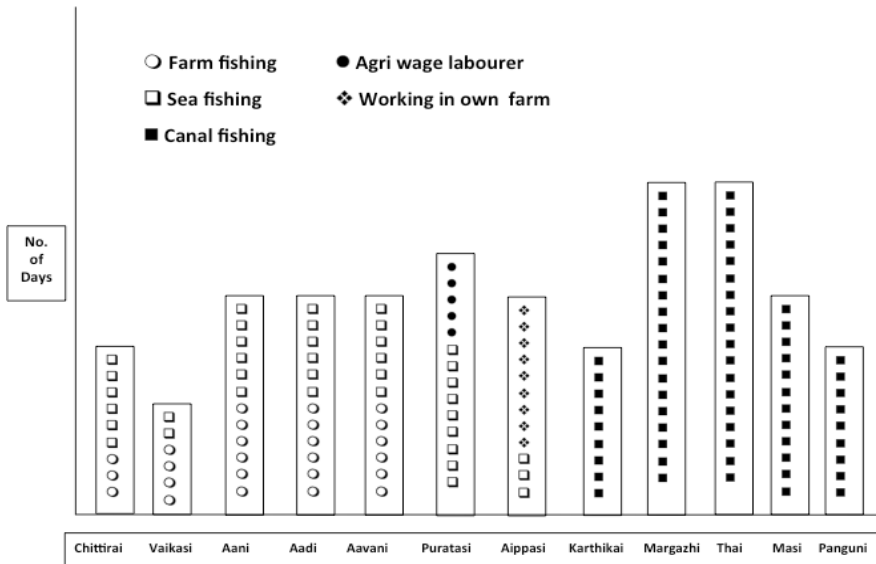
Innovations in participatory social work research

Innovation can be seen as the process that renews something that exists and not, as is commonly assumed, the introduction of something new (Ponnuswami, 2011) in participatory social work research. Thus, innovation intends to make a systemic analysis of a threefold process. Firstly to understand the specific Indian socio-political, economic and cultural dimensions within a participatory research approach, secondly to analyze the documenting participatory research systems, and thirdly to look forward to strategies to nurture this research through adequate practices, policies and partnerships. The documentation processes need to adopt the latest technological developments. It certainly calls for the function of social work research academia to become a prime source of knowledge and innovation at all levels.

Theory building in participatory social work research

In India, though there has been a long tradition of intense fieldwork and active participative community involvement, very little from the research perspective of theoretical development has been contributed. It is vital to undertake research to address the present and future challenges in the social work profession in an effective systematic manner. In this way, participatory social research can be utilized for a range of purposes such as pedagogical and theoretical development, budget justification, risk identification, and monitoring for quality learning. This type of development calls for an extension of investigations, to venture beyond conducting and documenting programme evaluation, to tackle some of the more controversial and ambiguous issues currently encountered in social work field education (Maidment, 2003). For instance, rural widows, unwed mothers, aged people require greater interventions and theoretical contributions to address emerging social problems with intense levels of participation.

These various practicums of social work can be converted into participatory learning theories. For instance, self-help is one of the concepts introduced by social work practice in the empowerment process (Adams, 1996) and it was successfully implemented in organizing women as Self Help Groups (SHGs) in rural India. It was viewed as one of the best social group work practices in the recent past. However most of its learning is minimized due to economic or microfinance factors, limiting its absorption into social group work practice.

Participatory thrust for rural social work

Though a large proportion of the Indian population lives in rural areas, it has not attracted and retained the trained professionals to work in rural and remote communities (Hodgkin, 2002). The previous research has identified the need for social work programmes to better prepare students for working in the rural context by providing rural subjects, rural content in other subjects, and rural field education opportunities (Lome, 2000). Thus the participatory thrust for rural social work has to be focused in social work institutions located in cities within a proactive approach to networking and supporting rural field educators and researchers.

Geriatric care in urban areas is largely managed by home nursing care and institutionalized care for senior citizens. These practices may not be viable from rural perspectives due to geographical locations, economic affordability and mental disposition to stay away from home. Therefore the search for alternatives is needed. For instance rural community based

geriatric day care centres may be preferred than being totally displaced from their homes. It may require the arrangements for commutation, entertainment and nourishment while mobilizing the participation of the local people in the rural areas.

Conclusion

Social work research in India is facing numerous challenges in its fast changing society. The search for knowledge and alternatives can be promoted by scientific research in relevant fields effectively with participatory approaches. Having viewed the challenges of social work research in rural India, it has highlighted the importance of participatory research from a rural perspective. As a part of innovations, participatory social work research in addition needs to have a theory building and interdisciplinary approach. The convergence of teaching and fieldwork exposure can enable standardized contributions to the knowledge store of participatory social work research. The rural centred research helps in reaching out to this large section of a neglected population. Yet, Indian social work research approaches are ready to formulate and standardize more relevant participatory social work methods pertaining to Indian culture and to promote the empirical researches towards greater innovative social policy making. This integrated participatory approach in turn would ensure the quality of social work research and support the relevant social policy making from the wider Indian context.

References

Adams R. (1996), *Social Work and Empowerment*, Macmillan Press, London.

Chowdhry P. (1964), *Introduction to Social Work*, Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi.

Crawford I.M. (1997), *Marketing Research and Information Systems*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome.

Granosik M. (2006), *Professional Action in Social Work – An Interactional Perspective*, [in:] A. Heimgartner (ed.), *Face of Research on European Social Development. Community Work*, *Civil Society, and Professionalisation of Social Work*, LIT Verlag, Wien.

Hodgkin S. (2002), *Competing demands, competing solutions, differing constructions of the problem of recruitment and retain of frontline rural child protection staff*, "Australian Social Work", vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 193–203.

Lome B. (2000), *Rural social workers and their jobs: An empirical study*, "Australian Social Work", vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 21–28. DOI: 10.1080/03124070008415553.

Maidment J. (2003), *Developing trends in social work education*, "Women in welfare education", vol. 6, (Special Field Education Edition), pp. 1–12.

McCarty D., Clancy C. (2002), *Telehealth: Implications for social work practice*, "Social Work", vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 153–161, https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/47.2.153.

Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner (2011), available at: http://censusindia.gov.in/ (accessed: 23.06.2018).

Patil A. R. (2013), *Community Organization and Development: An Indian Perspective*, PHI Learning Private Limited, New Delhi.

Ponnuswami I. (2011), *Professional Social Work: Best Practices and Innovations in Teaching, Research and Extension*, Authorspress, New Delhi.

Sachdeva D.R. (2007), *Social Welfare Administration in India*, Kitab mahal, New Delhi.

Selvam V., Carunagaran V.M., Ravichandran K.K., Mani K.G., Evanjalin G., Beula J. (2003), *Joint Mangrove Management in Tamil Nadu: Process, Experiences and Prospects*, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.

Soundari H. (2006), *Dalit Women: Dimensions of Empowerment*, Vaigarai Pathipagam, Dindigul.

V. Lynn Meek U. T.-L. (2009), *Higher Education, Research and Innovation: Changing Dynamics*, University of Kassel, Kassel.

Yanca L.C. (2010), *Social Work Practice; A Generalist Approach*, Pearson Prentice Hall, New Jersey.