

Why Participatory Research? Equity, Voice and Empowerment

DR. ASHWANI KUMAR¹

ABSTRACT

Revolving around policy experience in monitoring and evaluation of historic rights-based social policy Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of the researcher in various parts of the country, this narrative research note explores methodological diversity in the practices of social science. Closing the methodological divides, the author advances the case of an inclusive participatory research for equity, voice and empowerment of poor and marginalized in India. It claims rather provocatively that participatory research methods not only link academic research with real world involvement and action but also far more effective in capturing and measuring the multi-dimensionality of well-being of poor and marginalized at the societal level.

METHODOLOGICAL HOSTILITY OR DIVERSITY?

In the social science and policy literature, conventional research methodologies have increasingly faced major normative and methodological challenges from rights-based social welfare policies. With the focus on social accountability, transparency and equity from the perspectives of poor and vulnerable groups, the implementation of historic rights-based social policies like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), National Food Security Act (NFSA) and various innovative welfare policies in the states of India has led to radical churning in the monitoring and evaluation research methods.

¹ Prof (Dr.) Ashwani Kumar is a Professor and Senior Fellow of Indian Council of Social Science Research at Center for Public Policy, Habitat and Human Development, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai). He has been a visiting fellow to leading global universities and think tanks including London School of Economics (LSE) and Korean Development Institute (KDI). He is also a former member of Central Employment Guarantee Council (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India). This narrative research note draws on his vast experience of monitoring and rapid assessment of implementation of MGNREGA as member of committee for 'National Award for Effective Initiative under MGNREGA Administration' in more than twenty states of India.

Though interdisciplinarity is often celebrated in the social sciences and also in the pedagogies of law and development, but bitter and divisive methodological differences define dominant modes of methodological practices in social sciences. And it gets worse when diverse methods are applied to evaluation of development policies in general. The so-called sibling rivalry between quantitative and qualitative methods (Q2), aggregative versus particular, positivist versus reflexive or the disciplinary antagonism between the data collection through large n surveys versus intensive, immersive village-level studies(ethnography) is entrenched beyond imagination in the discursive practices of social sciences². We all know the battle between proponents of methodological individualism (rational choice) and practitioners of holism (embedded hermeneutics) drives the methodological imaginary of social sciences.³ Besides issues of specialization, tastes, preferences and skills of individual researcher, disciplinary hostility continues unabated. In a brilliant review of citations patterns from leading journals, researcher Metin Cosgel writes that “economists rely on models and theories to hypothesize about reality, approach it from a macro perspective, construct general categories and stylized facts, remain detached from actual events and subjects, focus on outcomes, and use secondary sources to gather quantitative data. Anthropologists, on the other hand, observe reality up-close, maintain a micro perspective, attend particulars, consider actual people and events, focus on the process leading to outcomes, and use field research to gather qualitative data”⁴.

Though conscious of “unsuspected areas of potential agreement’ and “legitimate rock-bottom differences”, major scholars and practitioners of development studies have noted not only absence of ‘Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists’ but also pointed to a deeper normative and “epistemological” crisis in the social sciences⁵. Responding to the lack of ‘cross-boundary conversations between economists and

² Bardhan, Pranab (ed). (1989) *Conversations between economists and anthropologists: methodological Issues in measuring economic change in rural India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³ Bhargava, Rajeev (1993) *Individualism in social science: forms and limits of methodology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴ Metin Cosgel, (2005) “Conversations between Anthropologists and Economists’, *Economics Working Papers*. 200529. http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/econ_wpapers/200529

⁵ Bardhan Pranab & Isha Ray (2006) “Methodological Approaches to the Question of the Commons” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 54, No. 3, April, pp. 655-676.

anthropologists', eminent Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that "At bottom, in my opinion, are not issues about sampling size, respondent error...though these are important issues...The deeper issue is epistemological."⁶ However, this issue of epistemological crisis worsened further with the increasing influence of Michel Foucault on the governmentality practices in social science research. He famously argued that dominant governance practices in quantitative methodologies such as measurement, classification and observation of individuals for the purpose of census and other government related purposes make individuals disciplined and governable 'population' rather than citizens for legitimation of dominant modes of power⁷. The methodological consequence of Foucault's genealogical approach is that the role of the researchers is to reveal the hidden, contingent discourses of the power that through this method, contest notions of regimes of discipline and surveillance in the society. In other words, methodological choices are never innocent of dynamics of social power working through every day disciplinary practices of social sciences as 'power is everywhere', diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' Foucault asserted.

Given the larger issues of epistemological crisis and contested 'regimes of truth' in the debate on methodological diversity or hostility among social scientists, leading economist Pranab Bardhan in a seminal piece initiated a conversation around key epistemological dichotomies of autonomy versus embeddedness, outcomes versus processes and parsimony versus complexity to advance the argument for a far more inclusive social science methodological landscape⁸. Taking the debate on methodological pluralism further, we note that there are no easy answers to how methodological differences are concentrated, embodied and practiced in the social sciences, and briefly explore diverse methodological practices and propose a hybrid participatory research methodology for capturing the realities of equity, voice and empowerment of poor through a case study of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

⁶ Appadurai, Arjun (1989) 'Small-scale techniques and large-scale objectives.' In Pranab Bardhan (ed) 'The Economic Theories of Agrarian Institutions', Oxford University Press: 250 – 282.

⁷ Foucault, Michel (1991) 'Governmentality', In G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds.) *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

⁸ *supra*, note 2

MAKING STRANGE FAMILIAR - RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods are conventionally divided into quantitative, qualitative and participatory branches- each with differing underlying epistemologies, approaches, tools and techniques. Quantitative, qualitative and participatory approaches have different disciplinary origins, developed distinctive tools and each has developed its critique of the other approaches. In development and policy research, quantitative methods have typically been the main focus, with qualitative and participatory methods often relegated to desirable 'frills'. In all good research whether quantitative qualitative, or participatory, however, the major goal is inference because scientific research is designed to make descriptive or explanatory inference on the basis of empirical information⁹. In their celebrated work 'Designing Social Enquiry', Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba famously argued that the "differences between the quantitative and qualitative traditions are only stylistic and are methodologically and substantively unimportant. All good research can be understood—indeed, is best understood—to derive from the same underlying logic of inference. Both quantitative and qualitative research can be systematic and scientific. Historical research can be analytical, seeking to evaluate alternative explanations through a process of valid causal inference. History, or historical sociology, is not incompatible with social science".¹⁰ Keeping this appreciation of methodological diversity/ pluralism in mind, and also recognizing deeper epistemological differences between research methods, here, we briefly explain major strands of research methodologies in assessing development policies in general.

Quantitative Methods

Quantitative methods refer to the use of systematic empirical investigation of social phenomena through statistical, mathematical or numerical data or computational techniques. Data collected through polls, questionnaires, and surveys, or by manipulating pre-existing statistical data, quantitative methods focus on generalizing findings across time and space. Scholars agree that there are generally four main types of quantitative research; Descriptive, Correlational, Causal-Comparative/Quasi-Experimental, and Experimental Research. Largely influenced by methodological individualism

⁹ King, Gary, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba (1993) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ *ibid*

of rational choice practitioners of economics and risk-averse economists and policy makers, it has its origins in August Comte's positivist methodological framework. Positivism is based on the use of the scientific method through factual observation to empirically test hypotheses and predict outcomes of social action. Auguste Comte in an attempt to unite the natural and social sciences under a common philosophy and scientific method maintained that the aim and purpose of social research was the discovery of the natural laws governing human behavior through the collection and analysis of empirical data. In other words, Comte's positivist science was concerned only with establishing observable empirical relationships or laws between phenomena and abandoned completely any attempt to explore or explain the inner workings of people or societies. Using Comte's positivist methodology, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim used data on the average rates of suicide for a number of European countries to arrive at the general theory that suicide occurs (at least partly) as a result of weak levels of social control and low levels of social integration¹¹. Using the notion of 'falsification', philosopher Karl Popper who "concentrated mainly on practical problems of the methodology of the social sciences" claimed that good theories were empirically testable claims that survived repeated attempts of falsification, i.e., attempts to prove that a theory was invalid. In other words, Karl Popper asserted that if a theory was testable and incompatible with possible empirical observations, it was falsifiable (scientific), if not, it was unscientific. According to Popper, scientific progress required falsifiable theories and their refutations.¹².

In quantitative analysis, casual explanations require repeated/ iterated empirical observations while keeping individuals (being observed) separable from their endogenous moral and cultural habits or norms in which they are embedded. Privileging parsimony over complexity and focusing on outcomes rather than processes in shaping individual choices and social outcomes, quantitative methods focus on generalization of findings/ outcomes. Unlike qualitative or participatory research methods, the findings from quantitative research can usually be replicated or repeated, given its high reliability. No wonder, quantitative methods have greater 'theoretical generalizability and practical policy relevance' in the

¹¹ Durkheim Emile (1895) *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Free Press; Expanded, Updated edition (February 25, 2014)

¹² Popper, Karl (1959) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, First English edition published 1959 by Hutchinson & Co.

literature of social science. Commenting on the strength and weakness of quantitative methods, Pranab Bardhan and Isha Ray argue that “methodological individualism, utility maximization and exogenous preferences together create what might be called a ‘thin’ theory of human action¹³ but it is this thinness that gives microeconomic models their precision, parsimony and predictive power”¹⁴. Note, development researchers point out that quantitative methods can be used to collect qualitative data—as when open-ended or “subjective” response questions are included in large surveys¹⁵. Furthermore, quantitative methods have become more popular in conducting evaluation of development programs and policies because they are best suited to measuring levels and changes in impacts and to drawing inferences from observed statistical relations between those impacts and other covariates. But development researchers have also pointed out that quantitative methods are less effective in understanding process—that is, the mechanisms by which a particular intervention instigates a series of events that ultimately result in the observed impact. Also, quantitative methods often fail to reach and decipher the life worlds of poor, marginalized and excluded communities, groups and individuals.

Following are some of the commonly used quantitative methods in policy analysis:

- Survey research(Statistical surveys and questionnaires)
- Chi-square test
- Cluster analysis
- Regression analysis
- Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

Recently advances in the statistical methods and computational technologies have led to rise of new quantitative methods such as RCT (randomized control trial), quasi-experimental, machine language/

¹³ Taylor, Michael (1988)'Rationality and revolutionary collective action' In M. Taylor (ed) Rationality and revolution. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ supra, note 5

¹⁵ Ravallion, Martin, (2008) "Evaluating Anti-Poverty Programs," in Paul Schultz and John Strauss (eds.) Handbook of Development Economics Volume 4, Amsterdam: North-Holland.

translation, artificial intelligence, quantitative remote sensing and game-theory inspired simulation techniques. Drawing on results from randomized control trials of the impact of social policies in various parts of the world and led by development economists Abhijeet Banerjee and Esther Duflo, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) has radicalized the arena of quantitative methodologies. By applying principles and tools of behavioural economics, the so-called 'pragmatic rebels' seems to have engineered a 'revolution in evaluation' of social policies.¹⁶ Though sceptical of validity and generalizability of their findings, policy makers generally agree that the RCT and other similar methods have made the global fight against poverty more pronounced and effective.

Qualitative methods

They have their origins in the major branches of social sciences and humanities: sociology, anthropology, geography and history. In opposition to Comte's positivist methodology, Max Weber urged sociologists to go beyond scientific explanation to 'accomplish something that is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals'.¹⁷ While Comte adopted a more or less deterministic and reductive view that human beings are subject to invariable laws which govern their behavior, Weber, and his colleagues took the opposing view that these so-called 'laws' were no more than thick narrative accounts of human activity; that is to say, social and psychological theories are interpretive rather than causal.

Inspired by Max Weber's call for an interpretive understanding of action and influenced by pioneering works of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and political scientist James Scott, qualitative methods focus on holistic understanding of reality and socially embedded individuals and they also encompasses a variety of specific procedures for collecting data, ranging from life history interviews to direct observation of social interaction to embedded participant observation.¹⁸ In their analysis at the specific social locations/ sites, the researchers directly interact with those whom he or

¹⁶ Banerjee Abhijit V. and Esther Duflo (2011) *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, Public Affairs, New York

¹⁷ Weber, Max, (1949) *The Methodologies of the Social Sciences*, Free Press: June 1

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz (1963) *Agricultural involution: the process of ecological change in Indonesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

she is studying.¹⁹ They differ from quantitative methods in aiming, not primarily at precise measurement of pre-determined hypotheses, but holistic understanding of complex realities and processes where even the questions and hypotheses emerge cumulatively and intuitively as the investigation progresses.²⁰ Qualitative methods are therefore based on data collection and analysis which focus on interpreting the meaning of social phenomena based on the views of the participants of a particular social reality. In contrast to quantitative methods, researchers in qualitative analysis are comfortable working with a small number of cases, or even a single case.²¹ Also, qualitative researchers have a better understanding of reciprocity and group dynamics in a given social context. For instance, anthropologist Appadurai critiqued survey research methods that treated the household as an autonomous choice-making unit and he argued that “reciprocal relationships between households are central to the choices made by their individual members”²². True, the few-cases or single case methodology of qualitative research constrains and limits the theoretical import and generalizability of findings/outcomes but qualitative researchers produce a better insight into the complex human behavior, and provide rich accounts of social life and also a ‘a thick theory of human agency’. Therefore, most qualitative researchers or ethnographers don’t hold their methods to the conventional standards of ‘positive science’. Instead, they consider their methods grounded in a “reflexive science” and interpretive judgments. Following are the some of the major tools of Qualitative Methods: Case study; Analytic induction; Archival research; Content analysis; Ethnography; Focus group; Process tracing/mapping; Historical method; Life history; Longitudinal study; Morphological analysis; Participant observation; Semi-structured interview; Structured interview; Textual analysis etc.

Participatory Action Research methods

Participatory action research is a community-centric research approach that emphasizes participation and social action, often together.

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, The Basic Books.

²⁰ Scott, James, C (1985) *The Weapons of the Weak*, Yale University.

²¹ Ragin, Charles (1987) *The comparative method: moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²² supra, note 6

Participatory research method was first used by Paulo Freire a radical activist on Adult education in Brazil who defined world-mediated, mutual approach to education that encouraged the co-creation of knowledge practices.²³ But the participatory methods came into global prominence when they were used to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development projects and programmes in the early 1980s.²⁴ In the 1980s, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), a variant of participatory method, was developed and widely used by Robert Chambers from Institute for Development Studies at University of Sussex.²⁵ In the 1990s, RRA was replaced by Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In fact, participatory research, more popularly known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is actually 'a family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance, analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act'.²⁶ In fact, the goal of participatory research is to 'facilitate a dialogue, rather than extract information, that helps the poor learn about themselves and thereby gain new insights that lead to social change ("empowerment")'. In his classic works "Whose reality counts?"²⁷ and "Rural Development; Putting the Last the first"²⁸, Robert Chambers argued for a totally new way of thinking about and doing 'development', calling for a complete shift towards approaches that are more 'community-driven and process-orientated'.²⁹ Participatory research methods also benefited from emergent literature on social movements, arguing that, in their struggle for livelihoods, poor and marginalized developed 'a sense of identity and collectivity'³⁰. Participatory

²³ Mikkelsen, Britha. (1995) *Methods for Development Work and Research: A Guide for Practitioners*. New Delhi: Sage Publications

²⁴ Narayan, Deepa (1995) *Toward Participatory Research*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

²⁵ Robb, Caroline (2002) *Can the Poor Influence Policy? Participatory Poverty Assessments in the Developing World*. Rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund.

²⁶ Chambers, Robert (October 1992) *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory*, IDS Discussion Paper 311.

²⁷ Chambers Robert (1997) "Whose Reality Counts: Putting the Last First", ITDG Publishing.

²⁸ Chambers, Robert (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, John Wiley and Sons.

²⁹ Kumar, Somesh, and Robert Chambers (2002) *Methods for Community Participation*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

³⁰ Gadgil, Madhav and Ramachandra Guha (1993) *This fissured land: an ecological history of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press

research is both a range of methods and an ideological perspective.³¹ In contrast to nomothetic research traditions in quantitative research which can be carried out in all sorts of spatial and temporal conditions, participatory research requires a democratic social and political context. Its fundamental principles are that the subjects of the research become involved as partners in the process of the enquiry, and that their knowledge and capabilities are respected and valued. In capturing “dynamics, processes and relations” of the community in the research focus, it seeks to understand the world by trying to mitigate the structural and institutional constraints in which men and women make their own history. Not surprisingly, participatory methods are conducted in groups in opposition to quantitative methods’ fascination for ‘atomized individuals’. Explaining the real-world experience of participatory method World Bank researchers Vijayendra Rao and Michael Woolcock write that “in PRA (participatory rural appraisal) exercises, a skilled facilitator helps villagers or slum dwellers generate tangible visual diagrams of the processes that lead to deprivation and illness, of the strategies that are used in times of crisis, and of the fluctuation of resource availability and prices across different seasons. Eliciting information in this format helps the poor to conceive of potentially more effective ways to respond (in ways that are not obvious *ex ante*) to the economic, political, and social challenges in their lives”³².

In contrast to qualitative method, a researcher who lives with the respondents, observes their practices, participates in some fashion in their daily lives, and asks people why they took some action, participatory action researchers also attempt the change the world they explore and also proactively work to ameliorate the conditions of people especially poor and marginalized. Often participatory researchers see themselves as empathetic rather than neutral observers, or interpreters of speech and action ‘from the inside’. In other words, participatory action or equity research emphasizes collection inquiry and action grounded in the local experience and social history of the place. In contrast to positivist quantitative methods or anthropomorphic qualitative methods, participatory research methods emphasize eclectic methodological

³¹ Escobar, Arturo and Sonia Alvarez (1992) *The making of social movements in Latin America: identity, strategy, and democracy*. Boulder: Westview Press

³² Rao, Vijayendra and Michael Woolcock (2003) “Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches in Program Evaluation”, in Francois J. Bourguignon and Luiz Pereira da Silva (eds.) *The Impact of Economic Policies on Poverty and Income Distribution: Evaluation Techniques and Tools* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 165-90

pluralism; improvisation and innovation; adaptive iteration; triangulation; plural perspectives; optimal ignorance and appropriate imprecision; and being open, alert and inquisitive in conducting policy evaluations for pro-poor social policies.³³ Thus, participatory research is ultimately about relationships and power. The key relationships are between the researcher and the researched, and between local people and those actors they see as powerful and who affect their lives. Participatory researchers act as facilitators and work towards attaining equality in these two relationships. Participatory researchers are also aware that the notion of community is not unproblematic and communities are not innocent of power dynamics as 'individuals embedded in reciprocity is often rooted into unequal relations and multiple notions of interests'.³⁴ With the acceptance of participatory research approaches by various funding bodies (for example, the Department of Health in England and the World Bank, UNDP, Ford Foundation), there are a growing number of development programs and anti-poverty policies that stipulate the use of participatory research strategies in the funded projects (government or non-governmental organizations).³⁵ As the participatory research has become more popular with the governments and the donor agencies, it has also faced criticism of becoming a 'new tyranny' of de-politicized development research and unjust and illegitimate exercise of power, naive expectations of the transformative power of development professionals, and failings "of emphasizing personal reform over political struggle, of obscuring local power differences by uncritically celebrating 'the community', and of using a language of emancipation to incorporate marginalized populations of the Global South within an unreconstructed project of capitalist modernization".³⁶

Generally, following methodologies are used for consulting and collaborating with local-level key stakeholder in the participatory research:

- Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

³³ supra, note 26

³⁴ Hart, Gillian. 1997. 'From rotten wives to good mothers: household models and the limits of economism.' *IDS Bulletin*, 28, 14 – 25.

³⁵ Cooke, Bill, and Uma Kothari (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

³⁶ Williams Glyn (2004), 'Evaluating participatory development: tyranny, power and (re)politicisation', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 25, No 3, pp 557–578

- Self-esteem, Associative strength, Resourcefulness, Action planning, and Responsibility (SARAR)
- Beneficiary Assessment (BA)

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Following Robert Chambers' methodology of "putting the last first", a combination of following data gathering techniques (aggregate data analysis) and qualitative tools are often applied to capture group dynamics and also individual difference:

- Primary Data Collection through sampling
- Secondary data review
- Structured questionnaires/Semi-structured interviewing
- Focus group discussion
- Participant observation (for ethnographic analysis)
- Gender Analysis
- Participatory Focus Group Workshops
- Testimonial of stakeholders

VISUAL TECHNIQUES (QUALITATIVE-PARTICIPATORY)

- Diagrams: Flow/Causal diagram & Venn/Chapatti/Circle diagram.
- Ranking Techniques
- Time Trends Analysis: Historical and Future (visioning) Mapping & Oral Histories
- Mapping Techniques: Resource Mapping & Transect walks

WHY PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH FOR MGNREGA; EQUITY, VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT

As development researcher and policy scholar, we are aware that rights, opportunities, and power, all of which institutions can sanction or restrict, limit and expand too, play an important role in the extent to which people can successfully use institutions for accessing resources. It is also quite well-known that a poor person's access to opportunities is influenced not only by the relations with institutions outside the household, but also by those within the household. The household itself, is a significant sociological site for the construction of caste, class and gender identity and gender-differentiated access to resources and opportunities. While quantitative measures provide important aggregate-level information, these data are able to tell only a partial story. Poverty and lack of livelihood varies widely across households and villages/blocks/districts. The precise sociological, anthropological and political contours and dimensions of sites of poor and poverty are always contingent on time, place, and social groups involved. Aggregate data by definition do not reveal location (spatial or sociological) specific variations and trajectories. Neither do these data reveal the more subjective elements of poor people's experience of poverty or the ways in which individuals cope.³⁷ Dimensions of livelihoods articulated through non-market parameters (such as mobilization, participation and transparency) and whether and how social and political dimensions like decision-making, power relations and political participation are best captured by qualitative-participatory approaches. Quantitative data has been generated by almost all of the numerous participatory diagram methods devised in different parts of the world through measuring, counting, estimating, valuing, ranking, and scoring. For example, 'Voices of the Poor Study'³⁸ is an illustration of how and why capturing voices of MGNREGA workers (men and women) are so crucial. By comparing and contrasting findings from participatory methods with findings from more conventional household consumption and expenditure surveys, Deepa Narayan and her team's work has identified poverty indicators used by local people at the village level.³⁹ It also shows how using these measures lead to different conclusions about the causes

³⁷ Baulch Bob (2009) Neglected Trade-Offs in Poverty Measurement, IDS Bulletin, 27(1):36-42, May.

³⁸ Narayan, Deepa et.al (2000) Can Anyone Hear Us? Voices of the Poor', World Bank Publications; First Edition, March 1.

³⁹ *ibid*

and nature of poverty and reveals the policy and institutional methods that can best address the problem and how development policies must take gender differences into account if they are to be effective. Therefore, it is not surprising that leading social science researchers have debated quite vigorously 'shared standards' for methodologies.⁴⁰

We recognize the significance of "evidence-based" quantitative research but also submit that it is a misnomer that participatory methods are not amenable to quantification. In contrast, "participatory approaches and methods" can generate both qualitative insights and usually more accurate quantitative data than more conventional approaches and methods. They are also far more cost effective and can form a sound basis for much better targeting and focusing of more expensive quantitative and qualitative investigation to where they are really needed. Also, participatory methods have been refined to the extent that they now use insights, techniques and tools from quantitative and qualitative methods. Employing a combination of econometric, ethnographic and participatory techniques, World Bank lead economist Vijayendra Rao has developed the methodology of 'participatory econometrics' to assess the living standards of people, and also reduce 'the distance between the analyst and the subjects of her research and of letting the voices of the researched influence the analytical apparatus of the researcher'⁴¹. Based on integrative design of 'mixed methods', this novel participatory method combines Participatory Appraisals, focus group discussions, and participant observer methods, with quantitative data from structured surveys of representative samples, where the researcher is involved in every step of the process from mixed method data collection to mixed method analysis. It is, thus, an attempt to integrate econometric and qualitative techniques with the spirit of Participatory Development⁴² Following Rao's technique of participatory econometrics, development researchers Shylashri Shankar and Raghav Gaiha in their book "Battling Corruption: Has NREGA Reached India's Rural Poor?" have used an innovative hybrid research methodology model which is a mix of econometric and ethnographic methodologies i.e. probit model (a statistical tool) with interviews and group discussions to

⁴⁰ Collier, David, and Robert Adcock (2001) "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *American Political Science Review* 95(3): 529–46.

⁴¹ Rao, Vijayendra (2002) "Experiments in Participatory Econometrics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 18.

⁴² *ibid*

analyses how structure of power relations impact social protection programmes.⁴³ Using the Bayesian or iterative approach to participatory methods, development researchers working with an interdisciplinary team that include not only economists, sociologists, policy analysts but also grassroots civil society activists regularly return to the field/site to clarify questions and resolve apparent anomalies and contradictions. This also helps researchers to reboot the research in different but unanticipated non-linear directions, uncovering understudied phenomena that were of signal importance in the lives of the people being studied. The interpretive, reflexive, subjective world of poor is often result of a combination of economic, socio-cultural and political decisions of individuals and groups influenced by the matrix of what Amartya Sen calls ‘functionings and capabilities’⁴⁴. In fact, many development researchers including Jean Dreze have come to appreciate and practice some forms of what they call ‘activist research paradigm’ with an aim of linking the academic research and making difference to the lives of citizens and poor in particular.⁴⁵ It is not surprising that the participatory research ontologically claims to mediate in the “actualization and preservation of the universal which is contained within the particularity of civil society”.⁴⁶

Understandably, the participatory research is often time consuming and also requires a great deal of planning and training key stakeholders including wage-seekers and facilitators from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for their inclusive participation in the research. Generally, the participatory research is anchored inemic validity that participatory analysis promises. Emic validity is about understanding the study host(s) from their own system of meanings. And this can be achieved only by being in the host community (for instance wage-seekers of MGNREGA) and coming to a thorough understanding of the daily lives of the study hosts through a “short-term intensive immersion” in the field. As “culture orders political priorities”, it is important that the inference gathered in the research captures the challenges of bargaining power of wage-seekers of MGNREGA from their internal perspectives. It is in this

⁴³ Shylashri Shankar and Raghav Gaiha, (2013) *Battling Corruption: Has NREGA Reached India's Rural Poor?* Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Sen, Amartya Sen (1988) *Concept of Development*, Harvard University Press.

⁴⁵ Dreze, Jean (2002), “On Research and Action”, *Economic and Political Weekly* March 2.

⁴⁶ Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

connection, specific methodological choices are often best understood and justified in light of the theoretical framework, analytic goals, and context of research involved in any particular study. In other words, influenced by the political imaginary of social movements, participatory research relies on activist grassroots ethnography by underscoring the importance of rapport with beneficiaries and the emic-etic distinction in the research. Participatory research is an iterative research process that seeks to understand livelihood security from the “inter-subjective” perspective of a range of stakeholders and to directly empower them in planning, monitoring and implementation of social policies. For instance, the most important stakeholders involved in this research process are MGNREGA labourers/wage-seekers. Participatory research for MGNREGA also includes decision-makers from all levels of government, civil society, and the local elite, thereby uncovering different interests and perspectives and increasing local capacity and commitment in the implementation of rural employment guarantee schemes. In evaluating rights-based social policies like MGNREGA, the principle of non-discrimination is upheld and firmly integrated in monitoring decisions, actions, and conduct of political, economic, social, and cultural in situations, and in the allocation of public resources, thereby enhancing social and gender equity. In other words, the premise of participatory research for MGNREGA is that involving the poor in the process will contribute to ensuring that the strategies identified for ‘enhancing livelihood security’ reduction will reflect their concerns, including the priorities and obstacles to progress as seen by the poor themselves. In short, we outline a variant of participatory action research “which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped... it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry”.⁴⁷

THE IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT OF MGNREGA

First of its kind, nationally and internationally, MGNREGA with its rights-based framework and focus on creation of ‘durable assets’ for rural poor

⁴⁷ Wadsworth, Yolanda (1998). What is participatory action research? Action Research Journal Institute of Workplace Research, Learning and Development, and Southern Cross University Press. Retrieved July 2, 2018.

and propelled by proactive disclosures rules of right to information, has the potential to address the challenges of rural unemployment, food security and regenerate the village economy in India. One of the most significant achievements of right to work legislation based MGNREGA is the promise to free rural laborers from the “dictatorship of the private employer” in rural India.⁴⁸ No wonder, today, about one-fourth of all rural households participate in the rural employment guarantee schemes every year. Another major impact of MGNREGA has been on the Minimum Wages Act 1948, as awareness about minimum wages has increased considerably and the “vibrancy in agricultural wages has been restored” in various parts of rural India since the implementation of Act in 2006. MGNREGA is also radical in the sense that it ensures rural labourers to have a legal entitlement not only to work on demand but also to minimum wages and in case of non-availability of work, the poor labourer is entitled to unemployment allowance. Similarly, the Act by emphasizing lateral public accountability systems like social audits, and proactive disclosure of information has internalized the spirit of transparency and accountability enshrined in the Right to Information Act. The model social audit rules have been framed for implementation across states. Centrality of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the implementation of MGNREGA has the potential to institutionalise people’s power at the grassroots and radically transform governance in rural areas. To overcome shortage of quality human resources, the government has also provided dedicated Panchayat Development Officer and Technical Assistant. The government has also taken a giant leap by owning up the responsibility of providing complete fiscal resources and administrative mechanisms for implementing MGNREGA. While implementation remains uneven and patchy across States and districts, there is evidence to suggest that MGNREGA has contributed to (a) increased rural wages everywhere; (b) reduced distress migration from traditionally migration-intensive areas; (c) usage of barren areas for cultivation; and (d) empowerment of the weaker sections and giving them a new sense of identity and bargaining power.⁴⁹

In brief, the Act mandates provision of guaranteed employment within a stipulated period on demand by workers; payment of statutory minimum wages in a timely manner based on well-defined criteria and work assessment methods and through transparent modes of payments;

⁴⁸ Dreze, Jean, (2011) “Employment Guarantee and the Right to Work,” in Reetika Khera, ed., *The Battle for Employment Guarantee*, Oxford University Press.

⁴⁹ Mihir Shah, ed. (2012) *MGNREGA Sameeksha*, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

provision of legal entitlements of facilities, unemployment and other allowances and creation of decentralised participatory and democratic planning, monitoring, quality control, vigilance and grievance redressal structures and mechanisms; while ensuring transparency and public accountability through proactive disclosure of documents and records for public scrutiny at all levels including monitoring of critical parameters in public domain. On the other hand, successful implementation as per operational guidelines also demands enhancing capacities and strengthening of administrative structures, processes and mechanisms for creating a facilitative environment for communication; awareness building, demand generation and empowerment of the rural poor. All these gain special importance in view of the fact that in MGNREGA implementation, five Legislations and Acts – MGNREGA as the central Act with Right to Information (RTI) and other Acts- the Panchayati Raj Act, Minimum Wages Act, SC and Tribal Act play their role, with MGNREGA having infused life in them. Over the past several years of implementation of MGNREGA, the central government and various state governments/district administrations have learnt from experience, experimentation and implementation and devised a sui generis mechanism and innovative operational strategies, processes, management systems and mechanisms for effective planning and implementation of the schemes in their respective states and rural districts. Some states like Andhra Pradesh have innovatively used the energy and reach of Civil Society Organizations and Non- Governmental Organizations in the implementation of the Act.

The law- based framework of MGNREGA creates a paradigm shift from earlier wage employment programmes as it provides for certain process outcome that strengthen grass-root democratic structures, enhances bargaining power of labourers and ensure transparency and accountability in governance. These are of particular significance in the context of rural India, where the rural poor are subjected to a hierarchy of social exclusions and vulnerabilities of different kinds, and where democratic institutions and community participation especially at the Gram Sabha are often distorted by powerful interest groups and dominant factions. To a certain extent linked to some form of semi-feudal agrarian context, the problem is the sheer amount of control and power that landlords and neo-mafia elements in rural India exercise over the productive workforce. Implementation of MGNREGA is not free from problems and limitations. Apart from ‘moral hazards and distorted incentives’, implementation of MGNREGA in the districts of India suffers acutely from lack of social mobilization of poor and this gets reflected in the continuing cases of pilferage, scams and collusion

with the local officials. More importantly, the voice and bargaining power of rural poor vis- a vis dominant rural interests often remain concealed as our field visits indicate. In most instances of implementation of MGNREGA witnessed in our field visits wage seekers are found constituting themselves as individual recipient of welfare schemes and choose to act on behalf of their individual or household interests but they are also slowly becoming part of a collective solidarity expressed as subaltern classes or 'rural proletariats'. Interestingly, in some cases MGNREGA wage-seekers are also becoming rural entrepreneurs due to the convergence of MGNREGA's schemes with skill-building programs and also market linkages. This is the real promise and paradox of MGNREGA.

This also in part explains how MGNREGA wage-seekers' labor power has increasingly been governmentalized 'where they deliberately shirk the work, collude with local officials and power brokers in siphoning the funds and hardly interested in creating durable assets. So, one is not surprised in the fields that wage seekers don't fight against all forms of domination but only specific aspect of tyranny of private employer in determining wages and employment. Assertions by the activists and wage-seekers to bring about transparency and accountability in the implementation of MGNREGA have also been met with backlash by the locally dominant interest groups/powers. The backlash takes various forms: disruption during social audits/public hearing process, bloody and murderous attack, and also killing of social activists. In contrast with earlier rural employment schemes, MGNREGA promises enhancing empowerment of rural poor and realization of social justice in rural India. Empowerment of rural workers goes beyond mere legislation. Empowerment means developing the capability of rural poor, dalits and tribals to reverse asymmetrical power relations using what their livelihoods rights mean and how they can be accessed. The example of Social Audit Directorate in the state of Andhra Pradesh is instructive in this regard. The Social Audit exposed fraud and corruption in the implementation but it also exposed the fact that majority of wage-seekers are not aware of rights given to them by the Act. The mobilisation of MGNREGA workers in some cases has already witnessed a combination of popular and innovative forms of civil society and Non-Government Organisations intervention. In Rajasthan, Suchna Evum Rozgar Ka Adhikar Abhiyan and MKSS's influential public hearing (Jan Sunwai), linking MGNREGA workers' associations in various states with Self-help groups (SHGs) such as Kerala's "Kudumbasree", Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan in Madhya Pradesh, Sangathit Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan in Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh, Jan Jagaran Abhiyan, a people's

organization in Araria district of Bihar and Vikas Sahyog Kendra in Palamu district of Jharkhand are some of the grassroots organizations that have organized MGNREGA workers and helped them to fight for their rights: employment on demand, minimum wages, timely payment, and worksite facilities, among others. The practice of forming “fixed labor groups” by the Andhra Pradesh government as a pressure group for demanding work under MGNREGA promises to overcome challenges of mobilization and empowerment of wage-seekers. The Andhra Pradesh government’s innovative APNA (AP-NGO Alliance) has been hailed for its role in institutionalizing NGO partnership for awareness and education of wage-seekers on their rights and organizing them to enable them to demand and receive their rights. The results of these innovative participatory development practices in mobilization of wage-seekers are remarkable. Field visits and rapid assessments of districts in various parts of India indicate that awareness of right to work has pervaded the social imaginary of laboring classes in rural India. This has also led to enhancement of their confidence in their collective strength. Many of them are able to secure a full 100 days of MGNREGA work over the year – the maximum guaranteed under the Act. They have been able to persuade the state government to pay the unemployment allowance to hundreds of persons who had been denied work. These are very significant political developments, not restricted to specific areas, with enormous scope for wider expansion across rural India.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS FUSION OF HORIZONS AND REALIZING JUSTICE

As 'niti' (public policy) relates to 'organizational propriety and behavioral correctness' and assesses the role of institutions in the development research, a focus on equity, voice and empowerment of poor or more precisely 'nyaya' (justice) allows us to reflect on the 'lives people are actually able to lead'.⁵⁰ It is this shift from "transcendental institutionalism" to 'realization-focused' justice that participatory –evidence-based- equity research intends to bring into the center stage of research and evaluation for social policies such as MGNREGA. This also signals a methodological departure from assessing ‘culmination outcomes’ to ‘comprehensive outcomes’ in the research on radical rights-based social policies such as

⁵⁰ Sen, Amartya (2009) *Idea of Justice*, Harvard University Press.

MGNREGA⁵¹. In short, 'comprehensive outcomes' include not only material and physical goals of the social policies but also refer to enhancing of the 'capability' of poor people in realizing livelihood rights in India. In developed and developing economies, the poor and underprivileged play a significant role in mobilizing struggle against those in power and arguing against social exclusion. However, they don't exercise independent influence in deciding the relations between state and civil society. Most of the anti-poverty programmes initiated by government or donor-agencies depict the poor as 'deprived', 'destitute', 'deviant' as against viewing the poor as having 'voice', 'capability', and 'agency'. Poor people have been characterized with hunger, ill health, malnutrition, lack of medical and educational services, sanitation problems etc. Policy literature on welfare and wellbeing depicts the poor as merely an 'empirical person' characterized by less income, less assets, poor skills etc.⁵² Though it is not openly acknowledged but the mainstream social science research methodologies have a general skepticism and distrust in the capability of the poor to alter prevailing hierarchies of power. Thus, one is not surprised that in the dominant disciplinary practices of social science research methodologies poor especially landless laborers, rural migrants, slum dwellers, casual construction workers, pavement dwellers, project affected-persons, and sex workers are considered as passive beneficiary 'population' rather than 'sovereign citizens' capable of independent political actions for change. In other words, the case of participatory activist and equity-centric research refers to a deeply contested "political project" that essentially means resisting dominant structures of power, enhancing the hold of popular sovereignty in decision-making, and also more importantly, re-conceptualizing the agency and rights of the poor in general. Therefore, the participatory research (in combination with qualitative and quantitative research protocols in various proportions) promises to address the 'epistemological crisis', and also normatively seeks to transcend the public-private distinction in the form of a community-centric democratic life and voluntarist conception of social action.

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² Kumar Ashwani (2010) *The Question of Poor, Third Sector Research*, Ed, Rupert Taylor, Springer, New York.