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research paper



**Inquiry as Intervention**  
**By**  
**Rajesh Tandon**

**Introduction:**

The notion of inquiry as intervention in social systems has emerged only recently in the respectable academic circles. Action –research has been the forerunner of such an approach to integrate inquiry and intervention (Lewin, 1947). However, there is beginning to emerge some consensus among the action - researchers (Brown, 1972) and participatory researchers (Hall, 1975; Tandon 1979) that inquiry can be conceptualised and practiced as an intervention process. Some illustrations of such a perspective are also appearing in recent years (Brown and Tandon, 1978).

This paper presents a case from the two year field work by the author where inquiry was used simultaneously with intervention. Small and marginal farmers in a region of Western India were the participants in this effort. The next section presents an account of this inquiry.

**Inquiry with Marginal Farmers:**

A non-governmental voluntary agency operated in an area that is primarily agricultural and economically backward. The bulk of the population is tribal and owns small (less than ten acres) plots of land. Less than two percent of the cultivated land is irrigated. Of the two hundred thirty villages in the area, only two have electricity. Since the area is hilly, only small (less than one acre) plots of land are available for cultivation. As of 1971, only about fourteen percent of the population was literate.

The agency started a program of training for poor, marginal farmers in 1975. The agency identified one poor farmer each from twenty five contiguous villages to act as Peer Group Leaders in their villages. These farmers were given training in techniques of modern agriculture, cooperative societies and rural engineering. These Peer Group Leaders were then asked to disseminate this new information and ideas among their peers in their villages. The Peer Group Leaders were young, literate and cultivated small (less than five acres) plots of lands.

The Peers Leaders were asked to organise their peers in the villages not only to disseminate the newly acquired knowledge but also to act as instruments of socio-economic and political change in the villages. The field staff of the agency maintained regular contact with the Peer Leaders and organised monthly meetings of all Peer Leaders. Every Peer Leader was asked to maintain a journal of his daily peer group activities and these were periodically checked by the agency staff.

Two years after the start of the programme, the author was approached by the agency to assist them in further strengthening the Peer Groups. The author was interested in understanding the dynamics of the rural situation and developing insights into the processes of rural change. He agreed to offer further training to Peer Leaders and their peer groups in exchange for research access in the above areas of his interest.

After an initial familiarisation with the area and discussions with the field staff of the agency, the author designed a three day residential training programme for the twenty five Peer Leaders. The programme was based on the principles of applied behavioural science training that emphasise increasing participants awareness of the dynamics of development in the in the rural context; improving participant skills in organising for collective action; and , enhancing their knowledge bases about opportunities and channels for village development.

The author designed a research questionnaire in consultation with agency staff to assess the level of awareness and information base of the Peer Leaders. The instrument also focused upon their perceived level of influence upon other villagers as well as the various government and public functionaries external to the village. Several demographic items were also included in the instrument. These instruments were also filled out by the participants on the opening day of the training.

The training was organised in a village where the participants and the author (along with some agency staff) lived together and shared responsibilities for preparing food and managing other living arrangements. It is important to mention here the “cultural shock” to the author during his initial visits to the area. In his personal notes to himself, he had written:

“It was during this visit that I experienced the sharp contrasts from the urban life that I was used to. It was summer then, and I was profusely sweating, only to realize that there was no electricity here. In the evening, it was suggested that we all take a bath. I was glad to hear that when we reached the river, I started having second thoughts about taking a dip in that river. The water was dirty, but the whole village was bathing and washing clothes there. As if that was not enough, a herd of cattle walked into the river to cool themselves. The next morning, I realised that toilet facilities were an urban phenomenon and I had the option to use the open pastures anywhere. One after another, the rural context was devoid of things and facilities that I had taken for granted before. It was a disorienting and discomfoting experience”.

The Peer Leaders found the training a new experience. They had initial reservations about the author being an urban stranger. They had expected some tangible benefits in the form of new subsidies or projects from the author. They were reluctant to be frank with him initially and generally maintained passive profile during the training. Coupled with initial discomfort of the author himself, the training was a fairly mild, low - key event. Towards the end of training, each peer leader was asked to identify and develop detailed plans for three problems of their villages that they wanted to act upon. It was agreed that the author and the agency staff will visit them in their villages and a second round of training will be organised after four weeks.

The second round of training turned out to be a much more lively and exciting event for the participants and the author. The primary force of the event was to analyse the experiences of peer leaders in organising their peer groups and acting on the problems they had identified in the previous round. The training was essentially a participative process of diagnosing the difficulties encountered in organising peer groups and taking collective actions. They described in detail the hurdles they had encountered from within the village as well as from outside in their efforts during the previous month. One participant, Babulal, mentioned:

“When I went back from here last month, I decided to improve the attendance in primary school. About 30 children in the village did not go to school at all. I suggested this to other villagers who generally expressed their inability to spare children to go to school. These children were assisting the family in obtaining bread twice-a-day. Then I went to the primary school teacher and requested him to create some new and interesting opportunities for these children so that they can have a brighter future. The teacher expressed his anger against the villagers calling them “dumb”. You know, we are operating in a situation where the villagers as well as the society continue to make us poorer and weaker. I would like to take this up as a

challenge for my peer group. We will increase the enrolment in the school within a month”.

The author presented some of his concepts about problem-solving, effective group work and strategies of collective action. It was now possible for him to communicate his ideas and experiences to the participants because he had started feeling somewhat adjusted to the setting. It was now possible to understand the hopes and predicaments of these farmers. The participants were able to share their fears and aspirations with the author now that they found him comfortable in their setting. It was now possible for them to understand the concepts and learn the skills that the author presented to them. The second round of questionnaire was administered a week after the training.

The author, along with agency staff, met the participants in their villages several weeks after the second round of training. This follow-up was aimed at supporting the Peer Leaders in their new efforts as well as obtaining further information about the impact of training. The questionnaire was again administered three months after the second round of training. During the second round of training, the author became aware of the daily journals of Peer Leaders as a source of research information. He collected these journals from the Peer Leaders after the third administration of questionnaires.

The journals of Peer Leaders were analysed by coding their activities in six categories: active initiatives, planned initiatives, informed initiatives, collective initiatives, initiatives that showed influence on the villagers, and, initiatives that showed influence on government and public functionaries. An analysis of coded journals showed that the Peer Leaders and their groups had shown significantly greater initiatives in all the six categories in the two quarters after training in comparison to the eight quarters before training. It appeared that the training had a major impact on the collective empowerment of peer groups both within and outside the village.

However, the questionnaire responses showed a different picture. There was no change in any of the dimensions of activity or influence over the three time periods in which questionnaire data was collected. Moreover, the percentage response on questionnaires decreased overtime. While all the twenty five Peer Leaders had filled the questionnaire in the beginning, the completed response was about seventy per cent over the second administration and about fifty per cent over the third one.

The data generated during the second round of training and subsequent follow-up field observation was consistent with the journal analysis but incongruent with questionnaire responses. The field observations clearly indicated significant impact of training as can be seen from the following account of one participant:

“Babulal, and his peers organised a meeting in the village to persuade villagers to send their children to school. After two months, eighteen new children had started going to the school. Twenty farmers used new variety of seeds for the winter sowing of wheat for the first time. The peer group had approached the Development Officer with complaints against the corrupt practices of the Panchayat (village council) head. On enquiry by an officer, these charges were established and the Panchayat Head was suspended. The peer group had begun discussions about electing a new leader in the forthcoming Panchayat elections. They held several meetings within the village to evolve a consensus candidate. In the forthcoming Panchayat elections, one of the peers was overwhelmingly elected as the Panchayat head. By the end of

a year after training, a strong peer group of fifteen members was operating in the village”.

In short, this was the field work. There are several conceptual and practical issues that the above account hints at. Some implications of inquiry as intervention are presented in the next section.

### **Implications:**

There are several implications in viewing inquiry as intervention. Based on the case of marginal farmers in India, five implications are discussed here:

1. The first implication of viewing inquiry as intervention relates to the notion of validity of data. Simply, understood, validity implies an authentic representation of reality. In that sense, the data which reliably represents the real dynamics of the system under inquiry is valid data. In inquiry as intervention, the source of data that is most integrated with the intervention process is the most valid source. When data collection is disjointed from the ongoing events of inquiry and intervention, validity is suspect.

In this case questionnaire data showed no significant change taking place in the life and villages of Peer Leaders and groups. However, the clinical and anthropological data from the journals and field reservations showed many important changes. It was clear that the utility of questionnaires as a source of data was much less in comparison to archival and unobtrusive sources.

The questionnaire data was invalid as it was not an integral part of the entire process. Questionnaires were designed and administered primarily for the purpose of finding out the impact of training. That was exclusively the researcher's need. But the participants did not see any relevance of the questionnaire to their experiences before and after training. As one farmer put it, “why do you want us to fill the questionnaire? If you want to know anything, just ask me”.

Moreover, the collection of data through questionnaire appeared disjointed and disconnected from their experiences, emotions and actions. The questionnaires appeared to be an unnatural, arbitrary, external intrusion in their life. Just as the intervention had to be consistent with the experiences of the participants, inquiry need to be an integral part of their life and living. It made sense to them to maintain a track record of their daily activities in the journals. Similarly, asking questions during training, or while visiting a village or while eating together was also a natural part of life, living and acting. Field observations thus became equally valid.

The challenge to innovate success of valid data, therefore, is an essential ingredient of inquiry as intervention. When the methodology of doing and the methodology of knowing become simultaneous, valid data requires the collaboration of all parties. The sources of valid data, as defined by the researcher, were rejected by the participants in this case. The notion of validity, therefore, needs to be enlarged beyond the narrow confines of the researcher as the only party.

2. The second implication of inquiry as intervention is embedded in its directive nature. Directive inquiry is characterised by an active intervention by the researcher on the system under study. Therefore, inquiry as intervention has impact. The researcher's interventions have impact on the area of inquiry and beyond. It can,

therefore, significantly influence the life and living of those who interact with the researcher in the context of inquiry.

This type of inquiry also has its own built-in resistance. The actors in a social situation being inquired into may resist inquiry because of its likely impact upon them. When inquiry is resisted, this resistance also forms the subject matter of study. To that extent, “releasing” or “tapping” aspects of inquiry as intervention acquire great significance as the elimination of resistance to inquiry becomes an integral part of inquiry itself.

The training of Peer Leaders was designed as an explicit intervention and it influenced the direction of inquiry. The training also seemed to have had a significant impact on the lives of the participants. Their levels of initiative increased significantly and they had acquired greater collective influence in their villages. It was through those processes that the understanding of rural change dynamics could be developed. In the process of organising peer groups and solving village problems, both the participants and the author obtained insights into the rural situation. Thus impact of inquiry thus became a mechanism as well as the outcome of inquiry.

3. When the process of inquiry is directive in nature, impact on people and their lives is inevitable. To the extent that there is impact on people, value - neutrality of the researcher is a myth. Inquiry as intervention thus becomes a political and ideological process. The ideological and political implications of inquiry as intervention have two primary aspects. First, the initiation of inquiry depends upon the acceptance of his value - positions by those who are his relevant “clients”. In this case, the author’s beliefs and motives were ascertained by agency staff and marginal farmers before inquiry could begin. It is important to note that verbal statements of value - positions are not enough; behavioural congruence with those values needs to be established with the “clients”. It was not enough for the author to tell the agency staff that he was for the rural poor. They believed it only when they saw the author in action.

Second aspect relates to the political consequences of ideological positions of the researcher. When the researcher’s values are in alliance with one class, antagonists to the researcher also exist in the same social situation. Thus, researcher has enemies too. And this may have repercussions on the inquiry from subtle sabotage to physical injury to the researcher.

The organisation of poor, marginal farmers for their collective empowerment was expressly stated position of the author in this case. Interventions were designed to equip the participants with skills in influencing others within and outside the village. The political implication of such an inquiry can also be seen from the fact that various peer groups became active in the politics of Panchayat elections. And, some challenged those in positions of power. To the extent that new organisations of marginal farmers act as a threat to those already in powers, such an inquiry can potentially lead to major political confrontations. It is important to underscore the political nature of inquiry as intervention so that enthusiastic researchers do not find themselves surprisingly caught unprepared in the midst of a major political conflict. Moreover, researchers need to be cautioned so that they do not unwittingly as to subvert their own value positions by supporting the wrong side.

4. Inquiry as intervention affects both parties. The researcher learns something about the system and its actors; the actors learn something about and from the researcher. The traditional distinctions of researcher and subjects as two distinct

parties with mutually exclusive interests break down in inquiry as intervention. Not only that both parties learn from each other, they also learn together from the very situation that they are a part of and are engaged in analysis of. Moreover, the interests of both parties in inquiry as intervention are mutually inclusive and supportive.

This case is a clear illustration of the impact that inquiry had on both parties. The author had undergone a process of unlearning and relearning during the two year period. The farmers were not only learnt new concepts and skills in association with the researcher, but they were also active partners in designing and analysing these learning situations. For the author as well as the farmers, this learning had both cognitive and emotional aspects. As an outcome of inquiry, both the author and the farmers were significantly affected by this joint enterprise.

5. Finally, under organised systems may be inquired into through inquiry as intervention. Brown (1979) describes under organised systems as those which are characterised by lack of regulation and formal structures, unclear purposes and poorly defined boundaries. Such under organised systems do not have a “client” group readily available. Moreover, it is rather difficult to understand their basic dynamics of under organisation through traditional research paradigms. Inquiry as intervention provides the possibility of creating a “client” group in under organised systems. And by intervening in them so as to attempt to organise them, it is possible to understand that forces that keep them under organised.

This Case highlights the above issue clearly. The attempt to create village based groups of marginal farmers was simultaneously an attempt to create a “client” group which could bring out the dynamics of under organisation and underdevelopment by its attempts to organise. Peer groups and Peer Leaders acted as collaborators in inquiry not only by providing information and insights but also by engaging in attempts to change their systems they are part of.

However, one may argue that this approach changes the phenomena that one intends to study. It is suggested above that this may be the only fruitful way to study such phenomena.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has argued for inquiry as intervention as a new research paradigm. A case study of inquiry with marginal farmers in India was presented. The case illustrated the difficulty in obtaining valid data in such an inquiry. The directive and impactful nature of inquiry as intervention was discussed. This makes inquiry a political and ideological process. Inquiry as intervention has impact on both parties. In the context of an urgent need to understand under organised systems, it has been suggested that inquiry as intervention offers valuable possibilities.

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**PRIA**

**Participatory Research in Asia**

42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110062

Ph:+91-011-29960931/32/33

Web: [www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org)