



Participatory research: Where have we been, where are we going? – A dialogue

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Abstract

Rajesh Tandon and Budd Hall, the UNESCO Co-Chairs in Community-Based Research have worked together on the theory and practice of participatory research since they first met in Caracas, Venezuela in 1978. This article is a conversation between the two of them that took place in New Delhi, India in 2015. It covers the creation of the concept of participatory research, a coming to awareness of the importance and power of local knowledge, the creation of the International Participatory Research Network and their thoughts on some of the challenges facing community and academic partners today. Of note is the fact that the early roots of participatory research were found in the global South, specifically in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Of further interest is the fact that for the first 20 to 25 years, participatory research was a discourse located almost entirely outside formal academic circles but rather in social movement structures and civil society circles.

Keywords: participatory research; global networking; knowledge democracy

Key messages

- What is referred to in the second decade of the twenty-first century as community-based research, engaged scholarship or participatory action research has deep roots in the postcolonial knowledge struggles emanating from the global South of the 1960s and 1970s.
- The earliest interest in, and support for, participatory research came from social movements and civil society organizations, not the academic world.
- As community-based or engaged scholarship becomes more accepted in universities, it is critical that it not become instrumentalized, neutralized or depoliticized.

What follows is based on the transcript of a conversation between the two of us. It was a conversation that took place in March 2015 in New Delhi, India at the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). We have edited the piece, added some further critical reflections and generally cleaned it up in the hope that those who are not as aware of the history and development of the theory and practice of participatory research might find their way into the story. We want to emphasize that although we became interested in these ideas what now seems a long time ago, we were at the

time and remain part of a larger knowledge democracy movement. The tribal farmers of Rajasthan and the rural women and men of Tanzania whose depth of knowledge first alerted us to the unsymmetrical and exclusionary nature of knowledge were our beginning. But the social movements in the global South and the excluded North have continually been our touchstone. And the hundreds of friends and fellow travellers working in all corners of the world with whom we have worked have carried this work forward. Our work is the work of hope, but also of deep concerns. It is about possible steps forward and about mistakes and contradictions. It is most of all a continuing invitation to all whose stories are similar and all whose stories might take all of us to entirely new places.

Rajesh Tandon (RT) – Budd, what are your reflections about the origins of participatory research (PR)? Or put the other way, what got you thinking about this alternative mode of research?

Budd Hall (BH) – Thanks Rajesh! Before delving into the early history in Tanzania, I wanted to recall our first meeting in 1978 in Caracas, Venezuela. It was the first meeting of the International Participatory Research Network and we were hosted by Francisco Vio Grossi, a Chilean activist scholar who was working at the time in Venezuela. I also recall a couple of early meetings in India; there were two meetings that had an important role to play in the genesis of PR – the first one being in 1979, where I expressed my ideas on PR at the Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education (PECCE), and the second being in 1982, after PRIA was founded. India, for two reasons, has been a critical space for the development of theory and practice of PR and remains so today. Firstly, the history of the freedom struggle in India, and the inspiration of Gandhiji taking on the British colonizers, created a generation of intellectuals who linked knowledge with transformation, freedom and liberty. Secondly, you Rajesh yourself approached the ideas with such enthusiasm. Led by your combination of personal qualities and family background of revolutionary freedom fighters, you made a choice of working with people who have been left out, kept down or excluded.

Coming back to your question, at the age of 25, I had gone to Tanzania to do my PhD in adult education. I had been studying comparative education and African studies at UCLA in the United States of America. I was fortunate to get a job as a research fellow at the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam in August 1970. I found myself in a country that believed in adult education, with a president who was an adult educator himself. The team at the institute thought that research was great, because it would be practical and help them make decisions on how to take adult education forward. They welcomed me with open arms and offered all support. I began my research work with the institute, making use of my 1970s survey research skills. The first initiative they wanted me to engage in, was to do a kind of a needs assessment on adult education learning needs for six districts in Tanzania. So, I undertook the initiative with great enthusiasm, despite having no background in the work area.

However, the way research was done in those days followed a colonial model, incorporating services of 'cheap labour'. You could easily have a large number of interviewers, about five or six hundred people, going around in the field, asking questions, while the researcher sat in the capital city, with his work being limited to designing the questions. The questionnaire would then be given to research assistants, who collected the data in the field, which eventually came back to the researcher, who then performed the detailed statistical analysis. I followed the same process, analysed data and produced the report, which was then sent to the director, and later

to the ministry, who believed that they finally had evidence-based data to support the policymaking process.

Accordingly, a group of district educators, picking from what emerged from the research process, prepared a blueprint of the list of courses that could be organized at the district level, in line with the needs of the people. When they came back to Dar es Salaam for a debriefing on their initiative, and on being asked about how things fared, they said that the attendance for the courses was disappointing, as either nobody opted for some of the courses offered, or they dropped out eventually, while only a couple appeared for others. There was a complete lack of interest in the courses among the people. The officials were at a loss to understand the reason behind this. This was one question to which I too had no answers. Despite being a good quality research design, incorporating A-plus methodology, and evidence-based data, it was disheartening to see that the results were disappointing.

This was however, one perspective. Looking at it from an alternative perspective, the process was indeed deeply flawed. I then began to find out 'why', as I was completely shattered with what had emerged. In the quest for answers, I ended up meeting a district educator. Sitting among a group of people in a bar, he said, 'My friend here is having some difficulties in finding out exactly what people would like to learn'. Listening to him, the people started to share their thoughts and views on the matter, one by one. One of them said, 'Oh, you know, what would be great in this village is to know about the better methods for storing grain over the season, as it often gets damaged due to rain, rodents etc.' After a couple of hours, I realized that I had learned more about the needs of the people by simply listening and talking to them.

This was the beginning for me, when I realized that the way we acquire knowledge, the way we learn about people's needs, the way we construct our ideas of community, people and identity in relation to each other, is really dependent on our ability to establish a relationship where you can listen and learn. It is here that I learned to 'shut up' and 'listen'. Learning to listen is one of the most difficult things to do and I am still working on it.

BH – What about you Rajesh? How did you get started?

RT – For me, the story is not very different, but only in a different context. I spent a year in southern Rajasthan, as part of my PhD work. Being with the people in Rajasthan, you say 'shattered', I was deeply disturbed, mainly for two reasons.

Firstly, despite my fancy professional education, there were many things in life that I did not know. For example, how to take care of myself when there are no fancy flush toilets, no running water from taps and so on. The second reason was the discovery that 'illiteracy does not mean ignorance'. For instance, despite having no formal education the indigenous farmers were extremely knowledgeable on issues such as agriculture, water harvesting, ecology and veterinary sciences.

This became the point where I started questioning my professional education, and also asking what is the contribution that we can make. In the early days, I began to work as a trainer in what in today's context is known as 'participatory research'. My purpose in training those young indigenous farmers was to help them access the public services to which they had a right, such as agricultural services and water services.

What triggered this thinking was that during discussions with the people, every one of them would start by saying, 'I don't know sir. You tell me.' This pattern of equating themselves with a lack of understanding was quite prevalent. This kind of thinking triggered an understanding that control over the minds of people is the most sophisticated way of ensuring the perpetuation of the status quo, because, then you

don't need guns, bullets, cops and surveillance mechanisms. If you control the minds of the people and if they believe and conclude that they are stupid, it becomes very easy to rule over them.

BH – But has it always been like this in India?

RT – Looking at this through the historical lens, in Indian culture and tradition, this particular aspect goes back centuries. Historically, we have had a *brahmanical* tradition, where the Brahmins (upper caste) were the only ones authorized to use Sanskrit. The role of Brahmins basically was to convince the masses that the king is always right. It is in this context that the question arises about the political economy of knowledge (or, whose interest does knowledge serve?) and subsequently the question, 'whose knowledge counts?', or 'whose knowledge matters?'

So, I began to see the link between knowledge and social change, and that is how PRIA was born; we said 'knowledge is power'. It does not mean that knowledge is the only source of power, but for those of us who work for the empowerment of the oppressed, exploited and excluded, we felt that way. We felt that the people needed to find a way to gain confidence in what they knew, value it, and then acquire new forms of knowledge to build on it. This is because the people cannot be empowered if they continue to devalue what they know.

BH – How did you operationalize it, Rajesh?

RT – This is how the journey for me and PRIA began, and we began to apply this approach to various aspects. In 1981 (when PRIA did not yet legally exist), there was an attempt to create a new Forest Act, which portrayed the forest dwellers as enemies of the forest. The Act was designed to bring in a form of forest guards, and train them in protecting the forest from forest dwellers, including the indigenous people (tribals/*adivasis*). Then, when a whole movement came about against the legislation, we realized that the underpinning of the legislation was this evidence that was produced to say that 'forest dwellers were responsible for deforestation'. It is at this point that we launched a substantial nationwide participatory research programme to understand the reasons for deforestation. What we discovered was that, yes, in many cases the axe was in the hands of someone, but then there was somebody else who was guiding the hand to move. Further, there were vested interests – the timber mafia and others – who were exploiting the forest dwellers to cut down the forests.

Then we began to produce this alternative body of knowledge, which looked at the experience from below – through the eyes and from the perspectives of the forest dwellers. This became a very powerful mechanism to challenge the general assumptions. Later, we used the same approach when questions about large dams began to be raised. We found that the cost–benefit analysis (CBA) framework that was being used to justify a dam project for power and irrigation had overlooked certain crucial data. So, we used the same CBA framework but looked at things from an alternate perspective. In most cases, those who officially prepared the CBA looked primarily at secondary data on forest cover. For instance, they would easily declare an area as barren, and therefore nullify any cost emerging from it. However, when we went into the field, and spoke to the local people, we found that they had built wells, and planted fruit-bearing trees. However, since these were not on records, the data referred to by officials did not reflect this. When we started adding up the cost for this, the benefits shrunk! We were then able to challenge the original assumptions. This challenge was based on the alternative CBA, based on local knowledge. Another

example of this was the campaign to save the Silent Valley in Kerala from a hydroelectric project, which had a similar impact.

Therefore, yes, you need social mobilization and collective voice, but you also need a way of analysing reality that starts from the lived experience of the people. So, this is how I got involved, and PRIA got moving in this direction during its early years.

RT – However, this was all 30 or 40 years ago. Some of the questions that we should reflect on are: What have been the high points? What have been the constraints? What are the issues for the use and expansion of participatory research methodology from current experience?

BH – The network you and I created under the umbrella of the International Council for Adult Education was called the International Participatory Network. We provided administrative support to the network from the International Council for Adult Education from 1978 to 1992. We drew on the ideas of the Colombian sociologist, Orlando Fals Borda, the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, President Nyerere of Tanzania, the early work of Ghandhi-ji of India, the work of the Finnish scholar Marja Liisa Swantz and many more. Beginning with the idea that people living a given experience had epistemic privilege on the knowledge of that experience, we drew from as many other writers as we could find who supported this kind of thinking. In 1992 we felt that the concept was strong enough to be used by people and that it could survive on its own. It was then that I moved in a different direction. While you continued in the non-governmental organization (NGO) domain at PRIA, I moved to the university world, taking a job at the University of Toronto in their adult education department.

Talking about low points, moving into the university domain was a low point for me for sure. After stepping into the premises of the University of Toronto, I found that in spite of the many years developing the theory and practice of participatory research, the department of adult education and community development did not want me to teach participatory research. It was then that I realized that the energy, innovation and intellectual development of this work had begun, but largely remained limited to social movements, in NGOs and in community organizations; the universities continued to feel that, it was not something they had invented.

It was then that I gave up on universities as a place to do this kind of action-oriented knowledge construction, as there was no support or funding available for this work. Further, being in the rarefied, detached atmosphere of university kept me away from the NGO world, its energy and the intellectual vitality of social movements. Moving on, I proceeded to the University of Victoria (UVic), where I became the Dean of Education in 2001. I harboured the hope of pursuing this work and having some influence because of my position. However, I was initially disappointed by the possibilities at UVic. I realized that the main interest in many faculties and departments was in keeping things going, preserving a version of the status quo.

RT – Then how did you carry on, Budd?

BH – The presence of Indigenous communities in British Columbia is gradually having an influence on our universities, particularly UVic in present times. Today, there are many more people in universities who are interested in participatory research and indigenous research. In line with this, UVic finally set up an office for community-based research (OCBR), and I was offered the opportunity to play a role as the founding director. In a way, you could say that it was at the age of 63 when I finally got a job that I was well prepared for and enthusiastic about. So, 63 was just a starting point for me.

The last few years in Canada have been very exciting ones, as there has been a rediscovery of many of the sources or roots of this kind of work. We are now speaking of notions such as of 'decolonizing methodologies' and 'decolonizing the universities', because we know that the body of knowledge that the world is using now creates inequality, threatens the very existence of various life forms and sustains the atmosphere of violence against women, and that body of knowledge that is used to analyse and provide solutions to such problems does the same. The European knowledge that we have been using for over 500 years continues to be the dominant body of knowledge in our universities. In contrast, when we talk about 'knowledge is power', it signifies more 'inclusive knowledge'.

Therefore, it can be said that it is a 'better up than down story'. However, the downs are not over. We are in a position where we are able to think properly and talk about issues of knowledge and social change in a way we were never able to do before, especially in my university situation in Canada.

BH – How about your experience, Rajesh?

RT – While I stayed in PRIA, the organization's work moved into what can be broadly called the international development fraternity. The idea of participation and empowerment began to trigger policymaking in the international arena and national government programmes, so much so that the World Bank came up with a policy on 'participation' in the year 1994. So, participation gained global acceptance in developing discourse and practice. However, the tools for promoting participation gained strength from the original work of participatory research, and from the work of people such as Paulo Friere, Myles Horton and Orlando Fals Borda, in different parts of the world.

By the early 1990s, everybody was beginning to talk about participatory planning, participatory monitoring and evaluation, participatory learning and so on, and the application of this approach in different ways related to project management in the development field. Here, two things happened that are of particular relevance to our conversation today.

Firstly, the approach that gained greater visibility and acceptance turned out to be participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and its legitimacy in the eyes of government and academia increased. Secondly, in many academic institutions in India and across South Asia, PRA began to be taught as part of courses on research methodology. This is how participatory research entered academic discourse, but only as a small subset of the larger research methodology programmes.

BH – Has it changed in the present century, Rajesh?

RT – Yes, in the twenty-first century, there has been a little less support for participatory research in my view, and this has been partly because many of us in the civil society domain began to get involved in an evidence-based approach to advocacy. In this approach, good quality evidence meant fetching good numbers and having policy dialogues on that basis. As a result, the practice of PR remained limited to the planning and monitoring of projects. Therefore, in the last ten years, the attention to questioning the knowledge produced from the top kind of got lost. As we got locked into the same framework where we were trying to produce better evidence, a lot of us began to lose the cutting edge. However, three types of social movements in our context have provided fresh triggers. They are the women's movement, the holistic health movement (ayurveda, naturopathy and so on) and the ecological movement.

Therefore, we are now in a very interesting phase. Today, there are many more students in the academic framework who are interested in learning PR, but this does not mean that the curriculum has really changed significantly to incorporate the tenets of PR. We do receive interns from Indian and other universities, who come and work in the field of PR, but they realize that their preparation before they come was not thorough and that they never really had any exposure to PR.

RT – How do you see the present realities, Budd?

BH – If we look at the acceptance of participatory research or similar practices that go by other names in universities, where I now work, we see that our work is now generally accepted as one of several approaches to research now practised by academics and postgraduate students. On the other hand, the culture of university research, which favours narrower options both in terms of knowledge creation and knowledge representation, has restricted the richer methodological alternatives that could be seen earlier when the discourse was largely limited to civil society and social movement settings. Another aspect of current realities is that 40 years ago, it was clear that the theory and practice of participatory research was most firmly rooted in the global South. Names like Freire, Fals Borda, Rahman, Kassam, Mustafa, Mbillinyi, Vio Grossi, Cadena and yourself were the persons who were referenced. Today, much of that history has been forgotten and many people believe that community-based participatory research is something that was ‘discovered’ in the global North by people like Boyer, the former President of the Carnegie Foundation. I wonder sometimes if the politically engaged nature of our work has not been neutralized by its newfound acceptability?

How do you see the current reality yourself, Rajesh?

RT – One of the most critical questions facing us in India, and perhaps around the world, is a global acceptance of a neo-liberal economic development model. In this model, we have assumed that all societies and communities would follow identical trajectories of development. It is this model of continuous and rapid economic growth as evidenced by gross domestic product that is causing ecological disasters and the destruction of the natural resource base.

Questioning this model has become impossible. TINA (‘there is no alternative’) is the most common phrase being thrown at those who challenge this hegemony. The results of this high-consumption model for communities are not positive. Take the case of depleting water resources. Parts of India are presently facing severe water shortages, and drought. Two phenomena are responsible for this. First, overconsumption of groundwater has been indiscriminate, both in rural and urban areas. Second, traditional knowledge (and systems) of water harvesting, storage and sharing have been devalued and abandoned.

In our context, there are significant changes in the system of higher education. Asian societies (including India) are expanding enrolment rates in higher education institutions (HEIs). A new generation of students from hitherto excluded communities and regions are entering higher education. They find both the curriculum and the pedagogy alienating from their lived experiences. They find their own knowledge systems are being devalued and ignored.

Therefore, there is an urgent requirement for acknowledging multiple systems, forms, modes and sites of knowledge production. This knowledge diversity can be both enriching and problem-solving. Participatory research methodologies enable the articulation of such diverse forms and modes of knowledge, and knowledge

production. Therefore, there is a growing recognition in HEIs that community-based research needs to be integrated in the higher education system.

BH – I notice widespread use of mobile and other digital technologies in India. How is this affecting research?

RT – There are one billion mobile connections in India. Use of social media has penetrated small towns. All political parties are asking their leaders to have Facebook and Twitter accounts. In some ways, information access and dissemination has become easy, inexpensive and fast.

But the information moving on these e-ways (information/digital highways) is largely controlled by a handful of multinational companies (Google, for example). Its vocabulary, diction, idiom and text are all rarefied global homogens. Local, particular, contextual stories and perspectives are not finding traction on such highways. Cultural and linguistic homogeneity is easing out diversity of perspectives, wisdom and actions.

I am worried about this 'digital invasion' of the minds of our citizens, even from a very young age. In your generation, television was seen as replacing grandmothers in the upbringing of children. In today's generation, digital tablets are fast replacing mothers and teachers as 'educators'. Therefore, community-based researchers have to increase their efforts to challenge this hegemony of knowledge, ideas and perspectives.

RT – And what about you, Budd? What do you see as you look ahead? What has been accomplished? What remains to be done?

BH – As we look over our nearly 40 years of collaboration in the broad field of participatory research or community-based participatory research, I believe that we can be pleased with much of what has transpired. Certainly this is the case from where I sit in the university world. The previously firmly held view that knowledge was a product very largely of universities and higher education research institutes, to the exclusion of other sectors of society, has been broken open. In my university, we are clear that Indigenous communities, street-involved women and men, women victims of violence, organic farmers, the differently abled and a wide variety of social movements create valid knowledge. The term 'co-construction of knowledge' can now be heard across the board in many universities. Community-based research is now found in the mission statements of many universities. There are national policies supporting engaged scholarship in several countries. Funding agencies are increasingly attracted to community–university partnership research and new journals, such as *Research for All*, are emerging.

As we have found from our two recent UNESCO Chair global studies, there are dozens of partnership structures and facilitative structures being created in universities to support community-based research. We have also found out from our studies that there is a huge appetite both among students and within community organizations to learn how to do community-based participatory research. On the worrying side, our research also shows that the university partner dominates the vast majority of community–university research partnerships. The university partner defines the problem, controls the funding and facilitates the administrative functions in far too many examples of partnership research. The other concern is with opportunities to learn how to do participatory research. Again, our research shows a strong desire to learn how to do community-based participatory research, but there are few opportunities at either the university or on the civil society side to benefit from systematic study.

I would also like to draw readers' attention to the links between what we refer to as community-based participatory research and the calls for de-colonizing higher

education that are being heard loudly in South Africa, but also from places as surprising as the University of Oxford, the University of Sussex, the University of Washington and my own University of Victoria. '#Rhodesmustfall' and '#Rhodesmustgo' are the cries for decolonizing higher education, originally referring to demands for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. It is a cry for what you and I, Rajesh, refer to as knowledge democracy. In South Africa, the cry is for revolutionizing the higher education curriculum that is seen as a remnant of the racist apartheid era. At the University of Sussex, the call is for a curriculum that represents black persons in England and all those who are not part of the white male European knowledge hegemony that still dominates higher education in nearly all parts of the world. At my university in Western Canada, the Indigenous peoples who were living well for at least 9,500 years before contact with European and other settlers ask where are their stories, their art, their ways of knowing, their music, their language in the courses at our university.

And while the discourse has changed somewhat, in that we now speak of knowledge epistemicide, of cognitive justice, of knowledge democracy and decolonizing our universities, the principles are the same as the ones we were grappling with in the 1970s. Whose knowledge counts? Who names the world? If all women and men have the capacity for philosophical, even theoretical, thought, why are only some of us labelled as scholars?

I am worried about what some people are calling the emergence of 'post-truth politics'. You and I have believed in the role of knowledge in deepening democracy and taking on injustice and inequality. But we have seen the Brexit campaigns in the UK, the presidential campaign in the USA, the response to the coup attempts in Turkey and many other instances indicating that knowledge does not count in such politics. Manipulation of the facts, and out and out lies have become commonplace in much of the emerging politics of our times. What does this mean for our movement, a movement that says that knowledge, co-produced knowledge, Indigenous knowledge under certain circumstances, is critical to making this a better world?

BH – Rajesh, when thinking of the readers of this exciting new journal, what final thoughts would you wish to share?

RT – For many practitioners of participatory research, finding platforms and outlets for sharing their knowledge and methodology with other practitioners has been difficult. Most academic journals 'restrict' forms of presentation and narrowly define 'methods'. As a result, practice on the ground has remained largely 'inaudible and invisible' to fellow practitioners and students.

If the right to research is a universal right for all citizens, and participatory research promotes that right, then journals and platforms that provide a voice to claimants of that right are critical.

In that sense, I believe that this journal can play a crucial role in advancing the practice and learning of participatory research methodologies, in both academia and society. If it can further promote respectful partnerships between HEIs and communities around them, the journal would contribute to accelerating the movement for knowledge democracy.

RT – And what about you, Budd? Any last comments from you?

BH – My biggest hope is that our collective work in creating knowledge to tackle our most pressing social, ecological, health and economic challenges will strengthen the capacities of those marginalized and excluded peoples to increase their power and

control over their lives. We live in an unequal and unjust world. Knowledge democracy is not neutral. Participatory research is not neutral. It needs to contribute to the creation of solutions to local problems and to the creation of another possible world.

Notes on the contributors

Budd L. Hall, a Professor of Community Development at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada shares the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education with Rajesh Tandon. He worked for 20 years with the NGO, the International Council for Adult Education before joining a university. His writings have focused on participatory research, social movement learning and community–university research partnerships. He is also a poet.

Rajesh Tandon is an internationally acclaimed leader and practitioner of participatory research and development. He founded the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a voluntary organization providing support to grassroots initiatives in South Asia, and has been its Chief Functionary since 1982. He was appointed Co-Chair of the prestigious UNESCO Chair on Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education for two terms (2012–16 and 2016–20). The UNESCO Chair grows out of and supports UNESCO's global lead to play 'a key role in assisting countries to build knowledge societies'. Dr Tandon has authored more than a hundred articles, a dozen books and numerous training manuals.