
Authority, Gender and Knowledge: Theoretical Reflections on the Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal

David Mosse

ABSTRACT

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods are increasingly taken up by public sector organizations as well as NGOs among whom they have been pioneered. While PRA methods are successfully employed in a variety of project planning situations, and with increasing sophistication, in some contexts the practice of PRA faces constraints. This article examines the constraints as experienced in the early stages of one project, and suggests some more general issues to which these point. In particular, it is suggested that, as participatory exercises, PRAs involve 'public' social events which construct 'local knowledge' in ways that are strongly influenced by existing social relationships. It suggests that information for planning is shaped by relations of power and gender, and by the investigators themselves; and that certain kinds of knowledge are often excluded. Finally, the paper suggests that as a method for articulating existing local knowledge, PRA needs to be complemented by other methods of 'participation' which generate the changed awareness and *new* ways of knowing, which are necessary to locally-controlled innovation and change.

The observations which inform this paper come from fieldwork and team discussions with the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP) in western India, August–October 1992. An earlier version of this paper was produced as *KRIBP Working Paper No. 2*, and circulated as an *ODI Agricultural Administration Network Paper* (No. 44). I am especially indebted to Mona Mehta for her insights on the gender aspects of PRA and the notion of the PRA as a 'formal' context. Acknowledgements also go to P.S. Sodhi, the Project Manager; T.G. Ekande, Supriya Akerkar, Utpal Moitra and Arun Joshi, core members of the project team; Steve Jones, my colleague from CDS; and the project's Community Organizers, who skilfully and sensitively responded to the challenges presented in the early stages of the project. I am grateful to Steve Jones, Dr J.N. Khare, P.S. Sodhi and members of the team for the critical reading of, and editorial work on, an earlier draft. The paper arises out of consultancy work financed by the Overseas Development Administration and the writing was made possible by an ESRC Global Environmental Change Fellowship. While many of the above have contributed to the ideas of the paper, the views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of ODA, Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd. or the KRIBHCO Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project.

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of techniques of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in rural research and project planning comes in large part from their use in generating information at the community level directly with members of the community. Such information is held to be more reliable and more relevant to community interests than that generated by conventional social research methods (Chambers, 1983, 1991). Improving both the quality of information available to planners, and communication between outsiders and community members is central to the rationale for participatory approaches, at least for projects with a more 'instrumental' notion of participation where PRA has made major in-roads. Many development efforts take place in highly complex social and physical environments, which place a premium on the use of people's knowledge and judgements (e.g., in assessing new technologies). Techniques of PRA not only draw on the complexity and sophistication of people's technical and social knowledge, their practical expertise in managing livelihoods and so on; they also draw on hitherto unrecognized abilities of diagrammatic and symbolic representation among informants through a range of mapping and other techniques usable by non-literate peoples. The effectiveness of location-specific project strategies based upon local knowledge equally depends upon the quality of information feedback and learning, and for this PRA increasingly finds successful application in methods of project monitoring and evaluation.

Given the growing importance of rapid research methods in development planning of all kinds, there are surprisingly few theoretical or critical reflections on methodology, particularly those based on field experience (see Fairhead, 1991; Pottier, 1991; Scoones and Thompson, 1992). In this article, I draw on my recent field experience of PRA arising from work as a consultant to a participatory natural resource development project in a tribal region of western India. This provides the background for more general critical comments on some of the assumptions implied in the practice of PRA. My focus here is on the social context of the use of PRA methods, rather than on the individual techniques themselves. PRA is undertaken in many different social contexts, at different stages in a project's life, and by different types of development organizations. These obviously shape the fieldwork and bring to light different questions. This study focuses on the use of PRA at the very earliest stages of a project, that is, prior to the setting of specific project objectives such as the relative importance of different natural resource components — forestry, crop development, minor irrigation — in a project. The paper considers interdisciplinary 'team PRAs' performed in an area which is new to the organization undertaking the project, and at a time when the project is developing its identity and relationship with local communities. This situation raises particular issues.

The first issue concerns the extent to which the use of PRA depends upon established links between an agency and local communities. Much work on PRA methods has been done by NGOs which are able to build upon years of work with a given community and have, themselves, an established identity and credibility. Is it possible for PRA to be undertaken in completely 'new' areas, where an agency is unknown? Can PRA itself be a means of establishing the mutual trust and rapport which is necessary for any participatory development effort? The second issue concerns participation in PRA. At its simplest level the question is: who does and who does not participate in organized PRA sessions? A more complex question is whether the perspectives and knowledge of all sections of a community are equally 'accessible' to the methods of PRA, or whether there are features of the PRA methodology which impose a selectivity on the type and sources of information.

In this article, I look at the constraints to participation and the way in which PRA may generate (or create) information of a rather special kind. I suggest a view of local information and knowledge itself which differs from that commonly held in practice. Information does not just exist 'out there' waiting to be 'collected' or 'gathered', but is constructed, or created, in specific social contexts for particular purposes. Here I am concerned with PRA techniques organized as public events and the ways in which these create (and exclude) particular knowledge. Specifically, I shall look at the implications of (a) social dominance and authority; (b) gender relations; and (c) the existence of project 'outsiders', on the shaping and recording of public information available for planning. In the case of gender, for example, the question is, what assumptions does PRA make about women's ability to fully participate? How 'accessible' are women's knowledge, competence and experience to existing PRA methods?

The third issue to be addressed is the complicated question of the existence of different kinds of knowledge, and the problems this may pose in generating information for planning. A related question concerns the extent to which PRA remains a set of techniques by which outsiders extract information, rather than a methodology for planning in which local actors actively participate. Is there an assumption, in the practice of PRA, that community knowledge about livelihoods and knowledge for action are the same? Does PRA in practice deal with the problem of the limits of local knowledge and awareness and the need for new skills for community analysis of problems and for planning?

This article is not, however, to be read as a generalized critique of PRA. As users and trainers will no doubt be quick to point out, social dominance and gender are not universally experienced as constraints in the practice of PRA (although such constraints may often be unrecognized). Moreover, the article is intended neither as a review of PRA literature, nor a discussion of possible best practice. Rather, it arises from a particular moment in one project's own critical analysis of its methods. The specific problems and learning no doubt emerged in part from flawed design, inadequate training,

or poor practice, for which I share responsibility. In this sense it is not a conclusion or a judgement, but an indication of the continuing need for context-specific methodological adaptation, especially as PRA is more widely employed in the public sector.

CONTEXT

The experience of PRA which informs this paper comes from an ODA (Overseas Development Administration) funded natural resource development project, the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP), implemented in India by the Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd (KRIBHCO). A brief sketch of the project is necessary to set the background to the later discussion.¹ According to the ODA Project Framework, the overall aim of the project is 'to improve the long-term livelihoods of poor farmers' through the promotion of 'a replicable, participatory and poverty-focused approach to farming systems development'. The project intends to increase local capabilities in the management of natural resources and to improve the ability of the poorest to gain access to existing government programmes in order to bring about sustainable increases in farming systems production and improved socio-economic conditions of poor farming families. The project strategy involves an extended process of participatory planning in which PRA plays a part in generating location-specific natural resource development plans. This involves prioritizing problems to be solved, and identifying opportunities for innovation. These include the use of improved crop varieties, measures for soil and water conservation, agro-forestry and minor irrigation. The project aims to identify women's perspectives on farming systems, to strengthen women's existing roles in, and influence over, natural resource management and open new opportunities for women's involvement in household and community decision-making and resource control. The sustainability of the project's initiatives ultimately depends upon the continued involvement of the community in project implementation, record-keeping and monitoring. The project aims to generate a local capacity for this through the training of workers from the community and the development of village-based organizations. In the long run this aims to enable community-based provision of services (e.g., savings, credit or input supply) and management of common property resources (grazing, forestry, fisheries) (Jones et al., 1994).

The project is located in three districts in the Bhil tribal area of western India (Panchmahals in Gujarat, Banswara in Rajasthan, and Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh), which are among the poorest in India. A rapidly growing population — presently around 5 million people — is putting increasing

1. The project is described in detail in Jones et al. (1994).

pressure on a fragile resource base which now faces extensive deforestation, soil erosion, water scarcity and declining agricultural productivity. Unable to meet their subsistence needs, 40–60 per cent of the working population now migrate seasonally for work in urban or better-off rural areas. Six village clusters were identified for work in the first year (1992–3), and the number has expanded subsequently.

The project is managed by a functionally autonomous and specially staffed unit of a large public sector organization with its headquarters in the centre of the project area.² It is headed by a Project Manager and has a core of technical and social science specialists supporting male and female Community Organizers (COs) based in individual village clusters. COs have the responsibility of working with community members in developing local strategies for natural resource and organization development, and of making themselves redundant after three to four years by transferring technical and organizational skills to local workers.

In July 1992, COs took up residence in the village clusters following an extensive field-based period of training (including training in PRA methods, in which several already had considerable experience). They began by developing a general understanding of the locality and identifying suitable points of entry into the community. This involved village meetings, house-visits, sketch mapping, understanding local transport links, etc., and regular team meetings to review progress over the first two months. By the end of two months, two or three villages had been identified as appropriate and ready for introductory PRAs. Positive criteria for selection of villages were small size, social homogeneity, the absence of known factionalism, the existence of supportive village leadership and the interest and willingness for the village to host structured PRAs.

The purpose of the first PRAs were: (a) to provide further training for the team; (b) to contribute to the process of rapport building; (c) to test the acceptability of the PRA methodology and adapt it for work in this area and stage of the project; (d) to begin to meet the project's information needs; and (e) to communicate the participatory and 'bottom up' approach of the project to villagers. These PRA exercises involved project staff and supporting consultants, including myself (a total of eight to ten outsiders) staying in villages for up to four days and guiding villagers through a structured set of group exercises and interviews, the purpose of which was to enable villagers themselves to articulate and document their knowledge and practice of the local farming system, and to identify priorities for intervention.

2. The organizational and managerial issues involved in promoting a participatory approach to rural development (largely developed among NGOs) within a large bureaucratic public sector organization, primarily engaged in fertilizer manufacture and marketing, is the subject of separate discussion in Bhatt et al. (in preparation).

Space prohibits a description of the different PRA methods employed; for this, readers should refer to back numbers of *RRA Notes* (1988–93), and to the brief explanation of terms given as an Appendix to this article. Suffice it to say that commonly used methods include: (a) villager mapping and modelling of social and physical environments, on the ground or on paper; (b) villager explanation of attributes, uses and preferences for (e.g.) tree or fodder species, using matrices and visual scoring and ranking systems ('matrix ranking'); (c) representation of seasonal patterns showing, for example, relative magnitudes of rainfall, workloads, borrowing or indebtedness, food availability, migration (etc.); (d) visual estimations, quantification or comparisons to record such things as yield, prices, distribution of soil types, non-agricultural labour, changes in the relative quantities of different food grains consumed; or (e) representation of social relationships, for example through genealogies,³ or villager perceptions of the importance and influence of different individuals or institutions (venn or 'chapatti' diagrams, linkage diagrams); (f) discussions with farmers of constraints and opportunities in relation to natural resources while walking across a micro-watershed (represented in a 'transect' diagram); and (g) summary representation of the local history of events or significant changes in the village ('time-lines'). As a matter of PRA principle these and other methods involve the generation of visible public information, verification and cross checking, the use of local materials, indigenous classificatory categories, and limited facilitation from outsiders.

In the KRIBP project, arrangements were made for our stay in the villages, sometimes making use of existing public buildings (such as schools) or hiring a canopy, organizing food and cooking and occasionally lighting. The PRAs followed a regular sequence. After introductions in a general village meeting in which the purpose of the PRA was explained, a group settlement mapping was organized. This was followed by other group activities such as 'time-lines' (village history), or drawing genealogies. Villagers (or rather, those who had turned up for the event) were then divided into three or four groups for an area mapping which usually took place on the second day. Each group undertook a 'village walk' spreading out in different directions from a central location. The group (villagers and outsiders) conducted interviews with households falling within their 'sector'. The area covered was then mapped by the group and presented at a plenary village meeting. These maps, prepared by different groups, were used to identify areas of concern which were discussed and agreed in a village meeting. The third day was used for a range of other group exercises: tree matrix ranking, social linkage or 'chapatti' diagrams, seasonality diagramming etc. Undoubtedly there are many ways of organizing PRAs, but the above pattern of public group activities is fairly common. When, in what follows, I refer to 'a PRA', I am referring to this pattern of activity.

3. The use of genealogies in PRA is discussed in Mosse and Mehta, 1993.

The first two PRAs — undertaken in villages in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh — had very different outcomes. In the village in Rajasthan a good deal of agro-ecological and socio-economic information was generated with a good degree of community participation. Initial anxieties were overcome, the outsiders were welcomed, a context was created in which the project and its objectives could be explained, and PRA exercises proved effective at articulating locally perceived problems in relation to soil erosion, deforestation, indebtedness, education, etc., and indicated likely directions in which to explore solutions. Watershed mapping, for example, was used by farmers to plot possible areas for soil and water conservation measures, and likely costs in terms of labour inputs for different types of work were generated. In the second village (in Madhya Pradesh), by contrast, the project team was prevented from carrying out the PRA by villagers who refused co-operation. The team was unable to establish a basis for communication with the community. Initial anxieties about the project deepened and the team had to leave the village after a day without having seriously attempted any information generation. In the process significant lessons about this village and the PRA methods were learned. The experience of these two villages place in sharp relief issues which have been experienced more widely in the use of PRA at the opening stages of the project. The contrast between 'success' and 'failure' is more apparent than real in the sense that many of the underlying difficulties are in fact common to both successful and problematic participatory rural appraisal. The rest of this article reviews these issues.⁴

PRA AND RAPPORT BUILDING

How easy was it to introduce PRA methods at the very outset of the project, and did these indeed help develop rapport with local communities? 'Rapport' is itself a very difficult quality to identify. The term describes a relationship between outsiders and the community, and implies the trust, agreement and co-operation necessary for the pursuit of participatory approaches to development. However, this relationship is usually described from only one point of view — that of the outsider. 'Effective rapport' in practice often represents the set of assumptions that outsiders have about the 'accessibility' of villagers and the likelihood of effective communication with them. In the case of the project, in the absence of agreed criteria and indicators, quite different assumptions were made by different people about what should be

4. Since September 1992, the KRIBP project has undertaken a systematic review of its PRA activities, and has modified techniques and approaches, building upon the sorts of lessons which this paper highlights. These developments are reviewed in Mosse et al. (forthcoming).

taken as signs of 'good rapport'. Some fieldworkers emphasized participation in village meetings at which the project objectives were explained, others stressed the strength of links with and co-operation of local leaders, others pointed to the number of household visits made. Several early problems in using PRA in the project were, in fact, related to mistaken assumptions and misread signs of 'rapport'. In practice, communication of the project's identity and gaining acceptance of its intended activities, as a basis for undertaking PRAs, proved to be a complex process. It was, moreover, only possible through the processes of critical reflection on practice which the project developed. The following paragraphs indicate the nature of the problem.

Several early experiences in the project villages indicated that tribal villagers responded to project staff, not as welcome helpers, but in terms of their recent experience of outsiders and their present anxieties. In these tribal villages, contacts with new outsiders appear generally to be perceived as threatening and risky, rather than as offering new and positive opportunities and resources. The most common anxiety concerned land rights. It was feared that the project would undermine land rights by constructing dams and flooding valley land, by reclaiming encroached government land for tree plantation, or by acquiring land for industrial development — all part of the tribals' recent negative experience of 'development'. In this context, the terminology used to express project intentions had to be chosen with care. Phrases such as 'forestry or water resource development' conjured a history of experience which prejudiced local reactions to project initiatives.

The experience of generations of tribals in the area is that outsiders expressing concern with their affairs do so in order to pursue their own specific interests. These interests, moreover, are usually expressed in terms of meeting the tribals' own need for 'development'. In some of the project villages, the scepticism of villagers was only increased by statements from project workers that specific project objectives had not yet been set because villagers would *themselves* determine local development goals. Paradoxically, participatory rhetoric of this sort can be a bar to effective communication when seen by villagers as a devious refusal by outsiders to state their intentions plainly. The participatory approach contradicts experience and usually prompts local inquiry and conjecture as to the project's 'real' motives. The questions uppermost in villagers' minds, and the ones to which project staff have had to offer satisfactory answers, are 'who are you, and what is your interest in us?'. Communicating an acceptable answer to this question in an appropriate idiom is a precondition of other rapport-building or information gathering activities such as PRA.

But, one might ask, don't the unthreatening situations created by PRA activities create an appropriate context in which to explain project objectives and open dialogue? Certainly, the effectiveness of PRA as a research method is often considered to rest on the 'rapport' generated by the creation of informal contexts (staying with people, sitting at the same level, etc.).

Experience from the project, however, suggests that where deeply entrenched suspicion of the motivation of outsiders' development intentions exists, participatory styles of interaction often do not have the effect of allaying fears and suspicions. The effect may in fact be near to the opposite.

Firstly, it is easy to forget that notions of informality are culturally specific and that what is apparently informal and unthreatening for project staff (sitting on the ground with villagers, or entering into casual conversation) may be seen as suspicious and deviant behaviour by tribals. This suspicion is illustrated by the comment of a woman in the Madhya Pradesh village, 'today you are sitting on the ground, tomorrow you will be sitting on our heads'. Non-directive and consultative approaches are unfamiliar, disorienting and treated with suspicion by tribals whose interaction with outsiders has for years been characterized by prejudice and hierarchy. In fact, as I suggest below, PRAs often involve setting up contexts which are in social terms highly formal, and this has important implications for the kind of information generated.

Secondly, certain PRA methods, however sensitively employed, may themselves be misconstrued and may not help communication. In some circumstances, the paraphernalia of PRA research — paper, charts, coloured powders, etc. — may in fact generate a greater sense of mystification than conventional research methods. Given insecure land tenure among many tribals in the project area, for example, any emphasis on land — and particularly techniques of area mapping and transects — may only serve to confirm existing anxieties about project intentions. Moreover, specific techniques such as village transects or mapping may superficially resemble the actions of other professionals, notably land surveyors for industrial development, and cause alarm. In these circumstances, PRA methods have to be selected and used carefully.

The outsiders' initial sense of 'rapport' with a community is often derived from their interaction with a limited number of individuals, who serve as the brokers or mediators between themselves and the community. Misperception of the social position of these 'community leaders' is another source of communication failure with implications for future project initiatives. In one or two situations in the project, the failure adequately to understand local styles and patterns of leadership seriously affected efforts to conduct PRAs. In the Madhya Pradesh village from which the team was excluded, the importance and influence of two different types of leadership within the tribal community was misperceived. Community Organizers had developed contacts with individuals whose apparent influence rested on their well developed connections beyond the village. These included the holder of the statutory position of Panchayat President or Sarpanch. These leaders, who also presented themselves as 'community leaders' to outsiders such as the COs, in fact wielded less influence within the community than a second type of leader, the traditional tribal leader or *patel*. The *patel*'s influence and leadership — which in the village in question was expressed in idioms and

conventions not immediately recognized by outsiders as 'leadership' — was significantly underestimated. These different types of leaders appeared, moreover, to have different interests in relation to the project. The Sarpanch and others with 'outside connections' may have seen potential for furthering their position in extending support to COs. The *patel*, however, appears to have seen the project as a threat rather than an asset. In the event, by persistently refusing co-operation and effectively blocking participation of the whole community, he demonstrated his control over community opinion and action.

Conducting an organized PRA exercise, involving a group of outsiders staying in a village (with attendant arrangements for lighting, food preparation etc.) demonstrates a visible commitment on the part of the project to a particular community. Where this is not based upon the gradual build-up of commitment on *both* sides (village and project), the PRA may in effect present the village with an artificial choice, 'do they or do they not want this initiative', before they are aware of the implications of this choice. Opting for caution and risk-aversion, village leaders may, as was the case in the Madhya Pradesh village, initially reject the approach. In such situations, organized PRAs should occur only after a longer period of working informally with individuals or neighbourhood groups. In other cases, concrete actions involving commitment both from the project *and* villagers are necessary before the more formal PRAs can begin. Sometimes, for example, it is helpful to take villagers to visit participatory development initiatives elsewhere or to arrange visits by groups with more experience of the project from other nearby villages. These and other actions also require local efforts in mobilizing support, raising funds for minor costs, and taking responsibility. On the other hand, as the project also demonstrates, organized public PRAs sometimes *do* provide an effective way of winning support for project activities.

Finally, the experience of the project has shown that effective communication with villagers is not only determined by factors within a village community (such as local anxieties about land or leadership patterns) but also by the wider administrative and political context of tribal development in the area. Villager perceptions (particularly those of leaders or political brokers) of the activities of the project in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have been influenced by current official preoccupations concerning, for example, the activities of missionaries, anti-Narmada Dam project activists and local mass organization activists. Given that the bureaucracy and political system in the region is highly sensitive to work in tribal areas, careful development of the project's identity and credibility with a range of local institutions has been an important part of developing a participatory strategy for the project.

In sum, as organized public events, experience suggests that PRAs should only be undertaken in a community after a reasonably good knowledge of the locality and appropriate contacts have been developed. It is also

necessary to have some means of assessing the adequacy of this knowledge for particular villages, and of identifying appropriate indicators of 'good rapport'. This preparation usually requires considerable time — more than was in fact allowed for in the early planning of the project.

HOW PARTICIPATORY IS PRA?

The objectives of undertaking PRA are likely to vary with the stage of a project. In the early stages of KRIBP there was a clear trade-off between the objectives of 'rapport-building' and 'information gathering'. Maximizing opportunities for participation was not always compatible with getting the best, most systematic, or most accurate data. Local teams varied in their emphasis, but it was widely accepted that early PRAs should give priority to the *quality* of project-community relations over the *quantity* of information output (not least because of the likelihood of bias in this information; see below). Ensuring adequate coverage and quality of data was a task pursued subsequently in an iterative fashion.

However, despite efforts to broaden contacts, PRAs are unlikely to be equally accessible or open to all sections of the community. Initial PRA activities of the project rarely involved a full cross-section of the village community. Gender, age, education and kinship all influence participation in PRAs. In the Rajasthan village, for example, one of the two major descent groups in the community initially took a leading role, and the other, although not excluded, was less centrally involved. This highlights the risk that, without further work, the priorities and action plans identified for the village will reflect a narrow set of interests. Not only are some sections of a village under-represented, but also some participation is discontinuous over the course of the PRA. Above all, participation by women has in all PRAs been both limited and discontinuous (see below). The reasons for non-participation are likely to be as varied as those for participation, encompassing both practical factors (e.g., time, distance) and social considerations (e.g., social factions and alliances). In some cases, strong leaders were able to 'mobilize' wide group participation; in others, individual factors of interest and curiosity appeared foremost. Without some means of recording and monitoring participation in PRAs, non-participation and the information distortions it causes often go unrecognized.

DOMINANT VIEWS AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

Physical presence or absence is, of course, only a crude measure of 'participation' and there are many other ways in which involvement in PRA activities is uneven, and discriminates against the recording of certain perspectives while giving priority to others. A record of individual involvement would

clearly demonstrate the uneven nature of participation in PRA exercises, but even such micro-observations might not reveal important ways in which social relations influence information generation in a community.

It is a truism to state that dominant views will tend to dominate. However, the way and extent to which recorded information will be biased in favour of perspectives which are not as general as they are projected to be are rarely considered or assessed. Indeed, I want to suggest that PRA, far from providing a neutral vehicle for local knowledge, actually creates a context in which the selective presentation of opinion is likely to be exaggerated, and where minority or deviant views are likely to be suppressed. In practical terms 'community priorities' such as a school, soil and water conservation, social forestry or well deepening conceal private interests.

While from the point of view of 'outsider' development workers an organized PRA is an informal event, in social terms the PRA is often highly formal and public: PRAs are group or collective activities; they involve important and influential outsiders (even foreigners); they take place in public spaces (schools, temples, etc.); they involve the community representing itself to outsiders; and information is discussed publicly, recorded and preserved for use in planning. Such activities are far from informal, everyday life. It seems highly probable that this social formality imposes a selectivity on the kind of information which is presented and recorded in PRAs. At the very least, where critical debate in public is not an established convention, we should avoid unwarranted assumptions about the accountability of publicly processed information.

Firstly, as public and collective events, PRAs tend to emphasize the general over the particular (individual, event, situation etc.), tend towards the normative ('what ought to be' rather than 'what is'), and towards a unitary view of interests which underplays difference. In other words, it is the community's 'official view' of itself which is projected. Communities often exhibit most solidarity when facing outsiders (Robertson, 1984: 144). People may express their equality and unity of opinion to outsiders through generalized expressions 'we think, we want etc.'. These 'rhetorical expressions of integrity of the community' are not to be mistaken for the absence of distinct and perhaps conflicting interests (Cohen, 1989: 35). The tendency to give normative information may be encouraged by faulty interviewing techniques (see Mitchell and Slim, 1991), but often the very structure of the PRA sessions – group activities leading to plenary presentations – assumes and encourages the expression of consensus. Where sensitive subjects are being addressed, there is anyway an understandable tendency to move away from the individual and the particular to the general and abstract, or sometimes from the present to the past (for example, matters of present sensitivity such as bonded labour are referred to as if they only happened in the past), thus presenting problems in the interpretation of local histories or 'timelines'. As project staff, we perceive a need for consensus information for the purposes of developing village workplans and have yet to develop the means to handle

differing or even conflicting views of local reality. There is sometimes, therefore, tacit compliance between insiders and outsiders in the generation of consensus views. More generally, the interactive context of PRA emphasizes mediation between 'outsiders' and 'insiders'; 'experts' and 'locals' but is not so good at identifying and handling differences of perception *within* communities. Indeed, at times, writing on PRA appears to reinforce weak and sociologically naive concepts of the community.

Secondly, the perspectives and interests of the most powerful sections in a community are likely to dominate, not through overt competition or confrontation, but through this expression of consensus. I am referring to what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'officializing strategies' whereby the particular interests of key sections of the community become identified with the general interest (Bourdieu, 1977: 38–43).⁵ The ability to represent the personal and particular in universal terms to '... transmute "egoistic", private, particular interests into ... disinterested, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests' (ibid: 40) is a sign of authority and dominance. These 'officializing strategies' involve possession of the 'capital of authority necessary to impose a definition of a situation, especially in the moments of crisis when the collective judgement falters ...' (ibid). It is perhaps not too far fetched to consider the organized PRA carried out at the outset of a project's contact with a community as such a moment of 'crisis'. The community is called upon to judge the outsiders' intentions, take the risk of co-operation, provide collective knowledge, and articulate collective needs and priorities, in the knowledge that whatever is said will, in one way or another, have implications for the future of the community. These are, perhaps, critical moments at which far more than usual is at stake in controlling the flow of information; moments, moreover, where those in authority '... are able to mobilise the group by solemnising, officialising and thus universalising a private incident' (ibid). One might go even further and suggest that the PRA actually presents a new means by which people in authority can 'officialize' private interests, by endorsing and putting on record dominant views. With the benefit of hindsight it is now clear that many of the priorities defined following the initial PRAs in KRIBP did in fact focus on the needs of dominant families, clans or hamlets in ways which — and this is the point — were not detectable at the time.⁶

Where a new project is perceived as likely to mobilize considerable resources for village development, the ability to identify *personal* interests

5. I am grateful to Emma Crewe, whose stimulating conference paper (Crewe, 1992) suggested the relevance of the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Maurice Bloch to an understanding of knowledge in development practice.

6. I should note in passing that the KRIBP project area is not one characterized by marked socio-economic differences (and this was one reason behind the choice of the project area). However, the fact that dominance is not clearly manifest in terms of wealth differences (and that these may in fact be underplayed) does not detract from the significance of power

with *general* ones and to ensure that these fall within the compass of *project* objectives offers potentially great material and political rewards. Sometimes, the claim of universal validity for individual interests is quite blatant and detectable — the PRA in which the Sarpanch's desire for a contract for the school building was projected as a community need for education, is a case in point. But there must be many instances of this process which go unnoticed. The school was not really a project priority, so the Sarpanch missed the mark; but today many community leaders (in India and no doubt elsewhere) are well aware of the benefits to be gained not only from projecting private interests as public ones but from doing so in such a way that the priorities of projects and their funders are met or 'triggered'.⁷ In this sense 'environment', 'gender' and 'poverty' (global development priorities) are very much part of 'public' knowledge building in community development projects. Clearly, not all community needs will reflect disguised private ambitions. Indeed, in the early stages of a project, it would be impossible to judge the extent of such domination. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of the possibility and, particularly, to recognize that a PRA is a social event and, like any external intervention in a community, will be shaped and influenced by social processes which may only be detectable in retrospect. Finally, 'the project' is not simply an observer of this process. The very presence of development workers alters the balance of power. They may be called upon to arbitrate between competing claims to knowledge, and may sometimes enable the expression of subordinate definitions of a situation.

Thirdly, the methodological problems identified here are common to all attempts in social science to represent and model communities. They may, however, be amplified in group PRAs because of (a) the short time-frame of research, (b) the public nature of the enquiry, and (c) the possibility of information being used directly to generate material benefits for the community. These observations suggest the need for certain modifications to PRA practice. These would include the use of more decentralized or neighbourhood-based activities, avoiding or deferring public decision-making or problem prioritization (e.g., at village meetings) and resisting the tendency to develop agreed or consensual views on complex problems until project workers are far more familiar with different parts of the community. The practice of organizing separate interest-specific, gender or social group based PRAs is now quite widespread and, given adequate attention, PRAs can be a useful tool in understanding and expressing difference. The identification of different or conflicting views, however, also requires

differences in the social dynamics of tribal villages, or the capacity of such differences to generate greater economic inequality in the future through unequal access to project (or other) resources. The often complex ways in which power has influenced responses to the project, and the strategic response of fieldworkers to this is the subject of separate analysis (Mosse et al., forthcoming).

7. As the project's 'focus on the poorest' has become more clearly perceived, village leaders have sometimes begun to operate through their own poor clients.

development of the means to resolve these conflicts as a project develops a consensus for local action. This, I suggest below, is another weakness in current PRA practice.⁸

The corollary of the dominance of 'official' knowledge about the community (or the 'officializing' of the views of dominants) in PRAs is the exclusion of the views and perceptions of non-dominant members of the community, who lack the ability to make general and public their private and particular opinions and interests. The clearest example of this is provided by the case of women in relation to PRA in the project.

WOMEN AND FORMAL PRAS⁹

By far the most important observation from the first PRAs carried out as part of the KRIBP project was the minimal participation of women. Very few women attended these PRAs, their involvement was discontinuous and they did not play a role in the round-up and planning sessions with which the PRAs often concluded.¹⁰ This raises both specific questions about women's participation in the PRAs in the project, and more general issues concerning assumptions about the 'accessibility' of women to the project, and the representation of women's perceptions. This latter is not a new problem, nor one restricted to PRA research methods. At the end of the 1960s Edwin Ardener commented on the absence of women's perspectives in social anthropologists' ethnographies which were often a product of only talking *to* men, and *about* women (Ardener, E. 1975a: 2). What is significant is that the omissions were not (except in retrospect) striking. While men were universally accepted as 'good informants', able to articulate knowledge and explanations (models) which met the expectations of investigators and included representation of women's concerns, women were considered difficult to reach: 'they giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic, and the like' (ibid). It was possible to conclude that outsiders (ethnographers) 'have a bias towards the kinds of models that men are ready to provide (or to concur in) rather than towards any

8. This is a subject requiring separate discussion. In the case of KRIBP, village 'entry' strategies involving close contacts with village leaders initially conspired to affirm consensual and dominant views. More recently the project has had to deal with conflicting interests. For a separate account of conflict in participatory development, or rather new participatory institutions as the context for social conflict and political competition, see Mosse (forthcoming).

9. This section draws on the more detailed observations on women's participation in the project discussed in Mehta et al. (forthcoming).

10. Having recognized this problem, the KRIBP project has taken steps to address the particular difficulties involved in PRAs with women. The project brought specialist skills into the project team and has attempted to develop a more comprehensive strategy for building women's perspectives into project planning (Mehta et al., forthcoming).

that women might provide' (ibid). Yet what is increasingly recognized is that dominant male models are incomplete; they do not, and perhaps cannot, express important aspects of women's experience and interests.

PRA methods have played their part in addressing some of these gender issues in field research. In many respects, PRAs have provided good contexts in which to explore the ways in which men's and women's experiences, needs and perspectives differ, and innovative ways of representing these differences have been employed (e.g. Welbourn, 1991, 1992; Sheelu and Devaraj, 1992). Nonetheless, the central problem of the dominance of male views still pervades the exercise of rapid appraisal for rural development. Of course, in some situations — such as the one discussed here — these methodological problems are more acute than in others. Indeed, the difficulty of involving women in PRAs reported here has a specific context. Group PRAs were used at the *outset* of a project working in an area unexposed to participatory development initiatives. Moreover, the project did not start with its full complement of trained women fieldworkers. It is often exactly at this early and formative stage of a development intervention that priorities are formulated and the shape of the project is set. However effectively women may be able to participate in later stages of a project, this will not compensate for their early exclusion. The particular problems presented in the use of PRA at the very point at which a project is negotiating its contact with communities (when, for example, it is more difficult to set up separate women-only group discussions) are therefore worth analysing.

For several reasons, organized group PRA exercises in the project have not provided appropriate contexts for the articulation of women's perspectives for natural resource planning. Firstly, women faced a number of practical constraints to participation. The PRAs took place during a season when women's work (especially weeding) did not allow participation (a choice based on the need to have PRAs during a season when few families migrate). PRAs assumed that women would be available *collectively* at *central locations* (away from the work sites of the home and field) for *continuous periods of time*. These requirements of time, location and collective presence were incompatible with the structure of women's work roles. Women are rarely free of work responsibilities for substantial lengths of time and it is hard to find times when women would be available collectively. This imposes major constraints on women's participation. Organized PRAs, for example, require the allocation of blocks of time away from field and house to carry out transects, mapping exercises, analysis and presentation, which women are unable to give.

Secondly, women faced social constraints. PRAs usually took place in public spaces (e.g., schools) and in the presence of outsiders. Bhil women are typically (explicitly or implicitly) excluded from such public spaces and activities. This exclusion of women 'is so normal and "naturalised" that it is rarely noticed or questioned. In fact, the presence of women causes remark while their absence goes unnoticed' (Mehta et al., forthcoming). The com-

ments made on the cultural specificity of 'informality' above have an important gender dimension. Notwithstanding the team's efforts to create relaxed and informal contexts, as mentioned earlier, the whole PRA exercise operated at a socially formal level. In a society which ascribes to women a sphere characterized as private, domestic, manual, low status, informal and by implication socially less visible and valued, any event which creates processes perceived and understood as public and formal tends to exclude women (*ibid.*).

Caution is needed, of course, in treating 'women' as a single group. Women's access to the 'public' of the PRA would vary with age, marital status, residence (natal village or village of marriage), religion and class. There are also significant cultural differences within the area covered by the project. We are as yet inadequately informed to generalize about this. There are also specific forms of adaptation to exclusion. The public space available to Bhil women is often 'extended', for example, by secluding women by some form of *purdah* (cf. Shaheed, 1989, cited in Ram, 1992). Again, the extent of 'veiling' in public varies between different categories of women.

Thirdly, not only the context, but also some PRA techniques themselves may have generated social exclusions. The representation of knowledge and experience in maps, tables, charts and so forth involved a formality which appeared to mark it out as the province of men. Women were typically excluded from the mapping of natural resources. Moreover, as Alice Welbourn points out from a different social context, many aspects of social relationships central to women's concerns cannot be represented spatially. When asked to draw improvements they would like, a group of Sierra Leone women replied 'the changes we need cannot be drawn'. They were referring to social issues such as overwork, the breakdown of co-wife relationships, and violence from husbands (Welbourn, 1991).

Finally, on several occasions during the early project PRAs when a few women were involved in PRA exercises, there was a difference in the way they responded to the tasks. Group discussions with women (and women fieldworkers) in one village, for example, tended to blur the lines between public and personal information, or between the subject and the relationship. Women were concerned to know about the background of the interviewer; they asked personal questions and related stories. Women felt bored by certain exercises, the tasks remained incomplete and the women gave up and began communicating by singing instead (Obs. by Mona Mehta).

We are inadequately informed about many aspects of gender relations in the project area, and it is too early in the life of the project to make generalizations about women and PRA beyond the specifics of these introductory PRAs. Nonetheless, I suspect that at least some of the observations made above (for example, on practical and social constraints to women's involvement) will find parallels in other PRA contexts. It may therefore be useful, in a preliminary way, to highlight some wider themes which the particular experience points to.

Women (and in different ways other subordinate social groups) appear restricted in their ability to articulate their concerns in public and in acceptable mediums (language or other forms of expression). Whereas dominant groups are able to generalize the particular and make the private public, women's own knowledge/power is often only articulated through men, their influence is exerted only as long as the appearance of male control remains (Bourdieu, 1977: 41). Public knowledge is, by social definition, generated by men and not by women. A 'systematic hierarchization' condemns women's interventions and knowledge to the unofficial, private, domestic (*ibid*) — an order equally internalized and expressed by women themselves. Even where women's practical roles take them into the public, this is understood as private/domestic. As Kalpana Ram points out referring to Mukkuvar women fishworkers in South India, who are engaged in wide fish marketing networks: 'The expansion of women's space which occurs in the course of practice is understood and legitimised in Mukkuvar culture only through its imperfect reference to women's cultural responsibilities as wives, mothers and daughters' (Ram, 1992: 206). In the same way, *public* expressions of women's interests (e.g., in the first PRAs) almost always revolve around health care, child care, nutrition, domestic work and acceptable home-based income generating activities (Mehta et al., forthcoming). They articulate a socially acceptable profile of women's activities. The early experience of PRA in the project suggests that there are major obstacles to women's articulation of interests in farming, natural resource management, or any other area of concern which falls beyond the publicly endorsed definition of women's roles.

Ultimately, however, what the reported 'inaccessibility' and 'inarticulateness' of women (in PRA) points to is not a practical problem, or even a problem of technique or researcher bias, but a manifestation of structural gender relations. These relations, which undoubtedly influence many information generating exercises, are amplified in the context of the rather special 'public' created by introductory and rapport-building PRAs, where, as I suggested earlier, much is at stake in the articulation of needs and priorities to outsiders with resources. As a more general problem, 'inarticulateness' as an aspect of gender relations has been theorized by many, but particularly aptly in Edwin Ardener's theory of 'muted' groups (Ardener, E., 1975a, 1975b). Ardener proposed that in any society there are dominant modes of expression generated by a dominant structure. It is these articulations that are heard and listened to, for instance by outsiders. Subordinate groups, if they wish to communicate, must express themselves through the same dominant modes. However, there is a lack of fit between the ideas and experience of subordinate groups and the modes of public expression available which produces a characteristic inarticulateness or 'mutedness' among them. This is not, of course, to say that women do not speak. 'They may speak a great deal. The important issue is whether they are able to say all that they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it. Must they, for example, re-encode their thoughts to make them understood in the

public domain?' (Ardener, S., 1978: 21). A number of socio-cultural examples of 'mutedness' among women are given in the literature (Ardener, S., 1975, 1978; Callan, 1975; Okely, 1975). In some of these cases, women are constrained in the expression of their interests by patriarchal definitions of their concerns. Arguably, this is what is happening in the context of public PRAs in the project.

Perhaps Ardener's theory can be accused of being rather static and of ignoring the interplay of power. After all, in many projects which have an explicit 'empowerment' goal, some of the clearest signs of progress concern the increased control that women gain over communicating their perspectives. In the introductory context of preliminary project PRAs, the influence of power on the articulation of knowledge is particularly prominent. In providing a way of thinking about the means by which these power relations influence women's communication, the theory of 'mutedness' does not, however, deny the importance of women's agency or the centrality of this in generating change.

To recap, what I am suggesting is, firstly, that an organized PRA sets up a particular context which gives privilege to certain types of knowledge and representation and suppresses others, and that there is an important gender dimension to this. PRAs will tend to emphasize formal knowledge and activities, and reinforce the invisibility of women's roles. Moreover, women's agreement with projections of community or household interests will be tacitly assumed, and the notion of distinctive perspectives will be overlooked. Women do not have the power (and at the beginning of this project have not yet been able to develop the skills or competence) necessary to represent personal concerns publicly and, by default, have to conform to the categories of legitimate concern given in advance. Put another way, women have to clothe their ideas and encode their desires in particular ways to make them heard and accepted as legitimate in the public domain of the PRA. But often, their particular concerns do not find a place in the consensus which a PRA generates. Where women are concerned, much remains unsaid. This silence, too, may only confirm the dominant view that women have nothing to say in relation to natural resource management and thus the invisibility of their roles in this area is reinforced and communicated to outsiders. Secondly, and more speculatively, some aspects of women's experience and knowledge may be encoded in ways which are not amenable to the kinds of formal representation involved in PRA. The boredom and digression of women during PRA exercises is perhaps an expression of their 'mutedness' in relation to existing mediums of expression. I return to this issue below.

These observations highlight the need for a significant modification of PRA methodology in terms of social context, timing and techniques. There is a need to modify the organization of PRAs to increase the opportunities for women's participation. There is a need to create non-public contexts in which women staff spend time with women, make more use of house- or field-based sessions — in other words, align PRAs with specific activities or

social spaces which mark 'informality'. Such PRAs are likely to involve shorter periods of time and activities which are compatible with continuing work, or to take place in small neighbourhood groups. Other and more informal ways of communicating knowledge, such as through practical demonstration or the use of stories, are needed. Also, a wider range of sources of information on women's perspectives could be tapped, including the recording of songs, proverbs, sayings, etc. Finally, there is need for constant attention to difference in the interpretation of information generalized for the community and household.

The quality of information from women is likely to increase as women become more familiar with PRA techniques and more confident about articulating their perspectives (as is demonstrated by work with women elsewhere in India; see Sheelu and Devaraj, 1992). There is an important training role for project workers here in demonstrating the possibilities of giving formal representation — and by implication visibility and status — to women's knowledge. Indeed, if the formality and public nature of PRAs initially presents obstacles to the articulation of women's perceptions, this problem in the methodology of PRA, once recognized, is perhaps also a key to identifying the positive role of PRA in a strategy for *increasing* women's profile and involvement in rural development projects. Project activities take place in a socially formal domain and unless women's perspectives are able to be articulated in 'formal' terms, women will remain apart from the planning process. PRA provides one means by which women's knowledge and activities (socially invisible but practically central) can be given formal recognition, support and status, or can be transferred from the informal to the formal arena of community and project planning.

INFLUENCE OF THE OUTSIDER

So far, I have only given oblique reference to the role of outsiders in generating information through PRAs. Of course, degrees of suspicion or trust frame a PRA exercise and, in some measure, it is the presence of the outsider which makes the PRA formal and public. The outsiders' concern with developing an overall picture is part of the in-built bias towards consensus. Moreover, 'local knowledge' is shaped by perceptions of project workers and their ambitions. There may be a 'conspiracy of courtesy' which conceals aspects of social life, or needs may be expressed in terms of the things which the project is perceived as being able to deliver. It is significant, for example, that while KRIBP initially generated a wealth of information on crops, soils, erosion, agro-inputs, and so forth, the PRAs failed to generate information on issues such as encroachment, or relations with the forest department or police, known to be key issues in the area, but perceived as beyond the remit of the project. Answers to direct questions about problems are likely to be

strongly influenced by expectations people have of the project and its particular interest in them.

Not all potential biases in PRA are attributable to the community and the way it projects itself; many also come from the investigating team itself. The practice of PRA tends, for example, to be technique-led. Investigators go with a fixed set of techniques to try out. Techniques should serve an agreed research need, but often become themselves the framework for research. In part, this is because the models of PRA practice, which are established in training contexts, emphasize the new and unfamiliar techniques. There are a number of important consequences. Unremarkable methods such as informal interviewing, which do not produce visible outputs, are underemphasized, in favour of techniques which generate attractive physical outputs, such as maps and charts (coined by project team members as the 'aesthetic bias'). Implicitly, the production of observable outputs generates more status for the fieldworker in report-back sessions than do unorganized notes from informal interviews. This bias tends to under-recognize the work of women fieldworkers who (working with women) typically find it more difficult to produce neat charts and maps, or formal information more generally (cf. Welbourn, 1992). Individual interests or enthusiasm for particular topics or techniques may also distort information gathering. The fieldworker who spends hours trying to complete a tree matrix ranking, only finally to give up in recognition that there was neither the interest nor knowledge among the group with whom he was discussing it, is a case in point. But more generally, as a set of techniques, PRA can falsely circumscribe learning. Carried out as a discrete activity, PRA can give the wrong impression that relevant planning information comes in the form of a set of completed PRA exercises. This can limit the acquisition of competence in more general skills of participant observation, narrative reporting and analysis.

Lastly, it is not only in the generation of information that project staff exert their influence; there are also dangers of misrepresentation in the summarizing, analysis and reporting of information by the team. An example will illustrate the problem. Villagers in one project village expressed a problem as 'house collapse'. This referred to the tendency nowadays of mud walls to collapse, given the shortage of wood which is traditionally used in their construction. This problem was initially summarized by the team as 'kacca housing' (that is non-cement housing constructed from local materials), falsely implying dissatisfaction with existing house design or a desire for 'pacca' (cement) housing among the tribals. It was also very easy to exclude women's expressed needs (e.g., for a hospital, a flour mill, a village shop) in 'summing up' because they did not fit neatly into the established categories of natural resource development.

In a sense, in PRA outsiders determine the 'ground rules'. Consciously or unconsciously, project workers impose ideas of 'relevance' and determine

what is accepted as knowledge.¹¹ But do we adequately differentiate the different ways of knowing or articulating knowledge which may exist?

DIFFERENT TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

I have already indicated how the articulation of knowledge is mediated by power relations both within the community and between it and outside 'developers'. However, information and knowledge produced in any community is not all of the same type. Knowledge, for example, is more or less public, 'official', codified, agreed, recognized as such, and accessible to outsiders. In much of the PRA literature, however, there is a general assumption that knowledge is undifferentiated and that, given the right tools, people's knowledge is both recognizable and accessible. As Johan Pottier puts it, the implicit message in much PRA literature is 'just ask, they know, and they are your friends' (Pottier, 1991). In reality, of course, knowledge is not so self-evident. The information manipulated through PRAs is often of very different kinds, involving mixed combinations of fact and value, consensus and difference, openness and sensitivity, the public and the private, etc. Even where we are sure of the questions we may not adequately be able to interpret the answers. As Fairhead points out, explanations offered by people may be expressed in polite/evasive shorthand idioms, in idioms signalling distrust, as ethnic norms ('our way') or as uncertain exploratory hypotheses (Fairhead, 1991). It requires detailed knowledge of local socio-political contexts to distinguish between these different types of information, to make correct interpretations and so to treat information appropriately. Much the same applies with visual information. Exercises of participatory diagramming or mapping have a natural appeal to outsiders with limited local language competence as a way of getting at otherwise inaccessible local understandings; but they do so by assuming, as Pottier puts it, that 'environments exist essentially as physical worlds, that is spaces, "uncontaminated" by cultural and social meanings' (1991: 9). Reality is not so simple. On a transect diagram, for example, a tree appears simply as a tree, whereas in real life the tree (or its removal) may be a symbolic statement about gender relations, a statement about land tenure, or a sign of resistance to agricultural intervention by the state (*ibid*). Moreover, which of these culturally constructed 'hidden' meanings is relevant, will depend upon *who* you talk to.

11. Of course, in agricultural development the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge is constantly shifting. One significant shift 'created' the whole area known as 'Indigenous Technical Knowledge'; but we have yet to see areas labelled as 'folklore', 'myth', 'ritual' or 'religion' admitted. These may, however, be particularly important forms of knowledge precisely because they do not isolate 'technical' knowledge from its context in social relations.

We need, moreover, to be cautious in assuming that all relevant information is equally amenable to representation in PRAs. The power, authority and gender dimensions of this issue have already been discussed; but there are further general points. In any community, different areas of social and economic life are codified, or rule-bound, to different degrees. As Pierre Bourdieu, referring to the Kabyles (in Algeria), points out, different domains of practice:

are differentiated ... according to the degree of codification of the principles governing them. Between the areas that are apparently 'freest' ... (such as the distribution of activities and objects within the internal space of the house) and the areas most richly regulated by customary norms and upheld by social sanctions (such as the great agrarian rites), there lies a whole field of practices subjected to traditional precepts, customary recommendations, ritual prescriptions, functioning as a regulatory device which orients practice without producing it. (Bourdieu, 1977: 20-1)

It may not be unreasonable to suppose that the knowledge (informing practice) which is most accessible to outsiders is that which already exists in a codified form, as explicit 'indigenous theories', explanations, rules, and agreed understandings. This is also likely to be an area where knowledge (or at least its public expression) is associated with authority. Other practices are not so easily explained and are not so fully rationalized in theory. They involve what Bourdieu refers to as a 'semi-learned grammar' — that is, sayings, proverbs, gnomic poems or spontaneous theories (Bourdieu, 1977: 20). Then there are practices which involve an expertise which is not codified, but exists as unconscious schemes which produce practical fluency in a task, or skill in making a judgement.

For a long time, models of human cognition assumed that all knowledge was mediated by language and that language was essential for cognitive thought. However, Maurice Bloch reviews a body of psychological studies which show that much knowledge is fundamentally non-linguistic and non language-like (Bloch, 1991). Certain kinds of concepts involve networks of meanings which are formed independently of language through the experience of, and practice in, the external world (1991: 186). Classificatory concepts, for example, may involve 'loose and implicit practical-cum-theoretical pattern networks of knowledge, based on experience of physical instances sometimes called "best exemplars"' (ibid: 185). In terms of practical actions, these may be linked to 'scripts' and 'shemata' which 'are, in effect, chunked networks of loose procedures and understandings which enable us to deal with standard and recurring situations, for example "getting breakfast ready", that are clearly culturally created' (ibid). Indeed, Bloch suggests that the performance of certain complex practical tasks, or the making of complex judgements, *requires* that the knowledge underlying practice is non-linguistic (ibid: 187). This is because the quantity of information and the speed with which it is to be processed requires that it is stored in instantly recognizable and usable 'chunks', rather than in language-like sentence strings. He cites

the examples of motorway driving and the Malagasy farmer making a judgement about whether or not a particular bit of forest would make good swidden. The expertise involved in both situations, but particularly the latter, involves the processing of a phenomenal amount of information (e.g., on soil, vegetation, topography, aspect, etc.) *in an instant*. Becoming an expert, Bloch suggests, involves the development of a dedicated mental apparatus for the packaging, storing and processing of specific chunks of information for handling familiar situations. Such learning is through long practice.

Much agricultural and other practical knowledge addressed through PRA, and which involves the simultaneous assessment of complex factors such as soil, hydrology, topography, and crop inter-relations etc., may be of the same kind. The difficulty is that such knowledge may not be codified in a way which allows it to be directly represented apart from practice, at least not through language. While the use of visual imagery and mapping may offer advantages here over conventional interview methods, there may well remain large areas of relevant local expertise which are, quite literally, missing from the picture. The problem is not that, as outsiders, we have no access to practical knowledge — clearly under certain circumstances non-linguistic knowledge is ‘put into words’ — but that we have immediate access to only a part of it, or rather we have access to practical knowledge in a changed form. As Bloch puts it:

... when our informants honestly say ‘this is why we do such things’, or ‘this is what this means’, or ‘this is how we do such things’, instead of being pleased we should be suspicious and ask what kind of peculiar knowledge is this which can take such explicit, linguistic form? (ibid: 193–4)

Not only should we treat ‘explicit knowledge’ cautiously in recognition of the fact that it is likely to be different from that employed in everyday practical activities (ibid: 194), but also because what is *special* about the knowledge may also be a question of *whose* knowledge it is. Once again, there is a possibility that it is the knowledge or expertise of poorer workers, or of women, which is under-represented.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that some of the information arising from PRAs (such as statements of community needs and priorities) is likely to be problematic because it is produced in a social context where the influence of power and authority and gender inequality are likely to be great. In particular, it is the *public* nature of the PRA which makes the production of local knowledge subject to the effects of ‘officializing strategies’ and ‘muting’. Secondly, I have suggested that information or knowledge generated in PRAs is, to a great extent, also shaped by the concerns of ‘outsiders’ and their interaction

with 'insider' community members. Thirdly, I have suggested that knowledge of certain kinds, which is embedded in practical expertise, may be encoded in ways which anyway make it inaccessible to PRA techniques.

These observations are not intended as bald statements of the limitations of PRA, but as a challenge for further innovation to generate methods which will better serve the needs of participatory planning. In relation to the problem of practical knowledge, for example, methods are needed which are able to distinguish different types of knowledge. Particularly, in addition to drawing on the sayings, proverbs, etc. mentioned above, there is a need to further develop non-linguistic and practical modes of learning. If certain types of knowledge are only learned by observation, and acquired by rehearsal, then outsiders themselves may also have to learn through sharing in the practice of a community. Certain kinds of expertise may only be transmitted when fieldworkers are able themselves to develop competence in key everyday procedures *and reflect on them* (Bloch, 1991: 194-5). This reflection is important. In effect, it may mean 'unpacking' non-linguistic expertise and 'putting it into words'. Such an exercise is *unlikely* to add to the practical efficiency of a familiar operation: in fact, quite the reverse. However, there may be distinct advantages to the change in character which practical knowledge undergoes when 'put into words'. For example, Bloch suggests that linguistic explicitness is associated with, and allows for, innovation (*ibid*: 193). Indeed, participatory approaches to development surely require the transformation of local knowledge so that it can be applied in new ways to problem solving, and not simply its articulation.

Even supposing that existing bias in PRA information can be identified and more reliable information generated, will projects have an adequate basis for participatory planning? If knowledge *about* livelihoods were equivalent to knowledge *for action* then undoubtedly villagers would have solved problems through self-help long ago. What is often missing, in the employment of PRA methods, is an assessment of the *limits* of local knowledge and awareness, and the constraints to existing community systems of problem solving. It is for this reason that, in KRIBP, villager involvement in the collection and representation of information through PRAs is only the first stage in a strategy for participatory planning. Local skills often need to be developed, for example, in communicating information in a form which is understandable to outsiders with access to development resources, in analysing problems and identifying workable solutions, and in negotiating between different interests within the community (*cf.*, Davis-Case, 1989). Translating individual, often fragmentary, experiences of a difficulty into the collective awareness of a problem with a view to change, and from this the formulation of a coherent programme of actions (some involving collective action) often requires new skills, knowledge and confidence, and in some cases new institutional arrangements (usually implying some shift in the local distribution of power). In broad terms, this means matching PRA with techniques of animation, awareness raising, non-formal education or community

problem solving which have been a central part of participatory strategies of social action organizations for two decades. In other words, having identified and built upon existing knowledge, PRA should not ignore the need to broaden and deepen this knowledge, to build on and develop local systems of analysis and problem solving, and to develop confidence and organizational resources necessary for action. Having experienced the usefulness, as well as the limitations, of PRA techniques, the KRIBP project is now attempting to put into practice a strategy for participatory planning which builds in some of these elements. The project has thus recently tried to formulate a step-by-step guide for participatory planning, which emphasizes the need for preparation for PRA activities, the critical review of PRA outputs and the development of a wide range of tools for community-based problem analysis and planning (Sodhi et al., 1993).

The techniques of PRA have contributed significantly to the promotion of participatory development. But, while they offer new opportunities for the articulation of local knowledge, including perspectives of women and other subordinate sections of communities, they may also expose projects to new risks by creating public contexts and a new idiom in which dominant interests can gain legitimacy. Perhaps the greatest danger is the promotion of PRA as a short-cut methodology of participation, rather than as a set of techniques or tools which have to be used in the context of project-specific strategies for participatory planning. PRA has proved an acceptable methodology of 'participation' in large and bureaucratic organizations involved in rural development. Yet its advantages here over other tools of participatory development — its speed, the visibility of outputs, its amenability to use on a large scale — may also turn out to be its greatest weaknesses.

APPENDIX: EXPLANATION OF SOME PRA TERMS

There is no list or fixed set of PRA methods. The range of methods used in PRA is large, overlaps with 'conventional' research tools, and is constantly expanding as new techniques are tried (see *RRA Notes*). The following are terms relating to the initial PRAs in KRIBP which may be unfamiliar to readers.

Participatory mapping and modelling. Villagers produce different kinds of maps and models including: (i) resource maps/models of catchments, village forests, land use or soil distribution, or showing the location of wells, trees, ecological pressure points, or individual field plots; (ii) social maps/models of residential areas, indicating household composition or marking other social characteristics such as literacy, asset ownership, or employment; (iii) maps for planning and project monitoring (e.g., catchment maps used to identify planned soil and water conservation measures and to record progress or assess impact); (iv) maps/models comparing the present with the

past or the anticipated future; and (v) maps by or for different interest groups. Maps are produced on different surfaces (paper, ground, floor) with different mediums (chalk, pens, coloured powder, cutting and sticking paper). Models use various materials including sand or clay from the ground, cardboard (cigarette boxes etc.), or vegetation. 'Social maps' can be used in defining the community and its boundaries, in understanding the nature of household units (nuclear, joint etc.). People's maps are often very detailed — social maps can be used in making a village census or household listing; resource maps are often remarkably accurate when compared with aerial photographs or maps from official revenue records. In comparison with other methods of obtaining and recording information, mapping and modelling are very 'rapid'. Exercises may vary from twenty minutes to three hours, and several maps or models may be developed simultaneously in the course of a PRA exercise.

Seasonality diagramming. The seasonal pattern of rainfall, fodder availability, agricultural labour (divided by gender), income, expenditure, borrowing, prices, migration, food availability, sickness etc. is represented visually using local materials. These diagrams take a wide variety of forms. The procedure usually starts by establishing the local calendar (placing stones to represent months). Quantities may be directly represented using seeds, stones, fruits, stick lengths, or through a scoring system (e.g. values out of ten). Inter-annual variations may also be represented.

Matrix ranking. This is a tool used to establish preferences and to identify criteria of choice in relation to crop varieties, fodder or trees species, horticulture, fuel types, medical services etc. The available items, for example fodder species, are listed and detailed criteria for ranking established (by outsiders probing into the advantages/disadvantages of each). Each species is discussed and given a rank or a score (e.g., out of five or ten) against each listed quality (or species are presented in pairs — *pairwise ranking*). Finally, a judgement has to be made about the relative importance of the different criteria used (e.g., is one criterion, say market price, of overriding importance?).

Chapatti diagrams. To represent the relative 'importance' and 'accessibility' of different institutions (the rural bank, the Block Development Office, an NGO, the Primary Health Centre) or individuals (the President of the Panchayat, a money lender, a healer etc.) with whom villagers have dealings, villagers place different sized circles of paper (size = importance) at different distances (relative accessibility) to their village. More elaborate variations 'map' the flow of services/obligations between individuals or groups (*linkage diagrams*).

Transects. These are systematic group walks through an area, e.g., across a watershed from a high point, during which characteristics, problems and opportunities of different land types are discussed and later summarized in a diagram.

Timelines. In group discussions significant events in the history of the village are recorded. These may focus on village infrastructure and services, health and disease, ecological or crop histories, or other livelihood changes.

Wealth ranking. This is a set of techniques (usually based on card sorting and scoring) designed to categorize a local population in terms of relative 'poverty' according to *local* criteria of wellbeing. The use of these methods was deliberately postponed in KRIBP until the project had greater familiarity with villages. The experiences of the project with 'wealth ranking' are discussed elsewhere (Mosse et al., forthcoming).

Estimating, quantifying, comparing. Central to many PRA methods are various types of visual quantification and estimation. These make use of local materials (lengths of stick, seeds, stones, fruit) to represent both absolute quantities (e.g. yield, price, rainfall levels) and relative amounts or ranges (6–8, 50–60). Relative quantities are represented in a variety of visual ways such as bar charts or pie charts. These can also be used to show trends over time (*trend analysis*) in, for example, fuels used, credit sources, interest rates, tree species, animal population, migration, time/distance to collect fuel, area under different crops.

REFERENCES

- Ardener, E. (1975a) 'Belief and the Problem of Women', in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women*, pp. 1–19. London: Dent; New York: John Wiley.
- Ardener, E. (1975b) 'The "Problem" Revisited', in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women*, pp. 19–28. London: Dent; New York: John Wiley.
- Ardener, S. (ed.) (1975) *Perceiving Women*. London: Dent; New York: John Wiley.
- Ardener, S. (1978) 'Introduction: The Nature of Women in Society', in *Defining Females*, pp. 9–48. London: Croom Helm.
- Bhatt, A., J.N. Khare, P.S. Sodhi, S. Jones and D. Mosse (in preparation) 'The Management of Participatory Development: Issues and Lessons', KRIBP Working Paper No. 10. Centre for Development Studies, University of Wales, Swansea.
- Bloch, M. (1991) 'Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science', *Man* 26(2): 183–98.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Callan, H. (1975) 'The Premise of Dedication: Notes towards an Ethnography of Diplomats' Wives', in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women*, pp. 87–104. London: Dent; New York: John Wiley.
- Chambers, R. (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. London: Longman Scientific and Technical.
- Chambers, R. (1991) 'Shortcut and Participatory Methods for Gaining Social Information for Projects', in M. Cernea (ed.) *Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Develop-*

- ment (2nd edn), pp. 515–37. Washington, DC: The World Bank; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, A.P. (1989) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge.
- Crewe, E. (1992) 'Small Men Making Machines for Progress in Sri Lanka', paper presented at the South Asian Anthropologists Annual Conference, London (September).
- Davis-Case, D'Arcy (1989) *Community Forestry: Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.
- Fairhead, J. (1991) 'Methodological Notes on Exploring Indigenous Knowledge and Management of Crop Health', *RRA Notes* 14: 39–42.
- Jones, S., J.N. Khare, D. Mosse, P. Smith, P.S. Sodhi and J. Whitcombe (1994) 'The Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project: Issues in the Planning and Implementation of Participatory Natural Resource Development', KRIBP Working Paper No. 1. University of Wales, Swansea: Centre for Development Studies.
- Mitchell, J. and H. Slim (1991) 'The Bias of Interviewing', *RRA Notes* 10: 20–22.
- Mehta, M., M. Batra, T. Ekande, S. Jones, U. Moitra, D. Mosse and P.S. Sodhi (forthcoming) 'Gender Issues in Participatory Natural Resource Development: A Review of the KRIBP Experience', KRIBP Working Paper No. 7. University of Wales, Swansea: Centre for Development Studies.
- Mosse, D. (forthcoming) 'Village Institutions, Resources and Power: The Ideology and Politics of Tank Irrigation Development in South India', in R. Grillo and R.L. Stirrat *The Anthropology of Development* (provisional title).
- Mosse, D. and M. Mehta (1993) 'Genealogies as a method of social mapping in PRA', *RRA Notes* 16: 5–11.
- Mosse, D., T. Ekande, P.S. Sodhi, S. Jones, M. Mehta, and U. Moitra (forthcoming) 'Approaches to Participatory Planning: A Review of the KRIBP Experience', KRIBP Working Paper No 5. University of Wales, Swansea: Centre for Development Studies.
- Okely, J. (1975) 'Gypsy Women: Models in Conflict', in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women* pp. 55–86. London: Dent; New York: John Wiley.
- Pottier, J. (1991) 'Representation and Accountability: Understanding Social Change Through Rapid Appraisal', unpublished ms., School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
- Ram, K. (1992) *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Robertson, A.F. (1984) *People and the State: An Anthropology of Planned Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RRA Notes* (various issues). London: International Institute for Environment and Development.
- Scoones, I. and J. Thompson (1992) 'Rural People's Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Extension Practice: Towards a Theoretical Framework', Beyond Farmer First, Overview Paper No 1. London: International Institute for Environment and Development.
- Shaheed, F. (1989) 'Purdah and Poverty in Pakistan', in H. Afshar and B. Agarwal (eds) *Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia*, pp. 17–42. London: Macmillan.
- Sheelu F. and J. Devaraj (1992) *Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): An Initiation in Tamilnadu*. Tiruchirappalli: The Activists for Social Alternatives (ASA).
- Sodhi, P.S., T. Ekande, S. Jones, A. Joshi, U. Moitra and D. Mosse (1993) 'Manual on Participatory Planning', KRIBP Working Paper No. 3 (draft). University of Wales, Swansea: Centre for Development Studies.
- Welbourn, A. (1991) 'RRA and the Analysis of Difference', *RRA Notes* 14: 14–23.
- Welbourn, A. (1992) 'Rapid Rural Appraisal, Gender and Health — Alternative Ways of Listening to Needs', *IDS Bulletin* 23(1): 8–18.

David Mosse is a social anthropologist at the Centre for Development Studies (University College of Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, Wales) where he is engaged in teaching, research and consultancy, focusing on participatory natural resources development. He has lived and worked in India frequently since 1982. He has been consultant in participation and social development to the KRIBP project from its initial design in 1990, and formerly worked as Oxfam Representative for South India in Bangalore (1987–91), and in the ODA Social Development Unit (1986–7). He is currently undertaking ethnographic and historical research into the development of indigenous irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu. He is the author of several articles on social organization, popular religion, and rural development in India.