

Reflections on the Question of Methodology:

Between Theoria and Praxis

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This article is about the vexed question of methodology; methodology of action research; methodology of a kind of action research which involves participants coming from a variety of positions with their respective plethora of knowledge and background, their respective methods of knowing and doing and their respective philosophies. It is about how we bring such diverse bodies of knowledge to work; to work together and in the process attempt to arrive at a 'methodology' which subverts the very notion of 'following a method'.

Through this article I wish to emphasize the importance of ontological explorations through the acts of knowing, relating, and doing over epistemic enquiries coupled with deliberation, reflection, and judgment in the kind of action research we are invested in (unlike the kind of action research in various emerging neo-liberal disciplines such as social marketing or in generic twentieth century disciplines such as social engineering, where it is seen as an 'applied, problem based research'¹). How these 'verbs' bring about a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand methodology, the way it governs our research and finally the way they allow us to break down the disciplinary silos. Silos that have not only separated 'theory' from 'practice' but have also (detached) the 'act of theorizing' from 'practice'. Rendering the act of 'practice' rigid with its methods and dogmatic in its approach.

Finally, I will attempt to bring my experience of conducting an action research work in a village in North Baster. As part of this attempt I would also unpack ways in which we shifted the 'practice' of cultivating 'development' from a mundane execution of modular imaginations of Development to a practice which is participatory, reflective, and sustainable. Through this description I wish to

¹ Heather Skinner, "Action Research," In *Formative Research in Social Marketing*, ed. K. Kubacki and S. randle-Thiele (Singapore, Springer Science+ Business Media, 2017), 11-31.

substantiate and emphasize the paradigmatic shift which might help us to imagine a methodology which will try to transcend disciplinary silos and in the same breath bring practice and theory into a robust dialectic.

In Medias Res

On 16th May 2018, a group of researchers from Center for Development Practice organized a stake holder's interface in a village called Banoli in Bastar. The intention of the meeting was to facilitate an interactive session where villagers (especially women from the Self Help Groups (SHG) of the village), state authorities, development agencies and a group of university researchers can collectively plan an ecologically sensitive design of livelihood generation through Non Timber Forest Produces (NTFP). Everyone had their visions and imaginations of how NTFP and minor agricultural produce could be utilized within a forest ecology to contribute towards livelihood generation of the villagers. The planning exercise was designed to comprehensively discuss the prospects and the methods which could be adopted to give shape to a collective plan of action. Scientists and the experts shared their ideas, state administrative officers shared their visions, developmental agencies forwarded their models and finally villagers too voiced their intentions. As an action researcher I always had a doubt around hypothetical visions. Thus, I chose to facilitate the process.

Our pursuit was to arrive at a workable plan which would suit the nuances of the context and particularities of our collective visions. A common plot of land of approximately 2 hectares was available and everyone agreed on producing 'Brood Lac' which would enable villagers to earn a decent livelihood through an increased production of 'stick lac' as a cash crop. We believed this would also save the forest ecology through a carefully sorted plantation and multi species conservation strategy; albeit, where we struggled to come to an agreement was around the question of the *how*. On the question of the method and the philosophy attached to it! It appeared as if methodology was the biggest impediment in our way of attaining a consensus of ideas.

As the discussions went ahead Chaintaya Ganjhu of Udyogini, an expert on Lacrearing and forest produces asked the participants in the process a crucial

question, “What would you like to do with the plot? Would you like to do an experiment? Or would you like to go for high production of Lac?” To which my colleague Vinisha responded by saying, “Perhaps both...It would be an experiment to learn about production and how to do it ecologically”. The meeting continued as the SHG women presented their illustrated plans on a chart paper and the rest of the 'experts' discussed their views and opinions on it. After a long discussion and survey of the plot of the land a tentative plan was prepared by all the stakeholders. Although the experts were not convinced about the plan as it did not fit into the prerequisites of their various 'successful models' of rearing Brood lac. As facilitators we accepted the risk of remaining a 'misfit' rather than ruling out the contingencies of the context.

From Poesis to Praxis and Technē to Phronesis

Action research is usually ascribed a fairly short history with its genesis being traced from the 20th century; Kurt Lewin addressed as the “father” of action research, tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice through what he called a ‘spiral’ of steps, each of which is composed of ‘a circle of ‘planning’, ‘action’ and ‘fact finding’ about the results of the action’². Lurking behind the halo of Kurt Lewin, another school of thought forwards a residual, largely forgotten and ignored history of action research which traces its genesis to a ‘pre-modern’ tradition of ‘practical philosophy’. A tradition of philosophy that unlike theoretical philosophy takes into cognizance the contingencies and particularities of ordinary human life. Unlike theoretical philosophy which uses *apriori* reasoning to achieve knowledge of eternal truths, the tradition of practical philosophy takes upon itself the task of articulating the various modes of reasoning pertaining to the different kinds of human action that humans generally engage in their practical everyday life. Aristotle's work *Nicomachean Ethics* forms the repository of this tradition of philosophy which analyses different forms of human action and the different types of reasoning they employ³.

Aristotle emphasizes on two distinct kinds of 'human action' – poesies and praxis. Poesies refer to numerous productive activities that form the basis of economic life. ... It is a form of 'making action' whose end is known prior to the

²Kurt Lewin, “Action Research and Minority Problems,” *Journal of Social Issues* 2, no. 4(1946): 34-46.

³Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson, (London: Penguin, 1955).

practical means taken to achieve it. Poesis is guided by the form of reasoning that the Greeks called *technē* and that we would today call instrumental ‘means-end’ reasoning. For the Greeks, the activities of craftsmen and artisans were paradigm cases of *poesis* guided by *technē*. And, as such, they were guided by ‘productive philosophy’—what we would today call ‘applied science’—which provide the principles, procedures, and operational methods which together constitute the most effective means for achieving some pre-determined end⁴.

Praxis on the other hand although tries to achieve an ‘end’ but the ‘end’ of praxis is not to make or produce some object or artifact, but to progressively realize the idea of the ‘good’ constitutive of a morally worthwhile form of human life. However, owing to its emergent nature this ‘good’ cannot be theoretically made or hypothesized but can only be ‘done’ through an ‘actioning’. Consequently, much of its ‘end’ cannot be hypothetical. It (i.e. the good) can be only ‘realized’ through a doing⁵. A doing which cannot be entirely planned. A doing whose future is open to the unforeseen becoming. A doing which is not entirely ‘deductive’ of a planned method but rather open to the interpretation of the peculiar contingencies of the context. In simple words, it is doing without a guaranteed end but with a possibility and a pursuit of what can be ‘good’.

My co-researcher Vinisha's response was more than just a counter response to categorically separate research from production. She was responding categorically to a thought which separates ‘pursuit of knowledge’ that is research from ‘production’; as if production is a method where all possibilities of research have been exhausted; as if its method has been fixed. Its ‘ends’ are very certain. On the same note as if the ‘practice’ of that production is also fixed. Its ‘*technē*’ has already been perfected to meet a set of apriori ends.

Vinisha was perhaps responding to urge the developmental agencies to take into cognizance the contingencies of the context and the ‘historical horizons’ of their own knowledge as experts. She was urging the group to move out of their ‘modular thoughts’ of production. As the meeting progressed it is exactly this dogmatism that we tried to address i.e. to expose ‘method’ to peculiarities of the context such that it

⁴ Wilfred Carr, “Philosophy, methodology and action research,” *Journey of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 4 (2006): 421-35.

⁵ Wilfred Carr, “Philosophy, methodology and action research”.

carried a willingness to re-structure itself. To re-think the philosophical justifications that hitherto substantiated it. To re-theorize method with a cognizance of the contingencies that the context provided and to facilitate the merging of the 'historical horizons of knowledge'.

As an action researcher I was not entirely sure of an 'end' but the imagination of that end was always open to a hermeneutic process. A process open to 'dialectics', dialogues, collaboration and their interpretation in the context of Banoli (the village) and Uttar Bastar-Kanker (the district, with a certain kind of history). I was hoping to arrive at a constitutive vision of the 'end' which keeps shifting its imagination as the context changes, conditions change and consequently the means and the methods change. At the same time I was in search of a 'Methodology' which would allow me to gradually 'work through' or in other words would help me reflect on my 'practice'. This 'Methodology' (although it may not have much to do with following a method) as Wilfred Carr calls, is more of a moral and intellectual virtue to do the right thing, at the right place and the right time in the right way than following a given method. This mode of 'ethical reasoning' while practicing, involves deliberation, reflection and judgment and is termed as *phronesis* by Aristotle and received to be the foundational mode of reasoning of *praxis* by the likes of Mac Intyre, Gadamer and Carr.

The Practice in Banoli:

The practice in Banoli involved a prolonged and digressive route. The meeting on 16th May, 2018 had an extended prelude of events, intended and unintended conversations, deliberated decisions and unforeseen windfalls that dates over six months. I came into Uttar Bastar-Kanker to mobilize people of Bhanuprattapur, Charama, and Kanker block to make them aware of a two-way radio communication⁶ system through which communities could exchange ideas and voices about their lives with the forest. A radio which could facilitate voice to reach each- other from either end through a mediation of a mobile phone. Through that two way radio network we wanted to initiate programs which would encourage the forest dwelling people to

⁶ <http://cgnetswara.org/>

discuss their lives as gathers, producers and consumers of various forest produce especially lac. While I was at it, I frequented a village called Banoli where my colleagues Vinisha, Ishita and Arunima had conducted a few studies. As planned we were trying to set up a radio network in Banoli. After spending a couple months in the village and the surrounding areas I realized how deep and direct were the connections of the people with the forest. In Banoli like many other villages in north Bastar people not only depended heavily on *char (chironjee)*, *mahua*, *tendu patta* and *lac* apart from paddy and millets for their livelihood. However, the essential life cycle events and rites of life (*sanskar*) such as birth (*tonda*), marriage (*manda*) and death (*konda*) are constitutive of the relations that they have with the forest.

As we went on with our work on establishing the radio network we started discussing how life in the village was punctuated with the seasonal emergence of various forest produces. How each forest produce would not be consumed without ritual offering (*nengdastur*) to their ancestral elders (*pen*) on a given time which often converged with the maturity of the fruits and the biological period of seed dispersals. We realized how belief systems and culture were sutured organically with the biological cycles of lives of various species. Consequently, we came down to rearing lac and how the lac insects live and reproduce itself on the *kusum* tree. We also started discussing the various ways in which they came to own trees of the forest, started rearing lac and/or gathering various seasonal produces such as *mahua*, *tori*, *salbeej*, *chironjee*, *beheda* and other fruits, leaves, flowers and roots. Gradually, my everyday interactions with the villagers exposed me to the various ways they cared for the trees and also cared for the fauna that lived on it. I learnt from the villagers how the Gond society is classified on the basis of totemic trees, animals and birds. How protecting these totemic species form a non-negotiable condition of their 'being' as Gonds. I also observed and felt how people are slowly forgetting the ways of being Gonds. As the newer generations started espousing a more extractive relationship with the forest. Without asking too many questions I learnt how the practice of rearing healthy lac insects on the kusum trees were slowly substituted by techniques which would allow them to increase production. I organically learnt how traditional knowledge of facilitating 'natural inoculation' on kusum trees was slowly phasing out of the memory.

In our everyday conversations Rasobai, a resident of Banoli and one of the few people with whom I had a close bond with, told me that they have forgotten the art of preserving the 'bihan' (i.e. the brood) for the next inoculation cycle. The forest department and a few organizations promised to help us with fresh brood every year. We could use the fresh brood to get a harvest and then could scrape all of it off as and when we are in need of cash (I don't understand the context of this sentence – Arun is saying it or Rasobai? Does not make sense if Arun is saying it). Especially after *Dipawali* as the harvesting season of paddy starts. Rasobai added that even this year she never saved any lac on her Kusum trees for brood as she was afraid that prices would drop and she would lose out on much needed cash. She eventually scrapped off all her lac before the insects could lay their eggs in the early weeks of January. For a long time we discussed why Banoli and their adjacent areas lacked Brood lac in the meetings and every one would say that it was safer to scrape it off and sell it while the encrustations are still healthy than to wait for it to brood; brooding of lac comes at a cost of declining resin content, many times the insects would die and the encrustations would dry out; it results in an overall loss. Every time we spoke in meetings conversations often collapse into a loop of a popular narrative. People would barely come up with their specific challenges, reasons or conditions which prevented them from preserving brood lac (*bihan*); as if it was a shame that they have to hide, as if it everyone was guilty of scrapping off all lac even when they know that they should not be doing it. As if their needs although often very acute were not legitimate.

Ontological explorations facilitated a learning as I imbibed knowledge through the act of relating while staying with the people in Banoli. I did not follow a specified method per se. I did not try to hold back, or refer back to a list of do's and don'ts. Instead my behavior was informed by a tacit understanding of the bonds that I developed with the people in Banoli as I started visiting the village. One on one interactions, conversations with groups in between their everyday activities, my own voluntary participation in their everyday life allowed me to develop a realm of comfort and also helped the villagers to accept me as person eager to learn their ways of life without asserting my privilege to question them about their practices. Often non purposive conversations informed me with more crucial knowledge than a planned group discussion on a Sunday afternoon meetings.

The process of living with the villagers also helped me to engender enabling conditions to deliberate over probable action. Often the relationships that got forged while staying in Banoli helped me to carve out a space within an otherwise formal atmosphere of the meetings where people would think freely, talk, share their ideas and imaginations to respond to a situation which was developing into a crisis. The developing situation around the dearth and dependency of brood started getting discussed as the atmosphere of the Sunday afternoon meetings eased out. In one such meeting Mahabati Gaude said that not all would sell off all their lac. Some saved them for the next crop and left them to brood on their kusum trees. But those who saved, they saved so little that they could not share with others to inoculate on their trees. Most of them depended on the forest department or other organizations to distribute brood that would be supplied from Jharkhand. The SHG members discussed these problems throughout the month of January and contemplated that if only they could rear their own brood they would have been far better off. But no one was brave enough to risk it all, who would risk a whole harvest and wait for it (lac) to brood; what if all the insects died before they could lay their eggs and the encrustations dried out! The risk of growing one's own brood could only be taken by those who had many trees and would not mind incurring a loss while most of the families in Banoli only had 2 to 4 kusum trees on which they could farm lac. Life was not easy, neither for the insects nor for the people who were rearing them.

After about ten meetings that we had over a span of two months it was agreed that a brood lac bank could perhaps be a solution, an idea that Vinisha had been exploring through her research. We discussed and deliberated in those two months with a group of thirty five women around various questions such as – what is a brood lac Bank? Whether we could come up with a collectively owned brood lac bank which would supply brood to people in every cycle? How we would do it? Where we would do it? What will be the ethics of our laboring and distributing the produce? As we discussed we also kept exploring possible ways of setting up a Brood farm, initially we thought of doing it in the adjacent forests where there are many Kusum trees. Later women said that it would be difficult to maintain them and the forest department often creates a lot of trouble for rearing lac on trees in the forest. Some said that it will also become difficult for women to prevent monkeys from destroying the lac encrustations on the branches especially for the trees that are in the adjacent

forest. Only by a fateful coincidence we found the un-utilized nursery plot (a commonly owned plot of land of 2 hectares). The plot was explored and the SHG women decided to make a demand it from the Panchayat as they would use the plot to produce brood lac and learn various ways of rearing and caring for the plants and the insects with which they have been coexisting in the vast wilderness of Bastar.

After the plot was selected and the protracted process of handing over was accomplished still there were a lot of doubts, lack of clarity of what it all will result in! As time went by the SHG's activity attracted state stake holders who promised to support the activity through routing all labor work through MGNREGA. Although it appeared to be a boon but we also realized that it would take away the autonomy of the SHG women and it may also reduce it to a quantifiable job of digging and earth moving. As work started under MGNREGA we also realized that a lot of relational dynamics had emerged within the group of women. Expectation, hope and importance also creates and catalyzes various asymmetrical behavior which started affecting members. Lobbies got formed and work slowed down. In the current context of intra group disturbances it also became important for us to concentrate and address the causes of discontentment amongst the women rather than just externally pushing the group towards attaining the material goals and deadlines which MGNREGA work would entail. At this juncture we are in yet another conundrum, a dilemma which would have some opportunity cost. Deliberations on strategies of dealing with such situations often lead us into corridors of uncertainty which requires us to judge and commit to a strategy and pay the opportunity cost for not committing to the other.

Methodology beyond Method:

The idea of following a method often gets disturbed and side tracked due to the uncanny, unforthcoming nature of the contingencies. Action research as I encounter it, becomes an exercise of dealing with these contingencies and yet managing to make sense of the various detours and digressions that one has taken to arrive at the 'end' i.e. the idea of the 'good' which always remains a discursive and debatable idea. Giving material shape to such ideas perhaps requires us to engage and essentially engage together, to chisel out of the entropy a coherent narrative and not necessarily

a linear narrative of attaining an 'end' which is pre-determined (a-priori) and is considered 'perfect' hypothetically. My engagement helped me to shift my ways of approaching research from an exercise of 'proving a hypotheses' (which also reduces research to poesies) to an act of hermeneutic explorations of the context and its (inherently contingent) demands; it becomes an exercise to find an ethical response to mitigate such demands. Hence it requires a re-working of the philosophy that guides research in general and action research in particular. A reworking that will develop a philosophy (perhaps a practical philosophy) of methods premised on an organic interaction with those with whom we conduct the research (i.e. the villagers and the SHG women here) rather than a set of distant and abstracted apriori principles set by canonical disciplines and the silos that they create. The 'methodologies' that prevented the learned stakeholders from agreeing and taking the project forward without hiccups seldom attempt to have a re-look upon their own rationalities. Rationalities which are often oblivious of its surroundings, oblivious of its own 'historical horizons', oblivious of the uncanny-unforeseen-undisciplined nature of life and future of life itself. Hence I feel that it is not only a question of bridging 'theory' and 'practice' through action research but also a question of how theorization will help to enrich practice through a constant meditation on the practice itself through deliberation, reflection, and judgment. Hence I strongly sense that practice is not separate from theory and neither of them is pre-given. The moment it gets fixed and separated it would become an impediment as it became in the meeting on 16th May, 2018. Methodological hiccups will prevent us from making research functional. In that lieu I beg to differ with the world of disciplines and their methodological islands. If action research like any other research is a pursuit of truth, and unlike any other research also the pursuit of finding what is 'right' given its contextual contingencies, then perhaps it should seek for a methodology beyond the various 'methods' propagated by various disciplines. In other words a methodology for an action research would first demand a requiem for 'methods' and an epitaph for the 'disciplines'.

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