Action research: writing on righting wrongs?

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This paper is on' action research'. What is action research? How does it differ from conventional social science research? However to make sense of what we understand as action research (and our understanding is nothing more than a 'partial perspective'), especially in our context, the third world context, the southern context, we need to first see what the fundamental coordinates of the MPhil programme in Development Practice are, because action research is a component, albeit a crucial component, of the MPhil programme in Development Practice. The MPhil programme in Development Practice can be seen to have a five-fold agenda:

1. Develop a critical-analytical-reflective relation with the mainstream/dominant discourse of development (not to criticise or discard, but to re-form such discourse). Courses like *Philosophy of Development Practice, Understanding the Rural, Equality Discrimination Marginalisation in Rural Contexts, Philosophy of Justice, Discourses on Well-Being, Politics Resistance Transformation in the Rural*, and *Gender and Development,* make an attempt to generate such a sensibility in the MPhil course, without which, we thought, one shall remain a passive implementer or a naïve practitioner of given (western/Euro-American) models of development. In that sense, our understanding of development practice was premised on a re-thinking of both development and practice, it was in fact premised on a critique of both developmental frameworks, including frameworks of progress and growth, and developmental action.

2. Engender a kind of self-transformation; engender perhaps through what Erik Erikson (in Ghandhi's Truth) and Spivak calls a 'non-coercive reorganisation of desire' in the student could the same happen with the 'community' is also an important questions. Would a new community be born through such reorganization of desire? We try to do this in courses like *Experiencing the Self: Relating with Others, Listening Learning Communicating, and Immersion I* (Village Stay), without which, we feel, development would remain quantitative, top-down and statist, and would have no human or relational or psychological context. This is also important because bottom-up or grassroots level developmental work is not just about knowing or getting the numbers right, but has much to do with feeling-states; feeling for the Other, with the Other; felling into oneself, one's own self. Developmental practice/action without affect is most often a liability to both the sector and the community. *Immersion* I, in the structure of the MPhil programme, is crucial to a reaching of this feeling-state in terms of one's nascent identification with the (suffering, and why not the hope, joy, despair of the) rural poor women. The fact that students actually live in the household of a villager, living the life of the rural poor for a month gives the student a sense of what it is to live in destitution/marginalization, as also to remain torn between hope and despair.

3. Learning to relate with groups and learning to work in community contexts. We try to do this in *L-Groups* and *Immersion II,* as well as in courses such as *Participatory Rural Appraisal* and *Grassroots Engagement Methodology*; the *Theatre Workshop* (Theatre of the Oppressed) conducted in rural spaces would have also contributed, where we see community not as something given but as an ever-emergent being-in-common (here we have in mind Jean-Luc Nancy's work on the question of community titled: *Inoperative Community*). Much of Higher Education in India focuses on individual excellence. There is hardly any training in working in groups and learning through group processes. The MPhil in Development Practice is training to also relate to groups (in rural contexts) and to the rural in terms of community groups and not just individuals. This, in addition to strengthening the inner resolve of the student (about to emerge as a development practitioner), sets to tune and balance the inner compass of the self between 'self-perspective/standpoint' and 'group-perspective/standpoint' and brings to conversation a five-fold agenda (Figure 1).
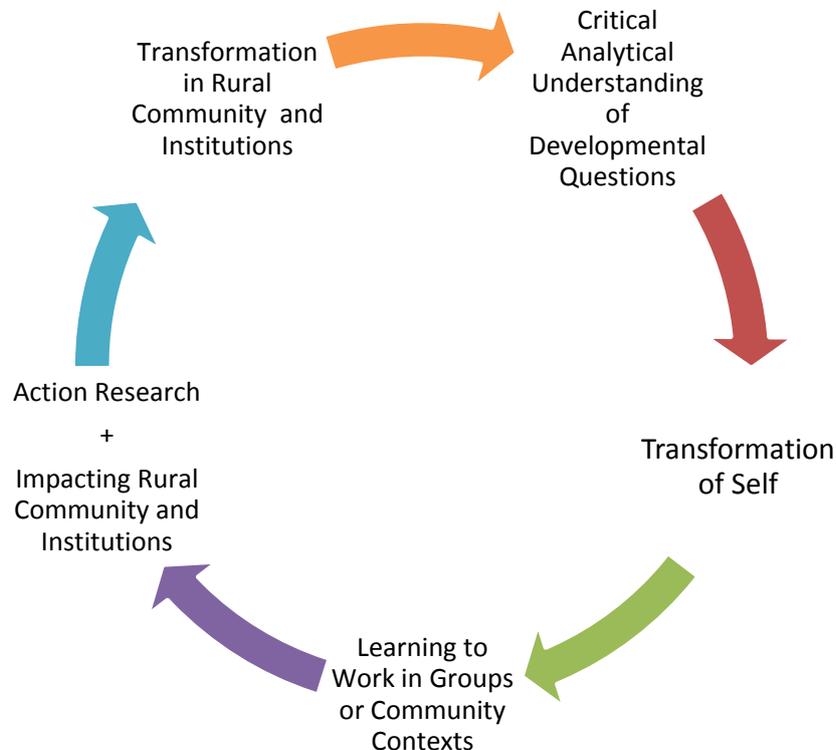

Figure 1. The major signposts of the MPhil programme in Development Practice in terms of the pedagogic structure.

4. Develop a framework for action research (not conventional research). We try to give shape to the action research proposal of each student through *Immersions*, *Dissertation Seminars* and *Research Methodology* courses. This is referred to in more detail in the section titled 'Revisiting Research'.

5. Learning to impact institutions (family, rural community, Self Help Groups (SHGs), State, panchayats,

gram sabhas). We try to do this through a specific action agenda in *Immersion III*. The impact of this action agenda is important to us. We want to see whether our action research makes possible appreciable changes in spaces of extreme impoverishment. In other words, we ask whether our action research has ushered in some transformation in the rural. This is important because transformation is our focus as well as the object of enquiry. In the MPhil Programme we first study extant transformation in the rural and in the community (which has happened before we arrive or is happening irrespective of our presence), we then try to usher in desirable/just transformation through collective/community action, and finally reflect on the process of transformation to produce knowledge on/of transformation. The MPhil programme thus brings to dialogue knowing, relating and doing in the three Immersions:

Figure 2. The major signposts of the MPhil Development Practice programme from the students perspective.

From fieldwork to (rural) immersion

The MPhil Development Practice programme is a movement from fieldwork, (never to give it up altogether), to what we have provisionally called Immersion. This section takes a closer look at the context, structure, rationale and objective of the three village Immersions.

The focus of *Immersion* I (Jan-Feb, 2nd semester) is primarily on the 'self'. This two-month Immersion divided into Village Stay (in a rural household, for a month) and Village Study (for a month) is about setting the compass of the inner self, in the direction of becoming a development practitioner. It is about being in touch with one's inner conviction, conviction to work in the rural, with the rural poor, and among poor women. However, *Immersion* I is not just about the self but also about extending oneself towards community/groups and learning to relate with them.

The focus of *Immersion* II is on the community and on group processes. *Immersion* II sets up a relationship with the rural community/group, and finds a community/group voice. But it is also about extending oneself (and community) towards a shared research agenda, an agenda emerging out of the community's needs. *Immersion* II has a double/dual role. On the one hand it is about forming SHGs, or any group, any collective. While on the other hand it is about deepening and bringing clarity to the action research question/agenda.

The focus of *Immersion* III is on action research. It is about setting up a relationship with the research question, conducting research and moving towards research findings. It is also about extending the research findings towards action and institutional change, even if minimal.

Revisiting the idea of research

In the MPhil Development Practice programme we arrived at the understanding that *Immersion* II is to have a double/dual role. The two roles/purposes are however not separate, but closely interrelated. On the one hand, *Immersion* II is an experience that would take the student to a sound understanding of groups and community contexts, and an appreciation of how groups work (or do not work) and how groups are forged. It is also about a deepening of one's nascent action research question. But the deepening of the action research question is not something one does alone. It is not done in the 'I', 'me' or 'mine' mode. One is expected to do it in the 'we'/'us' mode. The idea is to deepen the action research project in collaboration with the community/group one is working with. The idea is to also see what the community/group 'need' is and relate 'my need to know' with the 'community/group need to transform', bringing the two needs to a productive dialogue and a dialectic, to reach a middle ground. In this new imagination of research 'poor rural women' are not our objects of knowledge, but our co-researchers. They are not just 'native tribal informants' but 'co-producers of knowledge'. The 'gendered subaltern' thus becomes a colleague, albeit with much difficulty, in research and action. The local SHGs see possibilities of transformative social action based on our research findings. We came to the conclusion that action research in development practice is different from conventional social science research in a number of senses;

- Action research in development practice is not research on but research with the community/group. The poor tribal woman is not an object of research, rather a subject of research.
- Action research in development practice is attached/involved/engaged research, *not* detached research.
- Conventional research would always have a guilt-washing chapter on the limits/ethics of knowing. But would finally 'know about the Other', put it out in the public domain, publish and then would have nothing more to do with the Other; one would move to new Others. Action research in development practice engages with the life of the Other as one tries to figure out what is affecting the life of the Other. It does not just want to know about the Other, but know

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with the Other, and put to use that knowledge to action and collaboratively work towards transforming the life of the Other.

- The community/group has ownership over the research being conducted in their village and is involved in the research.
- The community/group wishes to build on the research and develop/design a frame of action/change/transformation.
- The community/group would continue to use the research as ground for its action even after we have finished our MPhil and are no longer in the village.
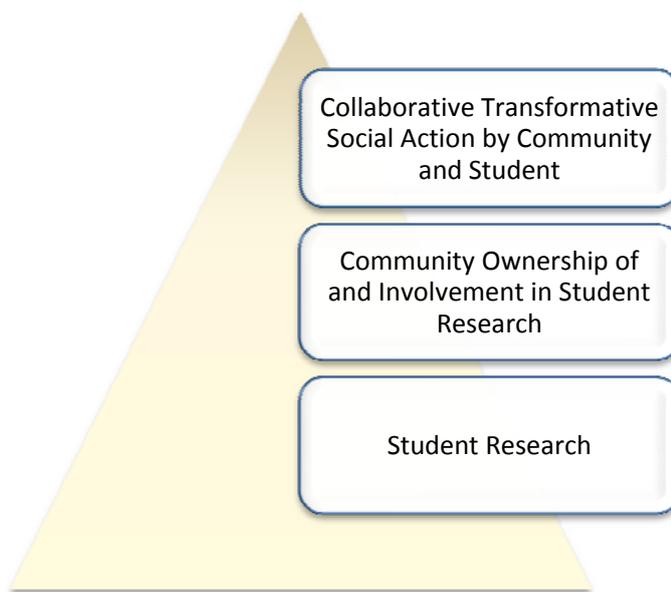

Figure 3. The major signposts of Action Research.

We are now in a position to share our understating of action research. Put telegraphically 'action research is reflective writing on the reflexive process of righting wrongs (righting wrongs primarily in rural and community contexts)'. But how does one right wrongs? One needs to know, first, what is wrong? Or perhaps, it is not about a first step (i.e. first knowing what is wrong) followed by a second step (i.e. then righting wrongs).The first and second steps work in mutual constitutivity (in overdetermination in the Althusserian sense), the process of knowing generates an understanding of righting, the process of righting deepens knowing. In other words, action research is both about knowing and righting, as also righting and writing. It is about knowing what is wrong, but knowing collaboratively. It is about making efforts at righting wrongs, but righting not in a top-down manner, righting with the community as foreground and the researcher as background. It is also about writing on the actual or lived process of righting wrongs, a process lived and experienced by both researcher and community, which is why action research in 'development practice' is not research 'on' the community, rather research 'with' the community. So action research is about;

- Engendering a small process of transformation in parts of rural India, a process owned by communities in which the transformation process is being initiated through some kind of

catalytic activity by the researcher,– who is in turn making an attempt to know in depth what is wrong, knowing with the community as co-researcher.

- Documenting the process in its infinite complexity and contradiction.
- Generating somewhat abstract learnings and explanatory frameworks on transformation out of the experience of transformation for the development sector and the social at large.

Action research is about first actioning research findings and then researching processes of action.

What is it that one is expected to do then in action research? To answer this question, we first need to locate action research within the larger framework of the development practice programme. Once again, to put it telegraphically, developmental practice is about social transformation and transformative social action. Action research is a core component in such transformation exercise-exegeses. Social transformation, which may happen without our active interventions, transformative social action (which we initiate and PRADAN initiates in the rural context) and action research (reflective theorisation of transformative social action) form a related triad in development practice.

But if action research is about transformation we need a short reflection on transformation. One can think at present of primarily three models of transformation, and the task of action research in development practice is perhaps to bring the Borromean Knot of the three to dialogue in rural contexts.

Political transformation: is being increasingly handed over to political parties[1] and is usually being imagined in liberal frameworks as transformation through the vote and in Marxist formulations as transformation through the 'revolution of through big bang change'. Both imagine transformation in terms of a restructuring of usually state power. Here the belief or the assumption is that political transformation, (i.e. transformation in the state apparatus), will then be followed by a somewhat slower, protracted and long-term and long-drawn 'social transformation'. However, the idea of the political, and power, changed in the last couple of decades. Power is no more seen as concentrated or condensed in the state or in one individual. The ubiquitousness and productive nature of power has led to the increased realisation for engagement in 'new social movements'. In other words, even within the framework of revolutionary transformation the need for social transformation as going hand in hand with political transformation, and not following political transformation has been felt[2]. The rural Soviets in Czarist Russia and the rural route the Long March traversed in China were perhaps nursery beds or nurturing grounds for such social transformation that in turn led to political transformation (as also followed political transformation).

Two Indian thinkers, Gandhi and Tagore saw social transformation, and not political transformation, as

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[1] I have in mind Badiou's turn to *non-party political formations*. We have seen attempts off late in India at reclaiming political space or the space of politics and taking it beyond the left-right divide; anti-corruption movements being a case in point.

[2] I have in mind the turning away from a *Monthly Review* kind of political perspective to a perspective engendered by the *New Left Review* and the book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Laclau-Mouffe - for a brief and simple understanding see http://anselmocarranco.tripod.com/id68.html.

fundamental. Socrates 'in the marketplace[3]', Gandhi in the Salt March, Tagore in Sriniketan, are perhaps examples of three philosophers engaging with the 'doxa' of the multitude/community, engaging in praxis, engaging in philosophical practice and practical philosophy, where practice is not conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance(*Erscheinungsform*][4].)

Further, while in conventional or classical understandings of political transformation the assumption was that social transformation will follow the political, and that both would be required. It would be interesting to note that the need for self-transformation (though reiterated at times in terms of certain 'ascetic/moral practices' or conversely through 'training in violence' as in projects of class annihilation) was never foregrounded or taken too seriously. Once again the assumption was that the change of structure shall take care of the change of/in the self/subject; a parallel (and overdetermined) working through to an 'ethics of the self/subject'[5] was never on the agenda. The revolutionary male worker thus continued to be the perpetrator of domestic violence. The vanguard rarely lived the life of the proletariat, and at times, he even shunned laboring activities, including household work.

However, in spite of its many problems and pitfalls we remain committed to the necessity of political (usually understood as structural) transformation. Our action research projects may set up connections with new social movements, movements that work for transformation at the intersecting histories or interstices of class, caste, gender and nature. Our discomfort with political transformation stems from the fact that it projects political transformation as prior to social transformation and at times, the project of political transformation becomes asocial (contemporary forms of Mao-ism in India could be seen as an example). The critical angle we look for with respect to political transformation is how one can socialise political transformation. New social movements – especially the work of Gibson-Graham offer us interesting models of 'socialised politics' or 'politicised social transformations'.[6]

Social transformation: is increasingly being handed over to a body of professionals/experts tied to the World Bank. However, social transformation is an older concept, perhaps with a colonial, even a pre-modern genealogy. A number of players from the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* to Tagore's Sriniketan, from the reformists to the revolutionaries, from the nationalists to the nativists, from the modernisers to the traditionalists participated in social transformation in their myriad ways (at times with also hidden political agendas). At other times, social perspectives to transformation have been suspicious of political perspectives to transformation. The Tagore quote is a case in point, 'the political civilisational perspective born in Europe feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future, while eastern Asia has been pursuing its own path, evolving its own civilisation, which is not

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[3] See Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (2007).

[4] "Dirty-Jewish" — according to Marhsall Berman, this is an allusion to the Jewish God of the Old Testament, who had to 'get his hands dirty' making the world, tied up with a symbolic contrast between the Christian God of the Word, and the God of the Deed, symbolising practical life. See The Significance of the Creation in Judaism, Essence of Christianity 1841.

[5] I have in mind Greek 'care of the self' and *askesis* in Foucault and Budhhist *ascesis* in Obeseyekere.

[6] For a brief and simple understanding see http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home.

political, but social.' This in Tagore's perspective to transformation there is a privileging of social transformation over political transformation.

Self-transformation: is increasingly being handed over to mental health professionals, such that other imaginations and projects of self-transformation, projects tied in turn to political and social transformation are increasingly being seen as irrelevant. Action research in development practice could possibly bring to dialogue all three perspectives of transformation, political, social and self, and see what emerges out of such a dialogue.

Do we arrive at more meaningful philosophies of transformation, philosophies either un-thought or partially thought? Action research dissertations could be nascent theorisations of such philosophies, philosophies that in turn redefine 'philosophy' itself, where philosophy is not an academic discipline but a 'way of living', 'away/art of living counter to all forms of fascism', where the practice of philosophy is (or can be), to paraphrase Nietzsche, a way of becoming. Where philosophical activity was not a form of accumulating knowledge but an exercise, an askesis. Where philosophy was to form, and transform, and not to just inform. Where philosophical practice was to transform oneself and the way one sees,' to regard otherwise the same things.' Where philosophy was the practice of a certain way of living and speaking, a certain way of being with oneself and with others[7];, and where philosophy is an exercise in self-transformation and world-transformation[8].

So action research could be seen in terms of the following:

- A process where the construction and constitution of knowledge is social, communitarian and not individual.
- A process where two kinds of agents, researcher and community come together to intervene, and who have particular skills and experience.
- It is important for researchers and participants to share mutual perceptions about what injustice, justice, ethics and well-being is.; The researcher and community 'knowledge' and the knowledge process needs to be made explicit so that values can be examined.
- Researchers must adapt modes of communication and discussion to the needs of local communities.
- Community is seen as an active subject (rather than a target group).
- The participatory process also involves informal education in which community and researcher both unlearn and relearn, and facilitate the 'expansion and democratisation of knowledge'.
- Its philosophy is centred on community development and improvement of quality of life, with certain political and social values as central.
- The focus on problems and projects contributes more effectively to an inter- and multi-disciplinary perspective.

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[7] I have in mind Foucault's 'care of the self'.

[8] I have in mind the Eleventh Thesis of Marx.

- Knowledge is not found or taught. It is created by means of a dialectical interaction.
- There is a move to engender and create transformative social action projects that are increasingly organic, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary with an effect on official policies.

The above discussion on transformation stems from my problems with the 'concept of political transformation', a conceptualisation that at times gets reduced to badla[9] and misses out on the necessity of badlao. It stems from on the one hand, the denigration of social transformation (denigration of the work of rural reconstruction in Tagore and swaraj-swadeshi in Gandhi), and on the other, the unquestioned overvaluing of only kind of transformation, World Bank sponsored social engineering, and the default devaluing of other kinds of transformative philosophies, social, political or self.

It stems from the marginalisation of the work of self-transformation in much of political and social transformation and the foregrounding of only one kind of self-transformation that is medicalised and approved by either scientific communities or flag-bearers of pop-spirituality in global capitalist cultures. It stems from my discomfort with the idea of the 'professional'. Something happens, something changes when you put a profession in a university setting, in a liberal studies setting, and PRADAN has taken precisely that risk, the risk of putting 'profession' to historical, philosophical, sociological critique. It stems from the problem of taking professional knowledge as given, in the field, as if the problem is one only of action. It stems from taking action as given, in the academia, as if the problem is one only of knowledge.

It also stems from the dream of founding philosophies of transformation, true to our rural contexts, histories, experiences and subaltern philosophies. The first rural immersion was about setting up a relational space between 'self' and 'community'. The second rural immersion was about connecting self, community, and action, an action that took the shape of being catalytic in the formation and founding of a self-help group. The third rural immersion is about bringing to dialogue self, community, action and knowledge production, knowledge production about transformation, by actually engendering transformation with(in) the community. The third immersion is thus about researching action/transformation through participation. The third immersion is about righting wrongs. It is also about writing on the reflexive process of righting wrongs. It is about reflection on the process of attempted transformation, even if limited, and partial.

Put telegraphically action research is about five 'hows'; how did you arrive at your action research proposal; what was wrong; how did you arrive at what was wrong; collaboratively or by yourself? How did you get the community on board? How do you wish to go about engendering the transformation? How did it actually happen? How would/could future transformative projects happen? What is your suggestion, given your own experience of action research?

One may ask why however have we made an attempt to move from conventional research to action research? One may ask what is it for? Why was such a move necessary? Apart from the reasons cited

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[9] I have in mind Schmidt's *The Concept of the Political* and Derrida's *Politics of Friendship.*

above, it could also be, as Spivak suggests, for a responsible and 'aesthetic education in the era of globalisation'. Responsible and aesthetic education as the last available instrument for implementing the somewhat unending programme of global justice and democracy, in an era obsessed with communication as against 'listening-relating'? We wonder, is it also to train the imagination? To work incessantly at the troubled interstices of the ethical, the aesthetic and the political? Is it for the development of a student body capable of developing its own sustained self-critique, destabilising, defamiliarising self-critique? Is it to create an opening to inappropriate others? Is it to prevent the collapse of differences in a developmentalist regime? Is it to engender a dialogue between rights-based frameworks and responsibility-based frameworks? Is it, in a word, as Spivak suggests, to learn to learn from below?