

Village Adoption

A Praxis-based Approach to Community Engagement by Institutions of Higher Learning

Centre for Rural Infrastructure
National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj
Rajendranagar, Hyderabad – 500 30

Abstract¹

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has launched a programme called Unnat Bharat Abhiyan with an aim to connect institutions of higher education, with local communities to address the development challenges through appropriate technologies. Policy notes and advocacy on the importance of community engagement by institutions of higher learning comes up for discussion time and again. Actually, there are several universities and science & technological institutions that already have community service as an integral component of their academic programmes. Nevertheless, sometimes it ends up as an NSS camp in the surrounding villages, where students conduct surveys knowing absolutely clearly that that the responses will never be coded or analysed. Possibly, this is because of lack of understanding of what community engagement is all about; or what are the modes through which meaningful community engagement can be taken up by universities or S&T institutions. This paper clarifies the idea of praxis-based approach to community engagement, which can be called ‘village adoption’ by institutions of higher learning.

Key Words: Village Adoption; Higher Learning Institutions; Community Partnerships; A Praxis-based Approach; Modes of Community Intervention

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The Background

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has launched a programme called Unnat Bharat Abhiyan with an aim to connect institutions of higher education, with local communities to address the development challenges through appropriate technologies. The objectives of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan are broadly two-fold:

1. Building institutional capacity in Institutes of higher education in research & training relevant to the needs of rural India.
2. Provide rural India with professional resource support from institutes of higher education, especially those which have acquired academic excellence in the field of Science, Engineering & Technology and Management

Under this programme, 132 villages have been identified for intervention by 16 institutes of higher education so far. This information was given by the Union Human Resource Development Minister, Smt. Smriti Irani in a written reply to the Lok Sabha question (Press Information Bureau, 10th December, 2014).

This sets the foundation for this paper. There is profound truth in the statement that greater the application of science and technology by communities; better will be the quality of life. Similarly, finer the practice of democracy at the community level, superior will be the dignity of life. To enhance the quality of life and to achieve dignity of life for the citizen, science, technology and management have to play considerable role, for which educational institutions have to contribute substantially (Palanithurai G. , 2015).

In reality, universities and institutions of higher learning in India are mostly involved in teaching (or training); occasionally in research; and rarely in community engagement. In other words, teaching takes the vast space in an academics calendar, and research gets marked occasionally. And the component of actual ‘community engagement’ either

hangs as an appendix or is largely missed out. Perhaps, it does not occur to us that an academic institution being actively engaged in development practice reinforces teaching; and prods research providing researchable issues. ‘Village Adoption’ can be one of the ways for institutions of higher learning to have regular development engagement with rural community. This paper clarifies that concept of village adoption and a range of approaches to village adoption that universities and higher education institutions specializing in Science & Technology and Management may appropriate for application.

The Concept of Village Adoption

The concept of Village Adoption entails development practice that is reflexive, and socially useful. It involves moving from ideation to action. During action, there is critical monitoring of the self and the other taking place – in terms of development principles, development ethics and prevailing development policy. We may call it Action – Response – Action Continuum. It’s sort of Reflexive Practice, contrast to blind-folded execution of guidelines. It must result in improvement in the local situations, refinement of a local practice, and betterment in the conditions of living of the people we are working with.

Village Adoption is development engagement undertaken by an academic / researcher or a development professional who *aspires to learn from ‘practice’ and from the unintended mistakes during the course*. It demands research-minded practice on the part of the professional in question, which we call reflexive-practice (Ramesh R et al, 2014). It demands peer-review of *‘what’s going on’* to be able to figure out and explain. It should result in useful social action for the community we are working with.

Operationalising Village Adoption is based not merely on professional competence, but it relies on prudence and practical wisdom as well. Academics / Researchers begin their research process by systematically collecting and interpreting the data in order to provide an analysis that sheds light on the issue; and opens a path for possible social

transformation. Doing ‘use-inspired’ contextual research is especially well suited for service learning, socially embedded research, and community partnerships. It aims at researching and communicating so as to address real world concerns. In qualitative research tradition, this approach is known as Praxis-based approach or Phronetic approach to research (Tracy, 2013).

The twin objectives of VA

Therefore, Village Adoption aims at: (i) Instituting socially useful action; and (ii) sharpening the professional competence and development facilitating skills of the researcher / faculty member in question.

Adopt a village for reflexive learning / experiential learning, as a social laboratory for appropriating technologies for varying contexts. In other words, Village Adoption should help the faculty in question to learn things practically – the least one can learn is *that it’s not as easy as it is said in the classroom or done in the laboratory*. Secondly, the village adopted, and the residents involved must benefit through the action initiated. It can be introduction of a new agricultural practice, or introduction of an improvised technology that can reduce drudgery in their work and so on.

Need for Village Adoption

- It’s an opportunity to put one’s professional competence for practical utility of a community in need.
- It is an opportunity to be of service; and get to know if an academic or researcher is being relevant to the contemporary realities in the village or is being a boring drudge in the classroom talking of things that s/he does not fully understand about.
- It prevents one from being lopsided / from being bookish / and from being insensitive to local realities.
- It helps a kind of self-appraisal of one’s relevance to the changing rural realities, or s/he is talking of matters that are no more relevant.

We initially mentioned that village adoption is about moving from ‘ideation to practice’. It’s about experiential-learning (i.e. experiencing and learning). It enables us to be practical thinkers and reflexive doers. It’s about replacing passive learning, and rote learning by active learning through practice, and subjecting oneself into it. It’s about actual application and going through and the mill oneself, rather than reading about what somebody else went through, and producing carbon copies of them.

Rationale

How implausible it sounds when a development professional in an academic or training institution said: ***I TEACH RURAL DEVELOPMENT, I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH VILLAGES.*** First of all, it is unethical for an academician or a researcher to make such a statement. When this is done, the programme participants might well say: ‘ANYTHING IS EASY FOR SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO DO IT’. They may conclude that these people have been trained to talk a good talk, and they have very little grip over ground realities and practical aspects of development projects/ technology application to solve real life problems. It’s about Somerset Maugham it is said that he once commented about wrestlers that ‘*a dignified bunch of muscles, unable to split wood or sift ashes*’. Academics and trainers would be no different, if we did that.

Village Adoption lends ‘authenticity’

But for Village Adoption, especially in academic and training institution, one shall be constrained to talk only from Handbooks and Guidelines which the programme participants can easily figure out: *where is s/he talking from?* Therefore, for academics Village Adoption lends talking with authenticity during academic / training programmes.

The fair scale measurement

In any village development endeavour, village development as well as learning should concurrently take place. If village development has taken place, but no new learning has

been gained - that's being imperceptive, uncritical and uninformed. If learning has taken place, but hardly any development took place - that's being unethical, unprincipled and two-faced. This should serve as reference point for an academic to get himself/herself engaged in Village Adoption.

Modes of Operationalizing Village Adoption

1. Village Adoption in *Conventional Mode*
2. Village Adoption in *Naturalized Mode*
3. Village Adoption in *Demonstration Mode*
4. Village Adoption like in *SAGY Mode*
5. Village Adoption in *Action Research Mode*

Let us try to expand each one of this mode – what each one of this means to us.

1. Conventional Mode

- Conventional mode is the established and predominant usage in Village Adoption.
- It means you adopt a village and go about planning and carrying out things for:
- Overall Development; Holistic Development: Integrated Development
- Under conventional mode, you work in all almost all sectors, and take the help of sector specialists when needed

2. Naturalized (Canonical) Mode

- This is sector-specific intervention
- Work in a specific sector, for instance, (i) drinking water and sanitation (ii) seed production technologies; (iii) capacity building of panchayat administration, (iv) e-governance system etc.
- Naturalized mode gives the liberty of working within one's professional competence and specific sector mandate. This is taking up not more than what one can professionally handle.

- Taking up only what you are specializing in, and what you feel confident about.

3. Demonstration Mode

- In Demonstration mode, you have a specific proven model of development that you would like to implement, and demonstrate to the world that it works in your village – the village you adopted. The point is it should work in similar contexts elsewhere as well.
- For example, development through an innovative group lending model. You have SHGs and bank linkage model plus SHG federations that work wonderfully well. You have a thorough understanding of how it works. You implement it, and demonstrate it works.
- There are several others such as Watershed Models; Mobile-based Marketing Information System; Placement-assured Skill Training Model; Household Toilet model constructed within the subsidy amount given by the government.

4. Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana - SAGY Mode (Government of India, 2014)

- This approach aims at triggering processes which lead to holistic development (personal, Human, Economic, Social) of the identified Gram Panchayat.
- Engaging community for participatory local level development
- Converging different government programmes, private and voluntary initiatives.
- Building partnerships with voluntary organizations, cooperatives, academic and research institutions.
- Nurture the identified Adarsh Grams as schools of local development to train other Gram Panchayats
- Hygienic Behaviour and practices – Clean village
- Reducing Risk Behaviour – alcoholism, smoking etc.
- Health and Nutrition - Drinking water (piped water supply)
- Education for all

- Social Development
- Diversified agriculture
- Rural Industrialization
- Skill Development for all eligible youth
- SHGs and Financial Inclusion
- Employment under MGNREGA
- Tree Plantation
- Watershed – rain water harvesting – roof water harvesting
- Roads / Electricity / Telecom / PDS / Village Markets
- Strengthening GPs, Social Audit, Pro-active Disclosure

5. Action Research Mode

- Taking action: what you do in your practice to improve something / a situation
- Doing Research: how you find out about and analyse what you do in your practice, to see whether something has actually improved
- Telling the story and sharing your findings: telling others what you have done and how you have done it, and why it is important
- You make a claim to knowledge *that you have done or learned something that has influenced processes of improvement*
- Descriptions show the situation as it is, and as it unfolds
- Explanations contain the reasons and purposes for actions, why you did what you did and what you hoped to achieve and your awareness of the significance of what you have done.
- They also contain a claim to knowledge, that you have found something out that was not known before (Whitehead, 2009).

What kind of works to take up?

What works you can take up depends on factors such as (i) the pressing need of the community you are deciding to work with; and (ii) what you feel confident about as your professional competence, and so on.

- It can be holistic (like the SAGY model advocates)
- It can be sector-specific (going by your professional competence)
- It can be demonstration of a model that you fabricated taking cues from some research / action research / International experience reported as case.
- Peer-reviewed ideas (as trials) for action research
- You have developed a model after a series of discussion with your target population e.g. how solid waste can be collected for safe disposal.

Try it out in action. Follow it up. Share experiences through appropriate documentation.

Where & How does one get started?

- Baseline data of the village, and specifically the status of the nature of work we aim at focusing is necessary. There are plenty of templates prepared by various institutions, and departments for various purposes. Make use of one of them, if you think there is no point spending time on something where researchers have already spent sufficient time. If you have strong reasons, why you should custom design your baseline survey format, you are free to prepare one.
- Draw up a (Participatory) Strategic Plan for one year and an Operational Plan for every three months. Do a quarterly review against plan.
- Identify the stakeholders, and rope in relevant department of government (DRDA, NABARD, Local Banks, Agriculture, Agri Engineering, Horticulture, Forestry etc.) wherever possible, besides using Village Adoption facility, if any provided by your institution.

- You don't have to work in a Village Panchayat in full. Maybe, you can work in one habitation /or with 100 households / 100 farmers / 100 children if that's all you think you can handle.
- Asking the right questions usually means starting by asking the right people to help define the problem or question. Service users are our key informants.

Selection of Village for adoption

- Village selection can be based on access / remoteness - Drought Prone (geographical)
- Availability / Access to technologies
- Service delivery effectiveness / ineffectiveness
- Power imbalance - poverty and vulnerability.
- If your choice of mode is sector specific or to do with demonstrations, the approach to Village Adoption, obviously has to rely on recognizing the possibility for demonstration of a given model in a given context or presence of relevant issues / for selection of a village.

Operational Procedure

- Selection of village
- Data collection – use a data collection format / template
- Availability of access to technologies – traditional – appropriate – intermediate – advanced.
- Get into grips with what your data communicates on the issues you are likely to focus
- Participatory Planning
- Go ahead with your own strategy and tactics to implement (roping in relevant institutions)

Some Imperatives

We maintain a field diary and record not only what we do, and why we do it; but also our explanation about (not mere description of) what's going on. We also serve as provider of vital development information to the villagers, and help them link up with officials / banks etc. Select also poorest of the poor in your village and spend time discussing the way they make their living. This will naturally trigger you to initiate actions that help address issues that affect them.

Lessons learnt from Action spiral

How do you explain your 'action'; people's response; and the results achieved vis-à-vis the result expected? What went right, what went wrong? What should have and could have happened? What concept / theory / model is no good for practice, what improvisation is needed? What technology is appropriate and why? How you incorporate the lessons in your academic programme / training module.

Sharing your Findings / achievement

- Say what has been achieved (they contain a claim to knowledge, plus social usefulness)
- Describe and explain how it has been achieved (generate a theory)
- Seek critical feedback about what they are saying (test the validity of a concept / model / theory / technology) so that the story may be believed.
- Outline the significance of your work in relation to its rigour and original contributions to new forms of thinking and acting, so that it may be legitimated in the public domain. Can we call it a new model? Has it been socially useful and has had some educative value to the community you were working with? Has it contributed to enrich your professional competence to handle real-world problems better in the days to come?

Conclusion

The first important point is that the relative absence of scientifically rigorous evidence of what works does not imply that what practitioners do in their daily work is ineffective, it just means that it has not been scientifically researched and documented. Village Adoption helps us to determine what to do, and how to go about it, in the absence of extensive evidence about ‘what works’? To avoid excessive subjectivity and bias, we need to temper common sense with evidence gathering. We need to do some research which asks the right questions and addresses real problems.

We need to undertake trials which make sense, but which are pre-tested – at least by peer-review of the ideas which have gone into their design. We need to design adequate ways of evaluating the successes and failures of such trials. But crucially we need to take the step beyond small-scale trials and ‘pilots’ to interventions at meaningful scale. This is where much good work by NGOs and local governments falls short – if good practice does not go to scale, then this represents a lost opportunity (Massey, 2012). Village adoption helps identify real problems, seek greater understanding, explore innovative solutions and propose ways forward.

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Author

R Ramesh PhD
Assistant Professor
Centre for Rural Infrastructure
National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj
Rajendranagar, Hyderabad – 30
e-mail:ramesh.gri@gmail.com