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THE ROLE OF PRA IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF INDIA AND SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This comparative research paper examines the operational role of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in grassroots community development and resource governance in India and Sri Lanka. Across South Asia, centralized and top-down development approaches often experience bureaucratic "spatial blindness," resulting in development interventions that do not match local ecological and social realities. To understand how participatory methods address these problems, this study uses a qualitative secondary comparative research design based on a systematic narrative meta-synthesis of empirical field interventions from both countries. The main objectives of the study are to evaluate how different PRA tools are adapted to solve local socio-environmental problems, examine how visual methods and community mapping help marginalized groups challenge administrative state planning, analyze the role of participatory planning in preventing elite capture within communities, and compare long-term institutional outcomes. The findings show that community-led activities such as seasonal timelines, conflict mapping, and social diagrams help reduce bureaucratic blindness by transforming indigenous ecological knowledge into recognized empirical information. In addition, the public and visual nature of PRA tools creates transparency and social accountability, helping to reduce the elite capture of common property resources. The cross-case analysis also identifies two different pathways toward local institutional autonomy. In Sri Lanka, an Ecological-Crisis Adaptation Path focuses mainly on environmental resilience, while in India, a Structural Democratization Path is driven by

political resistance and rights-based mobilization. Overall, this study confirms that when local communities control the process of data creation, they move from being passive recipients of aid to becoming self-governing institutions capable of independent resource management and self-advocacy.

KEYWORDS: Participatory Rural Appraisal, Community Development, Elite Capture, Resource Governance, South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has emerged as an influential participatory approach in community development, particularly within rural societies of developing countries such as India and Sri Lanka. PRA emphasizes the active involvement of local people in identifying, analyzing, and solving their own social and economic problems. Unlike conventional top-down development models, PRA promotes bottom-up planning, local knowledge, empowerment, and collective decision-making. The approach gained international recognition during the late twentieth century through the contributions of development scholars such as Robert Chambers, who argued that rural communities should become active participants rather than passive beneficiaries in the development process (Chambers, 1994). As a result, PRA has become an important methodology in community development, poverty alleviation, natural resource management, and rural governance programs across South Asia.

The significance of PRA lies in its ability to strengthen community participation and encourage sustainable development practices. Through tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, seasonal calendars, focus group discussions, and participatory ranking, local communities are able to express their needs, priorities, and indigenous knowledge systems (Pretty, 1995). This participatory process helps reduce dependency on external agencies and enhances local ownership of development initiatives. In many rural contexts, PRA has contributed to improving transparency, social inclusion, and community mobilization, especially among marginalized groups such as women, low-income populations, and minority communities (Mohan, 2001).

In the context of India, PRA has been widely utilized in rural development programs, watershed management projects, self-help group movements, and decentralized governance systems. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations have adopted PRA methods to facilitate participatory planning and strengthen grassroots democracy. Studies indicate that PRA has played a significant role in empowering rural communities by enabling

them to participate in decision-making processes related to agriculture, livelihood development, and local resource management (Mukherjee, 2002). Furthermore, India's diverse socio-cultural structure has allowed PRA practices to evolve according to local community needs and regional development priorities.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, PRA has been implemented in rural reconstruction, post-conflict rehabilitation, disaster recovery, and community-based development programs. Following periods of civil conflict and natural disasters, participatory approaches became essential in rebuilding social trust and strengthening local institutions. PRA has supported rural communities by encouraging collective participation in development planning and fostering social cohesion among different ethnic and social groups (Silva, 2014). Community-based organizations, rural societies, and development agencies in Sri Lanka have increasingly recognized the importance of participatory approaches in ensuring sustainable and inclusive development outcomes.

Despite the widespread adoption of PRA in both countries, the effectiveness and implementation of the approach vary according to social, political, cultural, and institutional contexts. Differences in governance structures, levels of community participation, power relations, and local leadership influence the success of PRA initiatives. Therefore, a comparative examination of India and Sri Lanka provides valuable insights into the practical role of PRA in community development. This study seeks to analyze how PRA contributes to empowering local communities, strengthening participation, and promoting sustainable development in these two South Asian countries. By comparing selected case studies, the research aims to identify both the opportunities and challenges associated with PRA in different socio-cultural environments.

Statement of the Problem

Despite strong theoretical support for participatory approaches in development literature, there is still a clear gap between what these approaches aim to achieve and how they work in practice. In reality, local community organizations do not function in isolation. Both external and internal power imbalances constantly influence them. Externally, centralized state planning systems often continue to follow top-down bureaucratic priorities instead of local and indigenous knowledge. This can result in development investments that do not fit the real needs of rural communities and are poorly aligned with local conditions (Goud, 2003). Internally, rural communities are not equal or uniform. They are divided by class, caste, land ownership, and gender. Because of this, many development projects are vulnerable to elite

capture, in which wealthy or powerful households take control of public resources and decision-making processes. This often pushes marginalized and small-scale farmers further to the margins (Sreedevi et al., 2004).

While existing studies frequently detail the deployment of PRA tools within isolated, single-village projects, there is a distinct lack of comparative research examining how these participatory tools function when confronting different types of institutional resistance across national borders. Specifically, it remains unclear how the visual, non-literal nature of PRA tools, such as collective resource mapping, seasonal timelines, and stratification matrices, systematically helps communities overcome information gaps, challenge top-down administrative decisions, and neutralize internal elite domination. Without a rigorous, cross-border comparative evaluation, development planners and rural sociologists lack a clear framework to determine how localized participatory processes can be scaled up to drive long-term institutional change and autonomous community governance. Hence, the study title is The Role of PRA in Community Development: A Comparative Case Study of India and Sri Lanka.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In alignment with the research questions, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. To evaluate how different types of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools are contextually applied to resolve localized socioeconomic and environmental crises in India and Sri Lanka.
2. To examine how the visual and non-literal nature of PRA tools helps marginalized rural groups overcome information gaps and challenge top-down, technocratic state planning.
3. To analyze the role of participatory planning in uncovering local power imbalances and preventing elite capture of community resources.
4. To compare the institutional outcomes of PRA interventions in India and Sri Lanka to understand how grassroots participation drives long-term community development and resource governance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary comparative research design based on a systematic narrative meta-synthesis of established empirical fieldwork. Because the primary objective of this investigation is to evaluate how Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) functions as a mechanism for grassroots community development across diverse regional settings, a

secondary data-driven approach was perceived both methodologically appropriate and structurally necessary. Rather than relying on a single, geographically limited field site, this design allows for a high-level, cross-border comparative analysis of multiple socio-ecological contexts in Sri Lanka and India. By treating pre-existing peer-reviewed studies, institutional reports, and project monographs as primary empirical datasets, this methodology combines isolated grassroots findings into a unified, macro-thematic framework. This cross-case approach explicitly captures how localized participatory tools adapt to, challenge, or modify regional administrative structures across different national governance frameworks.

ANALYSIS

Part 1: Sri Lankan Case Studies

Case Study 1: Transforming Human–Elephant Conflict Mitigation through Spatial Mapping

In the agrarian boundary zones of the Anuradhapura District, farming communities experience serious economic vulnerability due to increasing Human–Elephant Conflict (HEC). To move away from centralized, top-down wildlife management approaches that often ignore local elephant movement patterns, community-led field activities used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools to capture local ecological and spatial knowledge (Edirisooriya & Bandara, 2022).

Through the creation of village-level Seasonal Timelines and spatial Conflict Vulnerability Maps, smallholder farmers visually recorded the exact places and times where crop harvesting seasons overlapped with elephant movements in search of water and food. This public mapping of crop-raiding areas and shared elephant corridors questioned the fixed and insensitive placement of state-installed electric fences.

The information produced through these community maps helped local farmer groups advocate for more flexible fencing arrangements managed at the village level. It also supported the formation of seasonal crop-watching systems that better matched the actual movement patterns of elephant populations in the region (Edirisooriya & Bandara, 2022).

Case Study 2: Strategic Post-Disaster Livelihood and Canal Rehabilitation in Coastal Ecosystems

Following the large-scale destruction of coastal economic infrastructure during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the village of Bambaranda East in southern Sri Lanka experienced severe livelihood disruption caused by saltwater intrusion into productive paddy lands. To

avoid top-down and non-participatory approaches that often failed to match real community needs, project facilitators introduced a community-led planning process using structured Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools (Koralagama et al., 2007).

In open community forums, affected farmers and fishers took part in Problem Trees, Resource Matrix Rankings, and local Mobility Maps to identify the main post-disaster challenges. The smallholders clearly mapped the exact areas where saltwater had entered their fields and showed the breakdown of secondary irrigation canals.

By comparing and ranking these problems visually, the community created a clear recovery priority list. They identified that cleaning and restoring drainage canals to remove salinity was more important than distributing general agricultural inputs. This shared, transparent analysis helped shift recovery funding toward rebuilding community-managed irrigation systems and providing locally suitable seed varieties (Koralagama et al., 2007).

Case Study 3: Strengthening Post-Conflict Resilient Agriculture and Adaptive Irrigation Infrastructure

In the post-conflict areas of the Northern Province, smallholder farming communities face both long-term economic hardship and increasing climate-related water instability. To build local resilience against severe seasonal droughts and irregular monsoons, a long-term development program carried out participatory vulnerability assessments focused on strengthening community infrastructure for climate adaptation (UNDP, 2013–2018).

Smallholders and village tank management groups participated in Seasonal Bio-Physical Mapping and Climate Risk Matrices to assess the condition of cascading tank systems. Community members mapped how changing rainfall patterns were drying up smaller water bodies, which in turn threatened irrigation in tail-end paddy fields.

The risk information created by the community helped local farmer organizations guide international development support toward specific needs. This included the rehabilitation of traditional tank components, strengthening of tank bunds, and the introduction of climate-resilient short-duration crop varieties. In this way, post-conflict recovery was transformed into a more active, community-led process of climate adaptation (UNDP, 2013–2018).

Part 2: Indian Case Studies

Case Study 4: Reversing Elite Capture and Maximizing Yields in the Kothapally Watershed

In the Low rainfall zone of Kothapally in Andhra Pradesh, early watershed development efforts often faced low community participation, strong elite control over water resources, and the quick breakdown of shared check-dams due to weak local ownership. To address these challenges, an innovative joint program involving international research institutes and local civil society used a participatory PRA approach to improve long-term outcomes (Sreedevi et al., 2004).

Local farmers and scientists worked together through Topographical Transect Walks to identify soil nutrient problems and map water runoff patterns across the landscape. Based on this shared mapping process, the community developed Community–Scientist Mapping Matrices that guided decisions on where to build small earthen check-dams, minor water-harvesting barriers, and groundwater recharge wells. Because these structures were selected through open and collective decision-making rather than top-down instructions, the risk of elite capture was reduced. This participatory process strengthened local cooperation and social trust, leading to higher crop productivity, improved groundwater levels, and the creation of community-managed water-use rules that helped protect tail-end farmers (Sreedevi et al., 2004).

Case Study 5: Indigenous Livelihood Protection and Statutory Resource Claiming in Forest Zones

The highly vulnerable indigenous communities of the Toda and Paniya tribes in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve of Tamil Nadu face serious livelihood marginalization due to the expansion of commercial monoculture plantations and strict state conservation boundaries. To document and respond to the loss of their traditional livelihoods, a focused participatory livelihood assessment was conducted directly within tribal settlements (Rafeeq, 2023).

Tribal focus groups used a set of PRA tools such as Daily Labour Expenditure Profiles, Seasonal Extraction Matrices, and Institutional Trust Diagrams. These tools helped build detailed profiles of both the Paniya and Toda communities. The data clearly showed the long distances tribal women had to travel each day to collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as wild honey and resin, especially under strict forest regulation.

By presenting these conditions alongside declining seasonal income in public discussions, the tribal communities created a clear and evidence-based record of their dependence on forest

resources. This community-owned information became an important basis for legally claiming community forest rights under existing tribal protection laws (Rafeeq, 2023).

Case Study 6: Democratizing Resource Governance and Equity in Watershed Interventions

The historical failure of state-sponsored watershed programs in the drought-prone Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh was mainly due to a top-down and technocratic planning approach that ignored local social divisions and land-tenure patterns in villages. To overcome this limitation, a more participatory intervention was introduced by embedding PRA tools into natural resource governance systems (Goud, 2003).

Facilitators used community-drawn Topographical Contour Maps, Seasonal Labour Calendars, and Social Stratification Venn Diagrams to understand how watershed benefits were distributed. These mapping exercises showed that state-built stone conservation walls and check-dams mainly benefited large landowners, while landless and marginal groups were left with limited access to common resources. By openly discussing these inequalities in community forums, the PRA process helped make the distribution of resources more transparent. This led to changes in the local Watershed Committee, promoting more inclusive decision-making and the introduction of community-based rules for fair groundwater sharing (Goud, 2003).

Major findings

In Sri Lanka, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) helped farmers challenge rigid state fencing systems through community mapping and seasonal timelines. This led to more flexible, locally managed responses to Human–Elephant Conflict. After the tsunami, PRA forums helped communities identify saltwater intrusion and damaged irrigation systems, leading them to prioritize canal restoration instead of general aid distribution. In post-conflict areas, participatory vulnerability assessments enabled farmers to study tank degradation and changing rainfall patterns, which guided funding toward tank rehabilitation and climate-resilient crops.

In India, PRA in the Kothapally watershed reduced elite control by involving farmers directly in transect walks and mapping exercises. This allowed communities to jointly decide the placement of control soil erosion and groundwater recharge structures, improving yields and supporting fair water-sharing systems. Among the Toda and Paniya tribes, livelihood assessments documented reduced access to forest resources and declining incomes, which

helped support legal claims for forest rights and protection of indigenous livelihoods. In Chittoor District, PRA tools such as mapping and social diagrams exposed inequality in watershed programs that favored powerful groups, leading to more democratic watershed committees and fairer water distribution. Across all these cases, PRA consistently supported marginalized groups, created locally relevant solutions, reduced elite dominance, and turned development and recovery processes into more participatory, fair, and resilient systems.

CONCLUSION

This comparative research paper has systematically examined the operational role of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in grassroots community development and resource governance across India and Sri Lanka. Through a qualitative, secondary comparative analysis of empirical case studies, the study shows that PRA works as a disruptive social process rather than a neutral method of data collection. The use of visual and participatory tools challenges top-down development models and changes local power relations by turning marginalized smallholders from passive recipients into active investigators of their own conditions.

A key finding from the analysis is that community-led PRA tools help correct the "spatial blindness" of centralized planning. By documenting very local ecological and spatial realities, such as wildlife movement patterns in Anuradhapura, post-disaster irrigation failures in Matara, and tank system degradation in the Northern Province, communities generate alternative and credible forms of empirical data. This local evidence pushes external agencies, donors, and planners to adjust development investments according to real field conditions.

The study also highlights the deep social inequalities within rural communities, which are divided by class, caste, gender, and land ownership. In such contexts, verbal discussion spaces often favour wealthier or more powerful groups, increasing the risk of elite capture. PRA methods such as matrix rankings, social stratification diagrams, and institutional mapping help reduce this problem by making resource distribution and inequality visible in public spaces. This improves transparency and strengthens social accountability, limiting elite control and supporting fairer access to resources for marginalized groups.

Finally, the study shows that although similar PRA tools are used in both countries, the long-term institutional outcomes differ based on social and ecological contexts. In Sri Lanka, PRA mainly follows an Ecological-Crisis Adaptation Path, helping communities respond to environmental shocks, disasters, and climate-related water stress through locally informed

infrastructure improvements. In India, PRA follows a Structural Democratization Path, where it is used to challenge deep social inequalities, support indigenous and marginalized groups, and build evidence for securing legal land and resource rights. Overall, the study concludes that when communities control the process of data creation, they shift from passive beneficiaries of aid to self-governing institutions capable of managing resources and advocating for their own development, offering a practical model for more equitable and resilient rural development in South Asia.

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