

The purity of perspective

This text is based on field research in the Vidharba region of Maharashtra, India, in context of the transgenic variety of cotton called Bt Cotton. There has been a lot of discussion in political, academic, activist, and scientific circles about Bt Cotton, and the popular media has latched on to the rather sensationalist theme of farmers committing suicide. But there is very little in terms of trying to gauge how farmers themselves navigate the technology and the terms they use to do so. If one wishes to discuss how farmers identify with and use these new technologies, one must understand at the outset, where farmers are coming from in terms of semantics and discursive reference points.

The basis of the problem is located at that initial entry point into a dialogue: the first question asked by you as a researcher. It is you who has formed the question. It is you that will then internalise the response and offer a further query to better isolate some semblance of a theme, notion, or narrative. The only solution that appears feasible is to reallocate the responsibility of asking the question to those individuals who possess the experiences one wishes to understand better. An exercise in asking farmers to define terms alone has presented a combination of what they expect I want to hear, and their own honest interpretation of these terms. The challenge is to distil the latter down by removing the former as

much as possible. It is, in essence, to retain the integrity of the purity of perspective.

Theoretical framework

My attempt at addressing this challenge is through using the medium of the moving image as a tool to facilitate this role transferral. There are two bodies of work that I have drawn upon to facilitate this process - Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques and Participatory Video (PV). PV is an exercise whereby the process of production involves those, that would commonly be termed 'actors' in a documentary context, as 'producers'. The audiovisual medium presents a visceral, pragmatic, and immediate form of depicting a particular theme, and control over that medium can be held by anyone, and used for a variety of purposes, with explicit reference to the terms championed by the producers.

Of application and symmetry

While PV may find its roots in an exercise that took place forty years ago, it has begun to take on a new relevance in recent practice, due primarily to three reasons. First, devices to capture digital video (DV) are now widespread and relatively affordable. Cassette or card based DV cameras, mobile phones, and digital still cameras with video capture capability are common and becoming increasingly affordable.

Second, editing and compressing content requires a simple desktop computer, an optical media writer, and either proprietary software (i.e. Windows Movie Maker within Windows XP and Vista) or free, open source distributions (i.e. dyne:bolic)¹. Third, sharing this content to a wide audience is possible to anyone with direct or indirect access to connectivity through portals such as YouTube or Google Video. Given this, the opportunity to use PV in conjunction with PRA presents itself as logical and pragmatic in a research context.

The precise objective of my using digital video has been to distil themes that are of concern to the community via a means that minimizes the possibility of my gauging the concerns based solely on responses of queries rooted in my own perspective alone, and to then address and analyse these themes in my research. While 1-6 (see box on next page) are fairly procedural in nature, it is the last element, processing and analysis, that presents the most pressing challenge of all.

Processing and analysis

Consider the piece created by farmers on farmers' suicide referenced in point 5 (see box on next page). There are distinct themes that arise here: what constitutes a 'good' farmer (i.e. following instructions as presented by scientific institutions,

PRA and PV as complementary research tools

- Minimisation of the intrusive nature and bias of the researcher from the exercise of both forming and asking questions, as community members themselves undertake the process of how best to present a narrative
- Broadcasting the resultant content (i.e. on a TV set, a laptop screen, or an LCD projector) facilitates immediate interaction and feedback with the participants and the broader community and gives rise to further discussion, often immediately after the screening
- The audiovisual medium is appealing and easily understood, thereby facilitating wider inclusion
- Participants realise that creating content is not a highly technical affair, which furthers the possibility of future efforts of producing content to suit their own objectives, according to their own terms

Applying PRA and PV in practice

- 1. Establishing links.** Prior to my visiting the community, I was looking for an organisation that was working in the area, and interested in using video in the context I was proposing. I did not want this exercise to be isolated to the time I was in the community, but to ensure that there would be someone willing to support the initiative. I decided to work with YUVA, an NGO based in Nagpur, about three hours away from the community². This was how I met the family I have been staying with, as well as others in the surrounding areas also involved in YUVA's work.
- 2. Who are you?** My first introduction to using the tool entailed house-to-house visits to ask elementary questions that would allow me to focus logistically and thematically (i.e. your name, how much land you have, what you are growing). This would be achieved by my first asking these questions to one household, and after their response, to show them how to engage the camera to record, and then ask the same questions to the next household, with that person showing the next how to engage the camera to record, and so on. This was done over 170 households over three days, which was then screened back to the community each evening for their comments and reactions.
- 3. What's your story?** A piece of paper would be divided into six sections (i.e. six scenes), and after giving an example of a story, I would then ask groups of people gathered in a coming public space to tell me a story in these six (or more) boxes by drawing it out, referring to themes of their own choice. In the first instance of doing this, one of the participants wrote down a dialogue to complement the storyboard with input from others, which was beyond what I had expected, but has since stuck procedurally.
- 4. The shoot.** The participants would then find actors and a 'set' to shoot the story, based on the proceeding exercise. All editing was done on the camera.
- 5. The screening.** After the shoot was done and credits were added (i.e. a still shot of a piece of paper with the information written on it), my camera was hooked onto my laptop, which was then fed into an LCD projector and enlarged onto a white bed-sheet approximately ten feet high. It was broadcast in a common space where people could easily gather, and began around 8pm (i.e. after dinner). An amplifier and speaker were borrowed from the panchayat hall and a microphone was placed near the speaker of my laptop³.
- 6. Late night with KR.** After the piece was screened, one person (KR, name changed here) from a neighbouring village (about a 15-20 minute walk away) who has done some voluntary work with YUVA and myself, acted as talk show host, and people came up in front of the camera, which projected their interaction to the rest of the audience of about 200 people.
- 7. Processing and analysis.** Elements 2-6 would usually occur over an eight hour period over the course of a day. After it was all over (around midnight), I would begin to (and at the time of this writing, am) get the footage translated of the piece and the talk show, and attempt to make the necessary links to my research in terms of themes (i.e. risk and uncertainty) and their representation.

avoiding debt, capitalising on new technologies such as seed and pesticides, accumulating material wealth) and a 'bad' farmer (i.e. what could be termed laziness, alcoholism, the acceptance of debt, and the resultant resort to suicide as a final solution the problems incurred from his decisions). Of interest to me here was this notion of formal regulation in terms of farming practice, as well as the role of credit in farmers' decision-making processes (as voiced by the main scriptwriter at the end of the piece). The narrative seems to allege that in order to be successful as a farmer, one must capitalize on formal knowledge, and avoid informal debt.

In terms my own work, the link here is the relationship between traditional farming practice and new, 'scientific' techniques, such as using Bt Cotton and other inputs. 'Progress' is determined by successful application of these new technologies, and that information on how to do so should be gleaned from third parties; in this case, an agricultural university. This will lead to success: having two gas cylinders, a 'Hero Honda Super Splendor', cotton plants "up to my waist with 100 bolls and 200 flowers". Via the more traditional elements of addressing my research objectives (i.e. formal/informal group interviews), I have found that an understanding of regulation at the level of farmers is not based on government directives or legal frameworks, but rather by practices undertaken by farmers for generations; what could be termed 'traditional knowledge'. This exercise of production has provided additional insight on how farmers consider the introduction of new technologies, and the resultant onset of new ways of 'regulating' their farming practice. If you want to succeed and be prosperous, you must adapt to new technologies in an informed manner, as the consequences of not doing so are dire indeed. This is what lies at the basis of a decision making process.

Prior to this exercise, I had not asked about what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' farmer; I did not really consider it on those terms, as I was more focused on an understanding of regulation, risk, and uncertainty. In allowing those I was working with an opportunity to form their own narrative, I was able to gain access to a process of asking a question that I would not have asked otherwise, with the corresponding production and themes arising (i.e. a judgement of progress as fuelled by behavioural change via technological adoption as a means to avoid severe consequences) furthering my own capacity to understand what I was seeing.

I would argue that using video in such a context cannot replace traditional systems of applied fieldwork inquiry in a research context. There has to be an initial familiarity with the people one is working with, which can be secured from both historical experience and everyday interaction (i.e. living in the community for some time, asking strategic questions, and using the extant literature as reference points to guide your inquiry). That said, the use of a video as a tool has opened up new doors of inquiry and analysis that I do not think I would have been able to pursue if not for offering those I was (am) working with the opportunity to ask the questions themselves. ■

Janak Rana Ghose, R.Ghose@ids.ac.uk

1. Refer to <http://www.dynebolic.org>. A copy an ISO suitable for writing a CD of the distribution is also available here.
2. Refer to <http://www.yuvaindia.org>.
3. Refer to <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-243387251247651263&hl=en> to see an example of a piece shot by farmers on farmers' suicide in Vidharba.