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The people's vision – UK and Indian reflections on *Prajateerpu*

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Member of
Prajateerpu jury
presenting their vision.

Introduction

At a meeting held at the UK Houses of Parliament on 18 March 2002, a smallholder from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh stood up to launch a report. She gave a personal account of a participation process called *Prajateerpu* (Telegu – meaning 'people's verdict', see Box 1) that remains controversial even as we write, six years later.

Anjamma stated that she and her fellow jurors had concluded that genetically modified (GM) crops would have little foreseeable impact on reducing malnutrition in Andhra Pradesh. The jurors had expressed concerns about the impact that a reliance on artificial fertilisers and pesticides would have on smallholders in the region. They called instead for local self-sufficiency and endogenous development in farming and food, joining a growing global movement for food sovereignty.¹

The report inspired a political cartoonist for the UK's Guardian newspaper to depict the-then UK Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, as a combine harvester rampaging through the fields, tossing smallholder farmers into the air. Beneath this, a columnist summarised



Photo: Sarojini Naidu School

the *Prajateerpu* process, through which Indian smallholder farmers had critiqued the prevailing global elite's vision of food, agriculture and rural development – Vision 2020 (see Box 2).

After the *Prajateerpu* report launch, interviews with Indian smallholder farmer representatives peppered UK news programmes, newspapers and websites. Soon, the director of the UK institute where one of the report's authors was

¹ 'Endogenous', meaning 'rising from within'. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endogenous>

Dr Vinod Pavarala and colleagues from the University of Hyderabad, India, planning to contact potential members of the jury.



Photo: Sarojini Naidu School

Box 1: What was Prajateerpu?

In 2001, a group of smallholder farmers in Andhra Pradesh (AP), India, took part in a participatory exploration of three broad scenarios for the future of food and farming in their region. This participatory process, a modified citizens' jury known as *Prajateerpu*, included an assessment of the potential of genetically modified (GM) crops. The jury was overseen by a panel that included a retired chief judge from the Indian Supreme Court, a senior official from a donor agency and a number of local NGOs.² The jury of 19 consisted of mostly *Dalit* or indigenous farmers. Over four days, they cross-questioned 13 witnesses, including representatives of biotechnology companies, state government officials and development experts. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting GM crops in the abstract, the jurors were able to build their own scenario for sustainable and equitable agriculture, and insert elements of the future scenarios to which witnesses had referred.

based was contacted by the minister for international development. Days later, one of the report's two principal authors was suspended, the other disciplined. Although published jointly with Indian organisations, the report was withdrawn by one of the two UK institutes involved. After an outcry by groups in India, where extensive Internet and mainstream media coverage of the report's censorship helped to mobilise a popular campaign, the UK institute lifted its ban. Union threats of collective action in defence of academic freedom, together with interventions by Board members and former directors of the two institutes saw the disciplinary action against the two authors revoked. One of the institute's directors formally apologised.

² The role of the oversight panel was to monitor and evaluate the fairness and credibility of the entire process, ensuring in particular that the process was not captured by any vested interests.

Guardian cartoon depicting the UK Secretary of State for International Development as a machine of destruction.



Cartoon: The Guardian

Overseas aid programme attacked in GM crops row

Clare Short is in the hot seat for funding GM crops in India

Luke Harding in New Delhi and John Vidal

Box 2: Vision 2020

Released on India's Republic Day in 1999, Vision 2020 sets out the future of the state of Andhra Pradesh as envisioned by its government – a future in which poverty is eradicated. Vision 2020 seeks to transform all areas of social and economic life in the state. It aims to build human resources, focus on high-potential sectors as the engines of growth, and transform governance throughout the state. The UK governmental Department for International Development (DfID) was the major external support agency to the government of AP at the time of *Prajateerpu*. Working with the World Bank, the British government supported a structural adjustment programme for poverty elimination in AP and funded elements of the government's Vision 2020. Both DfID and the World Bank helped the AP government to refocus its spending priorities and divest functions and services in chosen areas. Specific support efforts were made to strengthen the government of AP's capacity to manage the privatisation programme outlined in Vision 2020.

Kavitha Kuruganti, one of three facilitators, facilitating a discussion between a group of women.



Photo: Sarojini Naidu School

Over the following years, two distinct viewpoints on this 'participatory controversy' have emerged:

One group, based in both Andhra Pradesh, India, and in various universities and institutes in the UK, began a participatory review of the process. It was funded by diverse sources including the Dutch development agency (DGIS) and the UK's Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. It involved many UK and Indian partners, four *Prajateerpu* jurors, witnesses and analysts. Because of the level of controversy, the organisers decided to submit the results of this reflection process to an academic journal – resulting in two articles published in 2003 and 2004.

Another, smaller group of analysts associated with the institute which attempted to ban the *Prajateerpu* report, but who were not involved in the hearings, expressed their disapproval of the *Prajateerpu* process in an online forum sponsored by DfID in 2003.³ Subsequently, the same authors have criticised the process in an online review article (Table 1).

Participation with policy impact

Such enduring controversy about the process cannot be divorced from the controversial nature of the jury's conclusions about food and farming, and of the jury itself.

Most *Prajateerpu* participants were women. All except one jury member also came from castes and indigenous ethnic groups of the lowest social status in Indian society. Brought together from throughout Andhra Pradesh by

researchers at Hyderabad University, they heard three clearly articulated visions of the future. The first depicted life under Vision 2020 – the World Bank and UK-aid funded plan. The second looked at the export of organic crops. The third explored a path of self-reliance, promoted by Indian philosophers such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Sitting in a large tent-like structure on the edge of a small village, they heard from people with officially-recognised expert knowledge on the different visions. Aided by three facilitators – all native Telegu speakers – jurors questioned these 'witnesses' and slowly formulated their own vision for food and farming in their native state of Andhra Pradesh.⁴

GM crops and industrial farming are high on the political agenda in India and the UK. The jury's decision to reject GM as an answer to the problems of smallholder farmers received global newspaper coverage. Members of Parliament in both the UK and Andhra Pradesh considered the issues serious enough to table questions to their governments, both formally and informally.

The analysis presented in the 2002 report on the *Prajateerpu* process re-enforced the jurors' critique of government and corporate development policies, describing the UK government's approach to citizen participation in the state as ill-conceived and inadequate. *Prajateerpu's* conclusions displeased senior DfID officials. They made an official

³ Scoones, I. & Thompson, J. (Guest Editors) *PLA Notes 46 Participatory processes for policy change*, February 2003, www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/pla_backissues/46.html. These edited proceedings from the online forum were not, to the authors' knowledge, subject to anonymous peer review.

⁴ For full details on how jurors were selected, presentation of different visions, safeguards for quality and validity and design of the deliberative process see Pimbert, M. & Wakeford, T. (2003) '*Prajateerpu*, power and knowledge: The politics of participatory action research in development. Part I: Context, process and safeguards.' *Action Research*, 1(2), 184–207 and Andhra Pradesh Coalition in Defence of Diversity, 2003 (a coalition of over 140 grassroots groups, lead by the Deccan Development Society) Description of the *Prajateerpu* process (www.ddsindia.org.in/www/default.asp) and video www.ddsindia.org.in/www/videos/Prajateerpu.wmv.

Partha Dasgupta of Syngenta, presenting to the jury on GM crops, with simultaneous interpretation into the Telegu language.



Photo: Sarojini Naidu School

complaint to the UK research institutes involved, backed up by informal contact from the Secretary of State.

Five challenges and dilemmas

Engaging with power

Critics have suggested that the *Prajateerpu* organisers did not make sufficient efforts to involve some of the key stakeholders, such as DfID, the World Bank, the Government of AP and biotechnology corporations in the process. Yet these, and many other relevant organisations, were contacted up to a year before *Prajateerpu* took place. DfID agreed to be on the oversight panel, but withdrew before the hearings began. The World Bank declined to take part. But the AP government and Syngenta – the biotech firm which created ‘Vitamin A rice’ – cooperated fully, providing witnesses and independent observers.

Some critics have suggested that *Prajateerpu*'s organisers should have criticised DfID's citizen participation programme through private channels, for a less confrontational outcome. However, as several articles in this special issue confirm, documents critical of government practice have a habit of disappearing into bureaucratic ‘black holes’, while the bad practice they expose continues. Given our commitment to opening up political space with marginalised smallholders, who were under immediate threat of loss of livelihoods from the DfID-backed Vision 2020 policies, the authors and Indian coalition members felt a duty to publish the reforms suggested by the jurors. The evidence gathered subsequently suggests that the stark recommendations of

Prajateerpu had impact because – not in spite – of the very public debate they initiated.

A long-term strategy

Those working with marginalised smallholders in India have suggested that *Prajateerpu* should have been followed up further similar events in the region, drawing out themes highlighted by the original jurors. IIED convened two workshops to this end in 2002 and 2003. However, the limited human and financial resources available prevented a significant roll-out of the programme. DfID and corporate biotechnologists have had opportunity and the resources to undertake such inclusive participatory processes, and the jurors of *Prajateerpu* have sought greater inclusion from such authorities.

All those involved in organising the original *Prajateerpu* hearings have expressed regret at the lack of much-needed scaling up of *Prajateerpu* in the state. However, IIED has made links between similar processes in Zimbabwe (via Practical Action, Cooper *et al.*, 2003) and Mali (see Bryant, this issue) in which one or other authors here have been involved. This has allowed transformative learning between groups of smallholder farmers (including jurors) from different continents who experience similar threats to their rural livelihoods.

Consensus

Deliberation inevitably involves dialogue and often dissent. Dilemmas relating to the extent to which participatory processes drive those involved towards consensus or divergence are familiar to practitioners in this field. Yet, a small group of critics have persistently accused *Prajateerpu*'s organisers of ‘imposing simplistic consensus’ by ‘editing out dissenting views and aiming only for a singular conclusion’, thus avoiding ‘contention and disagreement’. Yet there does not seem any evidence to support this view (see Table 1). Far from accusing the organisers of such participatory ventriloquism, *Prajateerpu*'s broadly-based oversight panel expressed satisfaction at the fairness and competence of the process.

The event happened in the glare of considerable national publicity, and was therefore potentially influential. This was obvious to all who took part and may have influenced how jurors framed their recommendations. Assisted by the local facilitators (one is a co-author of this article), the jurors may have chosen to focus on the topics they considered most important and on which there was complete agreement, such as the rejection of GM crops, support for diverse, low

external-input farming, and opposition to land consolidation and contract farming.

Critics who accused the organisers of manipulating the jury would have more justification if the jurors had merely chosen one of the three visions for food and agriculture on offer. Instead, assisted by three independent facilitators, they built a vision of their own, under the watchful eyes of the oversight panel.

To anticipate criticisms about the basis of their vision, the organisers could have interviewed jurors after the hearings in order to, in the words of the critics 'delineate the different strands of argumentation'. But *Prajateerpu* was an exercise in participatory **action** research. To turn it into an exercise where academic analysis overtook the juror's own words in public prominence would undermine the very principles of participatory learning and action.

Reporting on *Prajateerpu*

The people involved in organising *Prajateerpu* included representatives of various Indian social movements and international non-government organisations. They decided that the report should be written by the two organisers based in well-resourced research institutions who had the time and resources to analyse and write. Having two Europeans – one French, one British – as authors of a report about a participatory process in India can be seen as problematic, however much local people were involved. Yet the practical alternative was to have no written report and for the process to be misrepresented, or its impact otherwise diminished.

The authors exchanged numerous drafts of the report with their Indian collaborators so that the latter could validate its contents and style. However, critics implied that the *Prajateerpu* report imported the political agendas of European-based authors. But this judgement misrepresents the sophistication of debates on these issues in India, and is contradicted by a close analysis of the publicly accessible complete video archive of the process. By contrast, critics who passed judgement on the process did so in the absence of first-hand observation and without accessing the video archive. With much, perhaps most, of the critics' funding coming from DfID, the agency the *Prajateerpu* report challenged, their credibility as disinterested analysts is open to doubt.

The significance of the 'people's verdict'

Prajateerpu was unprecedented in the history of policy-making in India. And it continues to be a unique process.

Box 3: Food sovereignty

Defined by Via Campesina as:

'... the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food Sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to food and to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.'

But debates on immediate and key decisions being made in food, agriculture and rural futures were sidelined by an assault on core aspects of the methodology of *Prajateerpu*. It is no coincidence that the strongest attacks came from organisations with the strongest commitment to a vision for food and agriculture that was undermined by the conclusions reached by nineteen rural smallholders and labourers.

By publicly raising questions about the quality of the participatory process in *Prajateerpu*, government agencies temporarily sidelined the united message emerging from the jurors' vision, which was based unequivocally on food sovereignty (see Box 3). In the long term, however, the process has contributed to a re-assessment of technological fixes to agricultural production, of which GM crops form a crucial element. The most politically significant of these is the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). The report concluded that 'data on some GM crops indicate highly variable yield gains in some places and declines in others'. It did not rule out any potential future benefit from GM crops, but as Practical Action commented when the report was released in April 2008, 'the IAASTD rightly concludes that small-scale farmers and ecological methods provide the way forward to avert the current food crisis'.

Prajateerpu has led to at least three key areas of learning around participatory processes:

- Potentially influential participatory, action and learning processes can be organised by non-state actors, including those with legitimacy among some of the most marginalised people in society. Inherent in such initiatives is that powerful elites who feel their interests are threatened will usually seek to discredit such processes. Organisers must be highly organised, committed and use a range of advocacy methods to enable the discussion of controversial issues with diverse communities.

Table 1: Two views of the same participatory process

Area of analysis	Comments made in a 2007 report by a group of researchers not present at <i>Prajateerpu</i> (Stirling <i>et al.</i> , 2007).	Response of the authors of this article, drawing on a review which included Indian grassroots organisations (IIED, 2004).
Organiser bias	An 'instrumental' process, driven by a concern that poorer farmers would be 'undermined' by new government policies.	A process viewed by an independent panel as fair and balanced, which allowed those normally excluded a space to analyse different perspectives and policy futures.
Biotechnology witness	Monsanto sent a witness who, it is implied, complained about the process.	Syngenta, not Monsanto, sent a witness. No complaint is on record.
Witness complaint	Several witnesses complained of the process being 'rigged'.	Only one witness, a multi-millionaire corporate farmer, complained that there were too many poor farmers on the jury.
UK and Andhra Pradesh state government's response to <i>Prajateerpu</i>.	Not analysed, beyond an implication that both governments 'condemned' it.	Government critics in UK and Andhra Pradesh had vested interest in supporting Vision 2020.
Civil society and opinion-formers response to <i>Prajateerpu</i>.	Not mentioned.	Widely supported by civil society organisations and some in government. Used to inform the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development.
Reference to analysis that has been anonymously peer-reviewed	None, but authors imply that their own analysis is the most objective. This analysis has not been subject to anonymous peer-review.	Three articles published, all subject to anonymous peer-review. Authors acknowledge that all perspectives can only be partial (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2002; 2004).

- Many experts and heads of organisations profess to have ideals that support such inclusive processes. But many also find ways to justify censoring uncomfortable information, or sidelining perspectives of marginalised people, or both, if the conclusions reached are contrary to their interests, their organisational strategy or their own vision of development and political values. Such practices need to be openly confronted and widely publicised. We also need to explore more effective ways of bringing to account individuals and organisations responsible for such abuses of power.
- Broad transnational coalitions of civil society organisations, action-researchers and marginalised groups can contribute to positive social change. It is important to validate grassroots-based analyses of policies that could not otherwise have been made, even if the initial conclusions reached become temporarily suppressed or marginalised. However, to be effective, a clear advocacy and political engagement strategy needs to be firmly in place well before the process begins.

Final reflections

The phrase 'history is written by the victors' is credited to the British wartime leader, Winston Churchill. We are not clear who the victors are, seven years on from the *Prajateerpu* hearings. Although the GoAP was voted out of office in the elections of 2003 – partly because of the very policies on agricultural development condemned by *Prajateerpu*'s jurors – the newly elected state government seems to have maintained the same central thrust of policy as its predecessor. We have few illusions that *Prajateerpu* is anything other than a minor skirmish in a longer term struggle between oppressed peoples and those who subjugate them. Yet it seems clear that *Prajateerpu* did succeed in its limited aim of allowing a rigorous process of co-inquiry with those living and working at the grassroots. It provided valuable input for international scientific and policy-making processes such as IAASTD. Participatory processes can allow people to begin to escape their portrayal by powerful elites as ignorant and dispensable pawns, and enable them to re-cast themselves as experts by experience with the right to influence political decisions.

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