



Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as a Tool for Rural Development and Experiential Learning: Evidence from Field Practice in Kolhapur District, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is widely recognized as an effective participatory approach that promotes community involvement in rural development planning and decision-making. The present study examines the role of PRA camps conducted by social work students in facilitating rural development processes and enhancing experiential learning. The study is based on field-based participatory research conducted in three villages of Kolhapur district in Maharashtra—Donvadi (2022), Sawantwadi (2023), and Sheloshi (2024). Using participatory techniques such as social mapping, resource mapping, seasonal calendars, wealth ranking, focus group discussions, and Gram Sabha participation, the research documents local socio-economic conditions and development priorities. The findings indicate that PRA camps contributed significantly to identifying local development issues, strengthening community awareness, and supporting grassroots planning mechanisms such as the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPD). The camps also provided social work students with valuable experiential learning opportunities, including development of communication skills, participatory facilitation abilities, and understanding of rural governance systems. The study highlights the importance of integrating participatory fieldwork within social work education to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement with rural communities. The paper concludes that PRA-based field learning contributes not only to academic training but also to participatory development and community empowerment.

Keywords: Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rural Development, Community Participation, Experiential Learning, Social Work Education.

Introduction

Rural development continues to be a major concern in developing countries where a large proportion of the population depends on agriculture and allied activities for livelihood. In India, rural communities face several socio-economic challenges including poverty, unemployment, limited infrastructure, and unequal access to education and health services. Addressing these challenges requires development strategies that are inclusive, participatory, and sensitive to local contexts^{1,2}.

One of the key criticisms of traditional rural development programmes is that they often adopt a top-down approach, where policies and programmes are designed by external experts without adequately involving local communities in decision-making processes. Such centralized planning mechanisms frequently fail to address the real needs and priorities of rural populations because they overlook local knowledge systems, cultural contexts, and they lived experiences of community members. Development scholars have therefore increasingly emphasized the importance of participatory approaches that actively involve communities in identifying their problems and designing solutions^{3,4}.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) emerged as a significant methodological innovation in development practice during the late twentieth century. PRA emphasizes learning from local communities through participatory tools that enable villagers to analyze their own conditions, identify problems, and develop strategies for improvement. Robert Chambers argued that development professionals must shift from teaching rural people to learning from them, thereby recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge and grassroots perspectives^{3,5}. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) emerged as an innovative approach that emphasizes learning from rural communities and involving them actively in development planning. PRA methods enable communities to analyze their socio-economic conditions, identify problems, and suggest solutions based on local knowledge and collective discussion^{5,6}.

Participatory approaches are particularly relevant in the context of rural governance and decentralized planning. In India, the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has strengthened local self-governance and promoted community participation in development planning. PRA tools can support these processes by facilitating collective analysis of local resources, social structures, and development priorities⁷.

In the field of social work education, experiential learning plays a vital role in preparing students for professional practice. Fieldwork is considered an integral component of social work training because it enables students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations. PRA camps conducted in rural areas provide an effective platform for experiential learning by allowing students to interact with communities, conduct participatory assessments, and engage in community development activities^{8,9}.

Shivaji University's social work programme annually organizes PRA camps to expose students to rural realities and participatory research techniques. During these camps, students apply PRA tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, seasonal calendars, and focus group discussions to understand the socio-economic conditions of villages. These exercises not only generate valuable data for community planning but also enhance students' professional competencies^{10,11}. The present study examines the role of PRA camps conducted in three villages of Kolhapur district—Donvadi, Sawantwadi, and Sheloshi. The research explores how participatory tools contribute to understanding rural development issues and how field-based engagement enhances student learning outcomes.

Table-1: Village Profile and Key Development Indicators.

Village/ Indicator	Population	Main occupation	SHGs	Major issues
Donvadi	350	Agriculture	5	Water scarcity
Sawantwadi	550	Agriculture & labor	2	Waste management
Sheloshi	920	Agriculture	14	Livelihood opportunities

Literature Review: The United Nations (2015), in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, emphasized participatory approaches and community engagement as essential mechanisms for achieving sustainable development. The report highlights the importance of involving local communities in planning, implementation, and monitoring development initiatives, which aligns closely with the principles of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)¹². The United Nations Development Programme (2022), in the *Human Development Report 2021/2022: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives*, stressed the need for inclusive decision-making, local resilience, and community-based development strategies to address contemporary social, economic, and environmental challenges. The report supports participatory methodologies that empower communities and strengthen local capacities, reinforcing the relevance of PRA in rural development and experiential learning¹³.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been widely studied in the fields of rural development, community development, and participatory research. The literature highlights the significance of participatory approaches in empowering communities,

enhancing local decision-making, and improving development outcomes. Robert Chambers is widely regarded as the pioneer of PRA. In his influential work *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Chambers emphasized the need to prioritize the perspectives of marginalized populations in development planning. He argued that rural people possess valuable knowledge about their environment and livelihoods, and that development interventions should build upon this knowledge rather than replace it¹⁴.

Subsequent studies have examined the methodological foundations of PRA and its applications in various development contexts. Chambers later elaborated that PRA consists of a set of participatory methods that facilitate collective analysis, shared learning, and community-driven decision-making¹⁵. These methods include social mapping, resource mapping, seasonal calendars, ranking exercises, transect walks, and focus group discussions, all of which enable villagers to visualize and analyze their own socio-economic conditions. Kumar further highlighted that PRA techniques encourage local participation and foster a sense of ownership among community members regarding development initiatives¹⁷.

Campbell described PRA as a qualitative research approach that allows researchers to gain deeper insights into social realities through participatory engagement with communities. According to Campbell, PRA techniques promote dialogue, mutual learning, and collaboration between researchers and participants, thereby reducing the hierarchical relationship that often exists in conventional research methods¹⁶. This participatory process enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of local issues while simultaneously empowering community members to express their concerns and aspirations.

Several scholars have emphasized the role of PRA in promoting sustainable development. Narayan's study on rural water supply projects demonstrated that community participation significantly improves the effectiveness and sustainability of development programmes¹⁸. Similarly, Scoones and Thompson argued that incorporating local knowledge into agricultural research and rural development planning enhances the relevance and success of development interventions¹⁹. Participatory approaches ensure that development initiatives are aligned with the needs and priorities of local communities, thereby increasing their long-term impact and sustainability.

The literature also highlights the application of PRA in natural resource management, agricultural planning, health promotion, and community-based development programmes. Cornwall emphasized that participation should be viewed not merely as a method but as a process that strengthens democratic decision-making and community empowerment²⁰. Through participatory exercises, communities can identify local resources, assess development challenges, and formulate collective solutions to address them.

Participatory methods have also been widely used in gender studies and women's empowerment programmes. Agarwal observed that conventional development approaches often fail to capture the experiences and needs of women and marginalized groups.

PRA tools, particularly separate group discussions and participatory mapping exercises, help reveal social inequalities and ensure that the voices of disadvantaged groups are included in development planning²¹. Such approaches contribute to more equitable and inclusive development outcomes.

In the context of education and professional training, experiential learning theories provide a strong theoretical foundation for the use of PRA camps. Kolb's experiential learning theory suggests that learning occurs most effectively when individuals engage in concrete experiences, reflect upon those experiences, conceptualize their observations, and apply their learning in new situations²².

Similarly, Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue, critical reflection, and active participation in the learning process²³. PRA camps provide students with opportunities to interact directly with rural communities, apply theoretical knowledge in real-life situations, and develop professional competencies in community engagement and participatory research.

Despite its many advantages, some scholars have identified limitations in the implementation of PRA. Cooke and Kothari argued that participatory approaches may sometimes fail to

achieve genuine empowerment if existing power structures within communities are not adequately addressed²⁴. Mosse further noted that participation can become superficial when local involvement is limited to consultation rather than meaningful decision-making²⁵.

Other challenges include time constraints during fieldwork, inadequate facilitation skills, and the exclusion of marginalized groups from participatory processes.

Nevertheless, the majority of studies conclude that PRA remains a valuable approach for participatory research, community development, and capacity building. By combining local knowledge with systematic analysis, PRA promotes community ownership, strengthens democratic participation, and contributes to more effective and sustainable development interventions.

Furthermore, PRA camps provide an important experiential learning platform for social work students, enabling them to understand rural realities, develop research skills, and gain practical experience in community-based development.

Methodology

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research design based on field experiences from PRA camps conducted in three villages in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra. These camps were organized as part of the academic fieldwork component of the MSW programme.

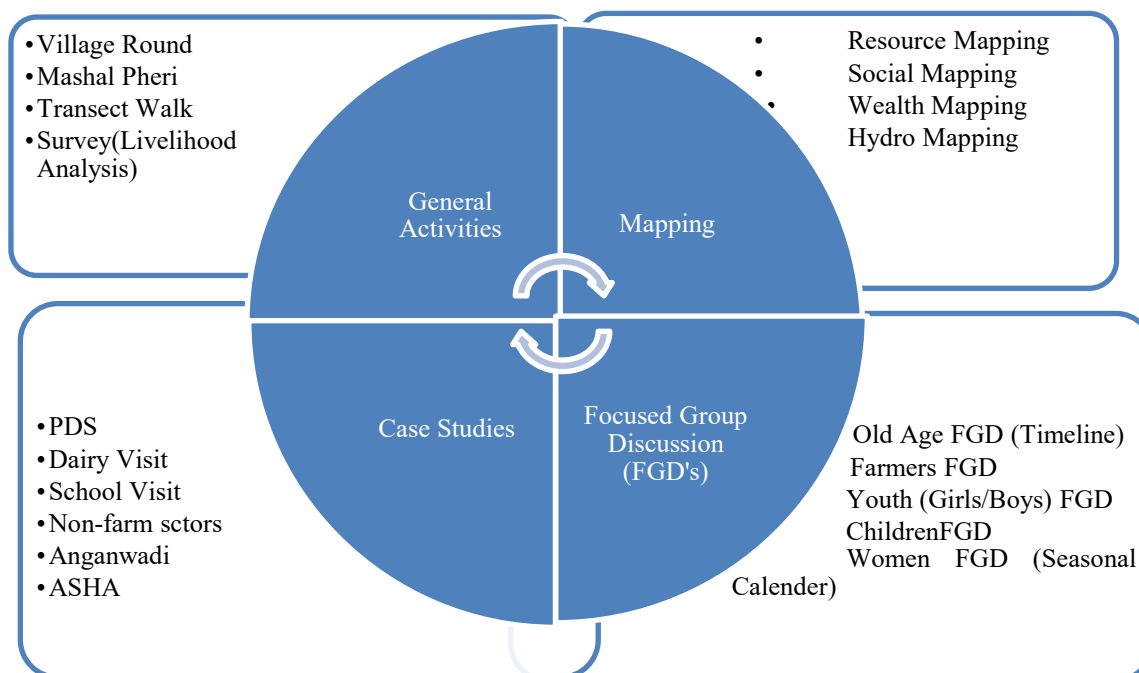


Fig-1: PRA Tools.

Study Area: The villages selected for the study include Donvadi (2022), Sawantwadi (2023), and Sheloshi (2024). These villages represent typical rural settlements with agriculture based livelihoods and active local governance institutions such as Gram Panchayats and Self Help Groups. The participants in the programme comprised a diverse group representing various sections of the community and academic field. These included village residents and Gram Panchayat members, who play a crucial role in local governance and development. Members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) actively participated, contributing their experiences in community-based initiatives and livelihood activities. Farmers and youth groups were also present in large numbers, reflecting their direct involvement in agricultural practices and rural development efforts. Additionally, social work students participated enthusiastically, gaining valuable field-level exposure and practical insights, while faculty supervisors guided and supported the overall learning process.

Data Collection Methods: Data were collected through participatory observation, focus group discussions with villagers, community meetings, and documentation of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools. The Participatory Learning and Action approach enabled students to engage directly with the local community and gain a deeper understanding of village dynamics. During the fieldwork, students interacted with farmers, women's self-help groups, youth groups, and local leaders to explore various socio-economic and developmental conditions of the village. The participatory approach facilitated community involvement in identifying local resources, problems, and development opportunities. Both qualitative and participatory techniques were employed to ensure that local knowledge and experiences were incorporated into the analysis. Several participatory tools were used during the PRA camps including social mapping,

resource mapping, seasonal calendars, wealth ranking, and timeline analysis.

The study employed a range of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the village dynamics. Social mapping was used to analyze the spatial distribution of households, caste groups, and available infrastructure within the village. Resource mapping helped in identifying the natural and physical resources accessible to the community. A seasonal calendar was prepared to understand the patterns of agriculture, employment, and livelihood activities across different seasons. Timeline analysis was conducted to trace significant historical events and developmental changes over time. Wealth ranking was applied to categorize households based on their socio-economic status and to identify vulnerable groups. Focus group discussions were organized to gather collective perspectives from various community groups regarding local issues and development priorities.

Observation of the Gram Sabha provided insights into local governance processes, participation levels, and decision-making mechanisms at the village level. Additionally, informal interviews were conducted with key informants such as village leaders, elderly residents, and other community members to obtain in-depth qualitative information. The PRA camps conducted in different villages provided valuable insights into the local issues, needs, and development priorities of the communities. In Donvadi village, the findings highlighted significant challenges related to water management and agricultural sustainability. Villagers expressed concerns about inadequate irrigation facilities and stressed the urgent need for proper maintenance and strengthening of existing water conservation structures. Efficient water use and improved irrigation systems were identified as key factors for enhancing agricultural productivity.

Table-2: Participatory Rural Appraisal Findings across Selected Villages.

PRA Tool	Purpose	Outcome
Social Mapping	Identify settlement pattern and social groups	Identified settlement patterns and location of different social groups in the village
Resource Mapping	Identify natural and physical resources	Identified key natural and physical resources such as water sources, agricultural land, roads, schools, and community facilities
Seasonal Calendar	Understand seasonal patterns of agriculture and employment	Showed agricultural cycles, seasonal employment patterns, and periods of scarcity or migration
Timeline	Identify historical changes in village development	Highlighted major historical events, development interventions, and changes in village infrastructure
Wealth Ranking	Understand socio-economic stratification	Classified households into different economic categories (rich, middle, poor) and identified vulnerable households
Focus Group Discussions	Gather diverse community perspectives	Provided insights into community issues, local knowledge, and perceptions regarding development and social problems

In Sawantwadi village, environmental concerns emerged as a major issue, particularly in relation to plastic waste management. The accumulation of plastic waste was affecting both the environment and public health. During the camp, community awareness programmes and cleanliness campaigns were conducted to sensitize villagers about sustainable waste management practices and the importance of maintaining a clean environment.

In Sheloshi village, interactions with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) brought attention to the critical role of women in rural development. The discussions emphasized the importance of increasing women's participation in livelihood activities and strengthening their involvement in local governance processes. Empowering women through SHGs was seen as a key strategy for improving socio-economic conditions and promoting inclusive development. Overall, the PRA camps provided a deeper understanding of village-specific issues and demonstrated the importance of participatory approaches in planning and implementing sustainable rural development initiatives.

Results and Discussion

The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) camps conducted in Donvadi, Sawantwadi, and Sheloshi villages provided an opportunity to understand the socio-economic conditions, environmental challenges, and governance practices of rural communities. Through participatory tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, seasonal calendars, timeline analysis, focus group discussions, and informal interviews, students and researchers gathered valuable insights into the developmental issues faced by the villagers. The findings highlight the importance of community participation in identifying local problems and exploring sustainable solutions.

Donvadi Village: Water Management and Agricultural Sustainability: The PRA activities conducted in Donvadi village revealed that agriculture serves as the primary source of livelihood for the majority of households. Through social and resource mapping, it was observed that while the village possesses fertile agricultural land, the availability of water remains a major constraint for sustainable farming practices. Interactions with farmers and village elders highlighted that irregular rainfall patterns and inadequate irrigation facilities significantly affect crop productivity. The seasonal calendar prepared with active participation of farmers provided insights into the agricultural cycle, labor demand, and critical periods of water scarcity. It clearly indicated that certain months experience acute water shortages, impacting both agricultural output and domestic water needs. Additionally, concerns were raised about declining groundwater levels and poor maintenance of existing water conservation structures such as check dams and farm ponds. Participants strongly emphasized the need to strengthen irrigation infrastructure and ensure proper upkeep of water conservation systems.

They also suggested the adoption of modern water management practices such as drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting. These findings underline the importance of sustainable water resource management in ensuring agricultural stability and improving rural livelihoods. From a broader perspective, the situation in Donvadi reflects common challenges faced by semi-arid regions in India, where agriculture is heavily dependent on monsoon rainfall. The participatory discussions encouraged villagers to collectively explore strategies for water conservation and community-based resource management.

Sawantwadi Village: Environmental Concerns and Waste Management: The PRA exercises conducted in Sawantwadi village brought to light significant environmental concerns, particularly the issue of plastic waste management. Social mapping revealed the accumulation of plastic waste in residential areas, along roadsides, and near water channels, indicating the absence of a systematic waste collection and disposal mechanism. Focus group discussions with villagers, including women and youth groups, revealed a lack of awareness regarding waste segregation and environmental conservation. It was observed that plastic waste from households and local shops was frequently discarded in open areas or burned, leading to environmental degradation and health hazards. During the PRA camp, students actively facilitated awareness programmes and discussions on environmental protection and responsible waste management. Community campaigns were organized to promote reduction in plastic usage, encourage waste segregation, and emphasize the importance of maintaining cleanliness. These initiatives helped create awareness and encouraged villagers to take collective responsibility for environmental sustainability. The discussions also highlighted the potential role of local institutions such as the Gram Panchayat and community organizations in establishing an effective waste management system. The findings clearly indicate that increased awareness, institutional support, and active community participation are essential to address environmental challenges in rural areas.

Sheloshi Village: Women's Participation and Livelihood Opportunities: The PRA camp conducted in Sheloshi village emphasized the critical role of women's groups in promoting rural development and community welfare. Interactions with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) revealed that women are actively engaged in savings and credit activities, as well as small-scale livelihood initiatives. These groups serve as important platforms for financial inclusion, mutual support, and collective action. Focus group discussions indicated that participation in SHGs has significantly enhanced women's confidence, leadership abilities, and decision-making capacity within both the household and the community. Access to micro-credit has enabled women to meet household needs, invest in income-generating activities, and manage financial challenges effectively. However, several constraints were identified in expanding women-led livelihood activities.

Limited access to skill development programmes, inadequate market linkages, and restricted financial resources hinder the growth of enterprises. Participants emphasized the need for targeted training, entrepreneurship development initiatives, and institutional support to strengthen women's economic participation. The findings also underscored the importance of women's involvement in local governance structures such as the Gram Sabha. While some women actively participate, many expressed the need for greater awareness and encouragement to engage in decision-making processes. Strengthening women's participation in governance can lead to more inclusive and responsive rural development.

A comparative analysis of the PRA findings from Donvadi, Sawantwadi, and Sheloshi villages reveals distinct development priorities and challenges. Donvadi village primarily faces issues related to water management and agricultural sustainability. Sawantwadi village is confronted with environmental challenges, especially plastic waste management, while Sheloshi village highlights the importance of women's empowerment and livelihood development through Self-Help Groups. Despite these differences, a common theme across all three villages is the crucial role of community participation in identifying problems and developing solutions. The PRA approach provided a platform for villagers to express their views, share indigenous knowledge, and collectively analyze their development needs. It also enabled students and researchers to gain deeper insights into rural realities and the complexities of rural life. Overall, the findings emphasize that participatory approaches are essential for effective planning and implementation of sustainable rural development initiatives, ensuring that interventions are need-based, inclusive, and community-driven.

The findings of the PRA camps demonstrate that participatory approaches can play a vital role in promoting inclusive and sustainable rural development. By involving community members in the process of data collection and problem identification, PRA tools encourage local ownership of development initiatives. Such approaches align with the principles of participatory development and community empowerment widely emphasized in social work practice. For social work education, PRA camps serve as valuable experiential learning opportunities. They allow students to engage directly with rural communities, develop communication and facilitation skills, and apply theoretical knowledge in real-life contexts. The interaction between students and villagers also promotes mutual learning and strengthens the connection between academic institutions and local communities. Overall, the PRA camps conducted in the three villages highlight the importance of participatory methodologies in understanding rural development challenges and fostering collaborative solutions. Strengthening community participation, improving access to resources, and promoting sustainable practices can contribute significantly to the long-term development of rural areas.

The PRA camps played a significant role in enhancing the overall learning experience of students by providing them with practical exposure to rural realities. Through active participation in field activities, students developed strong communication skills by interacting with villagers, facilitating group discussions, and presenting findings. They gained hands-on experience in participatory facilitation techniques, enabling them to effectively engage community members in identifying and analyzing local issues. The camps also strengthened their understanding of field research methods, including data collection through PRA tools, observation, and informal interviews. Additionally, students developed a deeper understanding of rural governance systems, particularly the functioning of local institutions such as the Gram Sabha. Exposure to diverse community contexts also helped them build gender-sensitive perspectives, recognizing the importance of inclusive and equitable development.

At the community level, the PRA camps contributed meaningfully to local development processes. They helped in increasing awareness among villagers about various government schemes and entitlements, enabling them to access available resources more effectively. The participatory exercises facilitated the identification of key local development priorities, reflecting the actual needs of the community. The camps also encouraged greater participation in Gram Sabha meetings, thereby strengthening grassroots democracy. Furthermore, the insights generated during the PRA activities supported the planning and implementation of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPD), ensuring that development initiatives are more need-based, inclusive, and community-driven.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) supports several Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations by promoting community participation and inclusive development. It contributes to SDG 1 (No Poverty) by identifying vulnerable groups, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) by improving agricultural practices, and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by encouraging women's participation. PRA also supports SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) through resource mapping, SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities) by strengthening local governance, and SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) by enhancing Gram Sabha participation and democratic decision-making.

Conclusion

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) camps serve as a highly effective platform for promoting community participation and strengthening grassroots-level development planning. The experiences from the three villages clearly demonstrate that participatory approaches enable communities to actively engage in identifying their own needs, priorities, and challenges. By involving villagers in tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, and group discussions, PRA encourages collective reflection and shared decision-making.

This process not only helps in generating accurate, context-specific information but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members towards development initiatives. As a result, the solutions identified are more practical, inclusive, and sustainable, as they are rooted in local knowledge and community consensus.

The findings from Donvadi, Sawantwadi, and Sheloshi villages further illustrate that participatory methods can address diverse development issues such as water management, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment. Despite the differences in local contexts, a common outcome across all villages was the strengthening of community dialogue and cooperation. PRA camps also played a role in enhancing awareness about local governance mechanisms, particularly the importance of active participation in Gram Sabha and development planning processes such as the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). This highlights the potential of PRA as a tool for deepening democratic practices at the grassroots level.

From the perspective of social work education, PRA camps provide invaluable experiential learning opportunities that bridge the gap between classroom-based theoretical knowledge and real-world field practice. Students gain first-hand exposure to rural realities, social structures, and development challenges, which enhances their analytical and critical thinking skills. Through direct interaction with community members, students develop essential competencies such as effective communication, participatory facilitation, teamwork, and problem-solving. They also learn to apply research methodologies in real-life settings, thereby strengthening their understanding of qualitative and participatory research approaches.

Moreover, PRA camps contribute to the development of sensitivity towards issues of inequality, gender, and social justice. By engaging with marginalized groups, including women and economically weaker sections, students develop a more inclusive and empathetic perspective. This exposure is crucial in shaping their professional identity as social workers committed to ethical practice and community empowerment. Integrating participatory methodologies like PRA into academic curricula is therefore essential for preparing competent and socially responsible professionals. It equips students with the practical skills and values required to facilitate community-based development processes effectively. Overall, PRA camps not only benefit the community by addressing local development needs but also play a transformative role in enhancing the quality and relevance of social work education.

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