

Learning from the Ground

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The different case studies selected for inclusion in this book refer to action on the ground, not only in the different countries of the region, but also with different strata of the population. Within dominantly agrarian societies, a crucial problem faced by the mass of petty producers relates to the cornering of their already miniscule surplus by traders and moneylenders. S P Wickremaarachchi's paper deals with the story of a sensitive intervention process initiated by the action-researchers of PIDA in Sri Lanka. What the PIDA work process demonstrates is that if the petty producers can be facilitated to collectively analyse their reality and act together, they can not only generate the needed resources as capital, but by collectively marketing their produce, they can reduce the trade leakages and substantially strengthen their position, both individually and as a class. The PIDA case also demonstrates the possibility of creating conditions that help set into motion an accumulation process, a raising of collective saving and investment levels, the lack of which our planners are constantly bemoaning. In fact, what appears as essentially an economic strategy has major political implications, because any decline in the power of the moneylenders and traders releases the fetters on the overall productive process. Equally important, such processes engender the seeds of collectivism, a tradition that the modern mercantile and capitalist process has substantially eroded in our part of the world.

But even with increasing parts of the surplus being retained with the producers, the overall insecurity of the poorer agrarian population remains. The Grameen Bank, an innovative credit programme in Bangladesh, has in the last few years, managed to

associate thousands of poor peasants, labourers and petty-traders—both men and women—with a system where inexpensive credit is made available on a grow-guarantee basis. Even those without any assets to offer as collateral—thus outside the pale of all normal banking operations—now have an avenue for credit other than the local moneylender. More important, the GB intervention is not limited to credit alone. The system of group-guarantee implies the necessary formation of an organization, whether formal or informal, for the group members to meet and discuss their various problems on a regular basis. Expectedly, this has led to many a small collective action on the ground.

Atiur Rahman's paper analyses the coping mechanisms of the poor in Bangladesh to the different natural calamities that periodically befall them. Through evolving a classification system that takes ecology, type of natural disaster and the class position of the victim into account, Rahman, through a concrete analysis of the floods and typhoons of 1987 and 1988 demonstrates that those who were protected by the Grameen Bank safety net managed to cope much better with the disasters. This was partly due to their earlier improved asset position, but equally, because of an innovative and humanitarian response by the activists of the Grameen Bank. But most important, what Rahman demonstrates is the value of self-reliant efforts over pure relief and charity. Very few of the people associated with the GB programme were looking for handouts. What they preferred were loans to help them get back on their feet through a developmental response. In a country, routinely described as a basket case and a begging bowl, such a transformation, even in one micro-level response which has gone to scale, is truly spectacular.

Nevertheless, Rahman while being appreciative of the work of the Grameen Bank refers to the constraints imposed by the political structure and official policies. Coping with natural disasters may well take place locally, but a reduction in their intensity or frequency can take place only through the development of an appropriate technology system—from evolving early warning systems, developing a code of conduct for disaster management, to initiating land development exercises where the impact of floods or droughts could be minimized. This, as Rahman argues, can take

place only if political power shifts into the hands of the people, agencies and classes who do not have narrow sectarian interests.

The problem of the disarticulation of the poor, their fragmentation into warring strata, the insecurity occasioned by their surpluses being appropriated by an oppressive elite, affects not just the rural poor but is equally evident in our urban settings into which the poor migrate. In an effort to escape the dragnet of oppressive rural social conditions, they land up in urban shanty towns—a feature characteristic of all our cities. And here, while they may well find jobs or income-earning opportunities denied to them in rural settings, they face the problem of habitat as survival.

Land, at least legally, is just not available at affordable prices to the urban poor. So they squat wherever they find space—on pavements, private or state-owned land. Often evicted and bulldozed they get pushed to the urban periphery where they settle, again possibly illegally. Almost never are they covered by the institutional services ‘theoretically’ offered by the urban development agencies. Poor quality and inadequate shelter then gets accentuated by overcrowding, a lack of sanitation and health services, illiteracy and ignorance—all a veritable breeding ground for the growth of criminality.

Karachi, Pakistan’s largest metropolis, is no exception to this general process of slummification. It is in one such settlement, a *katchi abadi* in local lexicon, that Akthar Hameed Khan, better known as the father of the Comilla Experiment, a forerunner of the Community Development efforts of the sixties, initiated the Orangi Pilot Programme. He started with a focus on sanitation—demonstrating the technical, social, organizational and financial feasibility of extending sanitation coverage from flush latrines in the house, to systems of waste collection and disposal, for the settlement as a whole. Central to the Orangi process was breaking through the barriers of distrust that all marginalized oppressed construct around themselves. Once the residents of Orangi saw the architects and social workers as genuinely concerned people, understood the technical aspects of design and work, saw that the costs involved were low and manageable, they were willing to organize themselves for action.

Undoubtedly, the fact that better sanitation was in the interest of all, and that the intervention was not seen as politically explosive,

helped. Also, once the local organizations (the lane committees) were in place, it became possible to talk of other issues related to health and education, involvement of women in activities outside the home, and schemes for a general economic upgrading of the families involved. In just a few years since its inception, the OPP has made significant beginnings in all these domains.

Orangi, is in many ways a microcosm of Karachi, a multi-ethnic settlement being ripped apart by rapid change, age-old prejudices and conflicts exacerbated by the inflow of drugs and weapons. No matter how sensitive and committed the work, the environment has a way of corroding all effort. Like Rahman, Akthar Hameed Khan, too, is left with the question of the macro-political, the OPP process caught within the binds of larger policies to which it can partially respond but over which it exercises little control. Even so, in the case of the garment workers, it was able to create self employment cost-effectively.

In a manner of speaking this is what revolutionary attempts have all been about—the setting into motion of political processes with an accumulation and economic process that would fundamentally alter the structure and balance of power in society. The great agrarian upsurges of the late '60s and early '70s—what is described as the Naxalite movements—attempted precisely this. The Naxalite challenge failed. Most analysts now claim that it was foredoomed to failure. Some feel that the 'situation was not ripe'; others trace the problem to a premature formation of a Party; still others lay the blame on a vanguardist policy of 'leading' the masses and indulging in violent activities such as individual annihilation without the needed mass mobilization, conscientization and organization. The reasons are many and complex. The end result however cannot be denied. The Naxalite Movement in India, after its spectacular growth for a few years, could not challenge the might of the Indian state. Between declining popular enthusiasm and increasing state authoritarianism, the movement split into different fragments whose actions, even if imbued with political rhetoric, could not be distinguished from those of terrorists or brigands.

The crushing of the movement and the political challenge did not, however, lead to any resolution of the problem. Many of the surviving actors, having learnt a bitter lesson, re-emerged as small

developmental and social action groups. In fact, much of the proliferation of both grass roots action and the middle class supportive activity against unjust laws and policies and for reassuring democratic and human rights owes its genesis to an outfall of the movement. The paper by Arvind Das traces the transformed trajectory of the Naxalite movement in the eastern Indian state of Bihar.

Notwithstanding continuing and benighted state repression, the Naxalite movement has slowly grown, phoenix-like, from the ashes of its shattered past. Both over ground and underground, electoral and non-electoral, its shift in tactics, strategy and working style has led to its simultaneous widening and deepening. Today the mass face of the movement, the Indian People's Front (IPF), enjoys a popularity and a base which none of the other political or social formations in Bihar can command. No longer is the IPF interested in narrowly defined political issues of 'capture of state power', but works through a variety of mass organizations and on different facets of life to give meaning and content to democracy. As Das wryly notes, for all those who condemn the movement as extra-parliamentary, it is only under the aegis of this movement that many of the 'subaltern' classes among the early militants have for the first time exercised their right of franchise.

Through activating the cultural front, assisting autonomous organizations of women, fighting against caste oppression and religious fundamentalism, linking up struggles of ecology and rights—in addition to the struggles against bondage, for payment of fair wages, and for distribution of surplus land—the IPF story also teaches us against being overly sceptical and dismissive of party political efforts. The setbacks of the last &teen years had blurred the boundaries between the non-party political and the non-political. In fact, politics itself had become a word and activity of disparagement. IPF teaches us that each o of us has a capacity to learn and that the process of moving towards a just, equitable and desirable order cannot take place by avoiding the questions of political power. More important, such experiences force us to rework our categories of 'extremism' and 'terrorism'—labels often stuck on efforts that question and challenge the legitimacy of the State and the system.

One critique of both innovative developmental and political effort has been the insensitivity, if not the blindness to the gender question. Be it national movements for independence from colonial rule, the socialist and the communist led worker and peasant struggles, the various welfare and developmentalist initiatives by the newly independent states, or even by many of the voluntary and non-party social and developmental efforts— all of them can be rightly critiqued on this ground. The combination of traditional and modern structures have worked to keep the women of the subcontinent in the most oppressed and exploited of states.

The gender statistics now available speak volumes. Barring Sri Lanka, even the sex-ratios in the region are male-biased. From being killed through foeticide, now made easier through the technique of amniocentesis, the differential treatment handed out to the girl-child, that is if she is not the victim of infanticide, keeping her confined to the house, denied nutrition, health, education skills, indoctrinated to accept a subsidiary status, married off at an early age, subjected to repeated child births, often killed for inadequate dowry—from birth to death the lot of South Asian women is a miserable one. If the above statement seems somewhat caricatured, it is because anything less than an extreme statement excites no response from the male-ordered, patriarchal system, that we are all a part of.

None of this has ever gone unresisted. Be it the women saints of medieval times (often branded as witches), or the feminists of times closer to our own—women have attempted to fight against their oppression, though unlike other oppressed strata they have had to carry out their struggle from both within and outside the home. From the earlier struggles for social recognition, for the right to work outside the house, for access to education and skills, for a right to vote and participate in public affairs—all the way to resisting violence, a commoditification process and a role and typecasting that ideologically binds them into self-constraining fetters—the women of the subcontinent are clearly on the move.

Expectedly, for the outside world, what has often excited attention are the activities of the urban-middle class women— an attention that is more amenable in the current situation of being dubbed as western (at such times a word of abuse), and ultra. Much more rarely has any attention been paid to the work being carried out

with working class and marginal women! If only this had been done, the image and self-image of women in the subcontinent would have been different. For unlike upper caste/class women who are confined to the household—these women are confident and ready to act. Of course, the label of an official programme helps.

CHANGING THE TERMS OF DISCOURSE

Each of the programmes/experiments discussed so far have as their impetus, impulses from the modern world. Even though each one of them, simultaneously presents a critique of modern day capitalist processes, as they have unfolded in our part of the world, the initiative for reversal has been taken by social activists and by cadres rooted both in modernity and in tradition.

From a social point of view, all these cases depart from the dominant framework's preoccupation with individual salvation, and through their stress on collective attempts to evolve a new framework of responding to, living with, and transforming the present. There is also an aesthetic nudging towards austerity and self-restraint, values which the unbridled consumerism of today erodes. Some of these cases may have a founding 'guru', but not letting a formalized structure of hierarchies and roles emerge, is probably as good a corrective prevention as any to dependence.

Many of the experiments/organizations talked about in this book have as their basis the material advancement of the participants. In poor countries this focus on income-earning and saving strategies is not surprising. In each case one can discern a movement from the simple to the complex, from a single focus to a spread effect on other issues. In each case the strength of the effort comes from an awareness of collectivity which pools together its resources, accepts help from the outsider but on its own terms, and works to improve/reform the present and grasp the future.

These different efforts also represent a diversity, so that while one may discern some general principles common to all, the modes of analysis and action are different. This is due not just to the fact of different social bases and geographical locations and socio-political settings. It is, after all self-evident, that in concrete terms what moves an informal contract worker in a large city is not what

motivates and involves the marginal tribals located in the periphery, but also that the understanding of politics and social change that govern the different response patterns are very different.

Between the IPF and *Sathin* in Rajasthan one can trace a spectrum of political understanding. The former has evolved a formal and explicit political understanding and language; a perspective on what constitutes the social base of radical transformation; and precise and developed tactics and strategies of the struggle which identify the actors, structures and processes which have to be opposed. The latter does not even have a vocabulary and language of politics. Though motivated by suffering, it does not incorporate categories of oppression and exploitation. More significantly, it does not externalize the problem. And yet, both have enjoyed a popular response from the depressed castes and classes.

All the cases are in the nature of micro-level development initiatives. While they all display a sensitive building up from consciousness-raising to social advancement via the steps of mass mobilization, organization building, inculcation of new values and invoking community spirit, their emphasis on ‘training’ through PAR and praxis can lay them open to the charge of instrumentalism, of raising the ‘illusion’ of ‘planned’ efforts at social transformation, even though the planning is with a difference. In so far, notwithstanding, their emphasis on building on the socio-cultural and knowledge base of the people, there is a certain downplaying of the civilizational texture of our societies that mark out the bounds of the possible.

The different critique of the various PAR experiences, both at the level of theory and action, do raise certain questions that require a response. For instance, is the animator/facilitator, o central to the PAR process, only another vanguardist element in a different garb? Given the structural and socio-cultural differences between the external animator and the people, can a meaningful and equal dialogue ever take place between them? Is dialogue sufficient as a response to the problems caused by an inequality in power relations?

It is true that not unlike all fledgling attempts, the PAR theory and process, too, is not invulnerable to processes of co-option and distortion. Each of the employed in the PAR lexicon have by now been given a totally different meaning in the establishment oriented developmental discourse—with everyone from the World Bank to national governments invoking the centrality of people’s participation and countervailing power. That is precisely why no ‘judgements’ or assessments can be made in the abstract, and why, what is presented

is a diverse range of case studies—from ‘planned intervention with a difference’ to movements based on the everyday rhythms and sensibilities of the common people.

No claim is being made that the material presented here is either representative, relates to the most significant experiments/movements in the region, or that it exhaustively maps out the range of our communities’ responses to the crisis engulfing them as they see it. For instance, in this book, there is a clear absence of detailed cases of how people are responding to either the natural resources or community identity conflicts, though references have been made in Chapter 4. Yet the sample is diverse enough to permit some generalizations. And if there is an ‘unintended bias’ towards the ‘instrumental’, it is because the urgency of the problems facing South Asia leaves little choice but to act in the best available manner. The hope is that both humility and experiential learning are not absent from what has been talked about, and that the ‘sustainability’ of these efforts will force the experience on the ground to be taken seriously. The rest is left to the experiences themselves.

For those interested in issues of praxis, the relationship between theory building and action remains a constant preoccupation. Not just whether the thinkers and the actors will or can be the same, but whether theory building as an exercise is imbued with sterility in an action sense. This critique is fairly easily made about theoretical work of a Neo-classical or functionalist type. Here the assumption of equilibrium, ensured either via nature or the market, leads to the status quo. Even critical theory which is centrally concerned with the issue of change, and revolutionary change at that, when caught within the moors of a pre-facto working out of the implications of intervention, often ends up relying on the ‘laws of motion of society’. To demand that each small action should be justifiable within a perspective of ‘overall structural change’ is only to foredoom the actor to inaction.*

* Editorial comment on R Sudarshan, ‘Theory, Ideology and Action in Economics and Law’, *Loyakan Bulletin*, 6.6, New Delhi, 1988.