

IRD AND THE AGENT OF CHANGE

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Three projects of rural development in Kerala, Maharashtra and West Bengal have been analysed from the point of view of their goals, strategies, programmes and methods of eliciting popular participation. This analysis suggests some hypotheses on the choice of beneficiary, the choice of strategy and the role of the agent of change

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In the days when it was called Community Development the social work profession used such terms as 'Client system', 'agent of change', 'strategy of change' etc. If CD. has today yielded place to **IRD** has there been a corresponding change in the role of the agent of change or in the strategy he must employ? More explicitly, does the social work profession have anything to contribute to this new role and strategy?

If these questions are foremost in our minds today, one way of answering them would be to analyse a few projects of rural development with a view to drawing certain hypotheses on what would constitute *an effective strategy of change*, what would be the *functions and tasks of the agent of change* in such a strategy, and — of relevance to a School of Social Work — what *training inputs* are required to form a suitable agent of change.

Three projects will be taken for analysis—one at Marianad in Kerala, the second at Nasik in Maharashtra and the third at Sherpur in West Bengal. All the details of each case will not be presented, but emphasis will be placed on the conclusions

of each case-study.

The first case under scrutiny is a pilot project at Marianad involving a fishing community.² An uninhabited stretch of coast where the fishing was poor and hazardous is changed within about 7 years into a 'prosperous' community of self-reliant fishermen with a unique fishing co-operative and an active mahila samajam. This dramatic transformation — the Community Workers of Marianad are reluctant to call it a 'success story' — will be analysed in terms of its goals, the strategy of community action employed, the programmes and the methods of eliciting people's participation.

Goals: Significantly, there is no explicit statement of goals, but the change agents' intention was to study the scope for change and organisation in a "despised" group. As far as the client group was concerned the change agents tried "to initiate an informal educational process to initiate change, to build awareness and allow people to inspire confidence in themselves" - a goal conceived in the best traditions of the Community Organisation process, and couched in language that could not initially

¹ I believe it is a moot point whether the concept of IRD is entirely new or radically different from that of CD. As early as 1921 Tagore advocated a philosophy of rural reconstruction that took a holistic view of the total personality, called for a co-ordination of resources and envisaged an integrated programme encompassing the fields of agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage industry, health, life-centric education etc. Building on this idea, Mayer in 1948, sought the co-operation of all government departments and the integration of administrative, technical and human-relations approaches. From its inception CD. has taken integral development as its goal.

² *Ripples and Repercussions*, a thought-provoking booklet on Marianad gives the data for this analysis.

have made much sense to the client group.

Phase I: Strategy of Action — "Community building and community development based on self-help".

(i) The change agents lived with the new settlers and 'made friends'.

(ii) They began with the needs felt and expressed by the clients.

(iii) The clients were involved "as much as possible".

(iv) The methods of operation were simple and no grandiose buildings, schemes or equipment were employed.

Programmes

(i) Construction of low-cost housing at Marianad for 50 very poor families from 7 different villages through a house-building co-operative

(ii) A public health programme

(iii) Clubs for boys and girls

(iv) A savings scheme

(v) A nursery and creche

Phase II (7 years later)

Strategy of action: There was a shift in emphasis towards helping to liberate the client group from the exploitative clutches of vested interests who controlled the economy. It was characterised by a readiness to fight for their rights. "It is more honourable for a fisherman to die fighting....."

Programme: Rather than a series of programmes, there was now a campaign that snow-balled by itself. It started when the clients became acutely conscious at a series of evening meetings that they were being exploited by merchant money-lenders. This led to a joint decision to boycott the merchants. The client group was helped by the change agents to resist the retaliatory tactics of the money-lenders who had enlisted the support of the Panchayat, some officials of the Department of Fisheries, local politicians and priests. There

was a show of strength when the client group, armed with weapons, defied a Panchayat ban on fishing. The opponents withdrew and the clients co-operative became "the only fishermen's co-operative completely controlled by real fishermen".

The success of this campaign among the men emboldened the agents of change to bring together the women into a Mahila Samajam that started an essential food-grains depot and successfully implemented a campaign against illicit distilling of liquor.

Methods of eliciting participation: The following actions of the change agents seem to have evoked a response:—

(i) *Living with the clients* and identifying with their lot evoked their liking and trust and gave them moral support in their struggle.

(ii) *Convening community meetings* and interpreting the clients' hardships evoked their determination to fight and focussed on the target.

In the second case, that of the Maharashtra Prabodhan Seva Mandal, Nasik we can collect important data on the goals of the project, its strategy and the programmes through which this was implemented from the report of a committee which met in April 1977 to review the Mandal's working.

Goal of the project: In 1974 the goal of the project had been formulated in terms of human development. Three years later it was felt the goal should be formulated in terms of *community building*. Accordingly the Mandal aims to build up a local community based on social justice in which a high premium is placed on personal freedom, fraternity and equality. Operationally the goal achievement can be measured in terms of the following criteria:

- (i) involvement of the whole community in group decisions

- (ii) improving local institutions, creating an awareness of available facilities for economic development
 - (iii) development of co-operatives to cater to the consumer needs
 - (iv) developing marketing facilities
 - (v) forming leaders among the landless to fight for better wages, preventing influx of outside labour etc.
 - (iv) creating a sense of vigilance in the community so that local leaders may not become corrupt.
- (i) Adult education
 - (ii) Youth leadership training
 - (iii) Childrens education
 - (iv) Cultural programmes
 - (v) Inculcating of spiritual values

Strategy of action: Building local communities is an educative process in which the Mandal tries to identify with the poor and the oppressed. The various strategies the Mandal could adopt are put down in the following order of priority:

- (a) Concentration of resources on groups rather than on individual beneficiaries. The purpose would be to form a group which could become a "critical mass" and be the beginning of a movement of social change.
- (b) To achieve participation on the part of the people at all levels in the programme of education, viz. at the levels of planning, execution and management of finance.
- (c) Economic programmes for groups of farmers owning ten acres and less. The purpose of these programmes would be to enable the group to have a voice in local politics and politics at higher levels.
- (d) To increase the utility of local institutions (e.g. Gram Panchayat, co-operative societies, banks) and to develop vigilance on the part of the community so that these institutions continued to be of service to the community.
- (e) To conduct explicit educational programmes in the following areas:

Programmes: In addition to the programmes mentioned above the Mandal has been conducting public health programmes and has been offering technical services (mainly boring of wells). The technical services were mainly utilised by the better — off farmers. The Committee decided to close down its technical services since they did not cater directly to the poor farmers which constituted the new target group.

Methods of eliciting peoples participation; The rich farmers participated in programmes offered by the technical department of the Mandal because of the attractive rates at which these services were offered. As far as the conscientization of the poorer farmers goes, the Mandal works through its extension department which covers 48 villages intensively and other surrounding villages on a more sporadic basis. The style of life of the extension worker communicates to the poorer farmers his identification with them. No members of the community are excluded from decision making meetings. A sense of togetherness is sought to be inculcated. These serve to ensure the participation of the people to a greater extent.

Sherpur Project

The third project under scrutiny, situated in Sherpur village, Murshidabad Dist. of West Bengal, was initiated by a group of college students (NSS) in 1973 and led to the formation of an organization of local village leaders — the Prabartak Parishad. In 1976 an attempt was made to assess the

changes induced in the Sherpur community as a result of various developmental programmes and to gain insights into the possible causes and conditions that foster change.

The Goals of the Project

Initially the project aimed at "infusing a new dynamism into the stagnant village community". This 'process' goal was supported by physical targets connected with the "development of the Sherpur area".

Strategy of Action

In the first phase the agents of change (NSS college students) were more active and the programmes they undertook were non-controversial (e.g. building a school). In the next phase the student action was more limited and the local leaders became more active to the extent of creating their own organisation for development (Prabartak Parishad) and the programmes they undertook were economic programmes that began to threaten certain vested interests. At the time of the study there was much emphasis placed on withstanding hostilities aroused from opposing political interests, and on creating new leaders and patterns of new leadership in the community. The physical targets though less important were not neglected by the agents of change.

Programmes:

- (i) School building
- (ii) Cattle Fair (weekly)
- (iii) Vegetable Fair (weekly)
- (iv) Tannery
- (v) Building 'Idgah'
- (vi) Deepening a tank
- (vii) Adult literacy programme
- (viii) Schooling for women
- (ix) Extension of agricultural programmes to neighbouring villages.

Methods of Eliciting Participation

- (a) Initially the presence of an external agent of change (urban college students) doing manual labour on behalf of the village enticed the villagers to share the work.
- (b) The interest of a prominent local leader in offering the villagers new economic opportunities, and his initial success in the face of opposition caused an upsurge of hope among the people.
- (c) A judicious use of the community organisation process by the NSS project officer who continued to have great influence on the village leaders led to their greater and greater involvement.

Some Hypothesis and Implications for Training

The following hypothesis suggest themselves:

(1) *On the Choice of beneficiary:* By choosing only the poorest section of the rural population it is possible to work towards a suppression of the exploitative forces that retard IRD.

The Marianad experiment illustrates this dramatically.

The second case — that of the Maharashtra Prabodhan Seva Mandal also seems to support this hypothesis. The Mandal, in the course of three years (1974-1977), shifted its emphasis from one of 'development' to one of 'liberation'. In its review of its own work the Mandal observed that "some people are poor *because* others are rich" and resolved to "exclude the rich from its economic aid programmes.... (and to run schools to) educate children to change the status quo of society and not merely provide learning for the children of the rich."

Swaminathan and Soares (formerly of ICAR) also hold that the "better-off sections of the rural community must be left to depend upon their own initiatives." They interpret the concept of 'antyodaya' as focusing exclusively on the rural poor, and note that this aspect is a "radical departure from the previous tradition" that characterizes IRD.

The same issue was debated at a Seminar on the Organization of Peasants in India, and Prof. V. K. R. V. Rao came out strongly against schemes that sought to include rich landlords, small landlords and landless labourers in the same organization. He maintained that each category should have its own organisation so that the interests of each group were represented.

Earlier the choice of beneficiary was guided by the concept of viability — the beneficiary had to possess sufficient resources (material, psychological strengths etc.) to be able to make good with a little outside assistance. It is not clear whether the philosophy of antyodaya has entirely abandoned the concept of viability. If it has then is IRD doomed to become a massive programme of social welfare that will be a perpetual drain on the nations' economy? If viability continues to be taken into account, then is IRD really a radical departure from the earlier tradition of rural development?

Social Work Implications: Since the 'poorest' are usually an inarticulate group the agent of change requires special skills - not normally found among scientists or administrators or technical experts — to identify and contact this client group and gain their confidence.

(2) *On the Choice of Strategy*

If the client group comprises the poorest sections it would seem that the most effective

strategy is one of *confrontation rather than of development*.

This hypothesis seems to be borne out by the first two cases where there was a distinct change in the strategy of action.

In the third case, that of Sherpur in West Bengal, the agent of change did not report any explicit change in strategy. Right through the strategy was to provide the client group "with the means of developing local resources for self-reliance". All the same certain hostile forces were released and there were signs of a struggle. The client-group was not confined to the economically weakest section, but to a politically inarticulate group. As this group began to develop socio-economic programmes, its leadership became more powerful and this new seat of power in the community began to be seen as a threat by the older political leaders who had hitherto done little to help the community. Though the agent of change did not give up the developmental approach it had to take definite steps to meet the opposition of the hostile political leaders.

It is important to note that confrontation can take varying forms—from lodging complaints with higher authorities to law-breaking actions.

The choice of strategy and the degree of confrontation to be employed will be determined by the relative strengths of the "exploited" and the "exploiter", bearing in mind Saul Alinsky's advice to radicals never to start a campaign unless it is going to be successful.

It is also significant to note that a strategy of continued confrontation is often called for. In the Marianad project it was observed that after the client group had successfully liberated itself from the middle men, it began, in its turn, to exploit the still weaker sections of the community. The

agents of change noted with regret that "the co-operative structure can become a capitalist institution in itself" and so they called for a continuous change process, reminiscent of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Social Work Implications: The professional Social Worker (who is, by definition, paid by society to help social 'misfits' conform to society's norms) is automatically excluded from the role of a confrontative agent of change. This poses a serious challenge to schools of Social Work that still feel they have a commitment to IRD. Should Social Work be deprofessionalized? Should professionals use only "safe" methods of confrontation that do not infringe the law or the vested interests of their employers? Should such methods be given more attention in social work courses and field work training?

3. The catalytic *role of the agent of change* does not mean a passive role. The agent of change has to take a vigorous role bordering on that of the charismatic leader.

This view is supported by the data from

the Marianad and the Sherpur projects, in both of which the outside agent of change played a decisive role.

The effective change agent needs to be a leader, ready to identify with the client and live with and like the client, display an attitude of deep sympathy and understanding, possess a knowledge of how to analyse society and its problems, use skills of handling individuals and groups in the community.

Social Work Implications: The professional Social Worker is generally equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills, but the formation of appropriate attitudes and personality traits tends to be overlooked in the course of his training.

The CD. programme was launched with high expectations that have been belied. There may be many factors responsible. Not the least of these factors is the poor quality of personnel available. If IRD is to meet with a better fate than its precursors it is imperative that serious attention be given to the training of appropriate personnel.