ADVOCACY, EMPOWERMENT, AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION: AN EXPERIMENT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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The abject conditions of the rural poor have lately attracted the attention of the social scientists around the world, including the United States of America. The complexities of rural problems in a developing country like India are much more complicated. The paper presents an experiment conducted by the author in India, in a village, to organise a society and work for rural development through international teamwork. The three basic principles directing this work are those of advocacy, empowerment and strategic international collaboration and globalisation of social work.

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As the world is coming closer and global economic interdependency is increasing, the problem of poverty has intensified in many countries, both in industrialised and rapidly industrialising nations. Families, women, and children often suffer the worst consequences of such intensification. Vast changes in socio economic conditions at international, national, state or provincial, and local government levels affect neighbourhoods, families and children. Today social workers and social reformers need multilevel social systems, practice models and innovative strategies, enabling interventions with and on behalf of clients at multiple system levels (Vosler and Nair, 1992). The problem assessment and interventions must be focused not only on individuals, families, and local service delivery systems, but also on economic and social policies and structures at state, national, as well as international levels (Blake, Nair, Pang and Shui, 1990; Vosler, 1990; Vosler and Ozawa, 1992).

Moreover, as the Cold War has ended and the economy and living conditions of one part of earth are getting intrinsically mutually interdependent with the other, an enlightened citizen of the modern world cannot shirk from his/her share of responsibility in international development (Tavis, 1991). The focus on poverty and the horrible living conditions in various parts of the world and the resultant problems like crime, corruption, and hygiene have lately and suddenly caught the attention of the U.S. and other industrialised nations. One way to explain is using Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's (1972) thesis that poverty becomes a social issue when the poor become active and aggressive. However, the poor who have gone through a systematic repression and brain-washing through generations, very rarely become aggressive or demanding of their rights and this can impact policy decisions to combat poverty.

Poverty: Concept and Dynamics

Poverty is not an easy concept to define. It is not only an economic phenomenon but is one which is loaded with political and normative concepts that make it difficult to define. If poverty is defined simply as a lack of financial resources, then why do poor people usually shy off from making the maximum use of resources that a welfare state makes available to them? If we follow Stein Ringen (1985, 1987) and look at poverty as a social phenomenon, such as deprivation, then we will have to deal with some very difficult problems of poverty and deprivation. It is difficult for researchers to agree with the definition of deprivation and its different components. One cannot just say that while living in poverty people do not really make any choices. What really constitutes a sense of deprivation and how it can be measured is quite a complicated, even a paradoxical, question (Abrahamson, et al., 1988).

Social Development and Social Justice

It is paradoxical to note that despite our deep commitment to humanitarianism, a major part of our world is oppressed with poverty. We are still far from building an equalitarian society with equal access to opportunities for each individual. There is an ever-pervading sense of powerlessness, victimisation by poverty and the hierarchical structure of society dominated by privileged groups. Moreover, a societal attitude dominated by fatalism leads a great many families from the lower socio economic class to feel powerless. In turn they learn to accept social injustices and exploitation as a way of life. Such families need empowerment by (a) regaining self-esteem in family members and pride in the family as a team, (b) regaining control over what happens to the family members individually and as a group, (c) understanding or realising what happened in the chaos, and (d) sharing with others while actively working to prevent it from happening again (Pauline Boss, 1988).

The core belief-system of these families is derived from a sense of nativity, a just World Theory and learned helplessness. Raised in a simple society, it is hard for these families to believe that anything bad can happen to good people. Faced with frequent atrocities and injustices such families usually indulge into a fantasy of feeling autonomous and being in control by building numerous defensive structures around them. Repeated exposures to such experiences gradually lead to a sense of helplessness which, like an infectious disease, is transmitted from one person to another and from one generation to another in the form of learned helplessness. Feeling helpless, the families fail to function as viable sources of socialisation for its members, encouraging deviance and poor self image. The members of such families are variously victimised by the elite power group in the community and get trapped in a cycle of poverty (Strange, 1990). It is not the individual's fault that he/she is poor. We must be careful not to blame the victim or the poor, as poverty is a problem that society has created and the individuals trapped in the system need not necessarily allow themselves to be subjected by the social definitions and social injustices (Farmer, 1989).

The Rural Poor

The abject conditions of the rural poor have lately attracted the attention of the social scientists around the world. Even in an advanced country like the U.S.A. the farmers

face financial worries. Studies have shown that the principal barriers keeping them from obtaining sufficient help and the social services they needed, were psychological: fear of insensitive treatment by agency staff, shame, guilt, and depression. Sundet and Mermelstein (1987) found that this calls for the workers to have a better understanding of the financial structures involved in farming, the bureaucracy, the Socio-cultural variables and empathising with their current state of affairs. The outside workers helping the villagers may not prove to be as effective as the local or "natural helpers" such as friends, relatives, and neighbours, unless they develop the skills of interpersonal relationships and make an effective use of the natural helpers (Patterson, et al., 1988). The socio-economic and mental health problems of the rural community are so unique that they call for specialised training and development of innovative methods of helping for an effective intervention (Stuve, Beeson and Hartig, 1989). Addressing the issue of inadequate social service access in rural areas Waltman et al. (1991) proposed developing innovative strategies for increasing visibility, establishing community rapport and responding to the unique needs and attitudes with a deep sense of community commitment, as essential steps for an effective intervention in a rural community (Waltman, Czarnecki and Miller, 1991). The human sufferings and disruption of traditional and vital life styles, as well as the threat to the future food production pose a serious challenge to social work education (Marino, 1988). New methods need to be devised for creative solutions to be used by helping professionals, local leaders, as well as concerned rural residents (Dorfman and Mertans, 1990).

The complexities of rural problems in a developing country like India are much more complicated than described above. India is a vast country with more than 700,000 villages. More than 76 per cent of the population still live in the villages.

About 48 per cent of the villagers live under the poverty line. More than four-fifths of Indian workforce live in villages and 68.8 per cent of them are engaged in agricultural and allied activities. A village represents the microcosm of Indian society. The Government of India, during its eight five year plans and other plans, has focused heavily on rural development. The gigantic government plans for rural development are quite impressive. And yet, these plans are far from being realised in their spirit. Despite several admirable economic achievements, the condition of the majority of the villagers remains the same. The poor farmers and workers are groaning under the huge rural development machinery, that appears to work more for filling the pockets of those in charge of its operation than meeting the needs of the poor. The red tape and corruption prevail from top to bottom with no one willing to take any initiative to stop it. Everyone appears to have some share in this loot. Everyone is busy filling their own pockets. The national intelligentia, on the other hand, except for blaming others or feeling sorry, appears to have helplessly accepted these conditions with no concrete suggestions to bring changes.

Many of my American and Indian friends, particularly those interested in Social Work, have frequently shared their concern for the deteriorating conditions of India and expressed their keen desire to do something for the re-awakening of the masses. Mutual discussions led to the idea of adopting a village on an experimental basis. The idea suited both the Indian ideal of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the entire world is a family), and the Western slogan for the "global village". If the ancient

Indian books of wisdom, the *Vedas,* viewed the entire world as a family, then why not consider life in a village as a family? How does this family respond to its needs and developments? These new developments create new tensions which require the developing of new techniques. How does the family use this tension for a holistic societal growth? How is the social and cultural breakdown of this basic unit of life prevented? It is this cultural crisis and moral degeneration that renders the gigantic government plans for rural development quite ineffectual.

We were thus quite convinced that any experiment for the Socio-cultural and moral regeneration of India has to start from a village. A village consists of an interdependent social network in which each village knows the other and depends on others for basic need fulfilment. There is another aspect of village culture and its strength that should not be ignored. One of the main reasons why Indian culture has survived hundreds of invasions by foreigners, starting from the raid of Alexander the great, is the fact that despite the destruction of well-planned and beautiful cities, thousands of temples, and the great ancient universities like Taxila and Nalanda, the Indian villages situated far apart in the hinterlands were saved, and it is these villages that have mainly carried on the Indian traditions until today. The ancient Indian glory, to a great extent, flourished on its democratic and enlightened rural social structure and idealism. It was during the thousand years of foreign attacks and rules that the age old democratic social structure of the Indian Community was rigidified into caste distinctions and many social evils penetrated into Indian society. It is the villagers in India, who despite constant setbacks in the urban areas, who have guarded Indian culture in its true forms. Any cultural regeneration and social development plan in India, therefore, has to start from a village.

The Chhitauna Village

It was with this perspective that I decided to go out, into the countryside near Varanasi, during my sabbatical leave in India, last year, and ended up selecting a village named Chhitauna, about 16 miles from the city and 4 miles from Jalhupur, a small township. The road from Jalhupur is narrow and rugged and for a little over a mile unpaved and hazardous. The total population of the village is about 5,000. In terms of caste distribution — a significant aspect of Indian social structure — there are about 400 houses of *yadavas,* 100 houses of *chamars,* 10 houses of *kweri,* 8 houses of *teli*, 4 houses of *nai,* 4 houses of *kahars,* 4 houses of Brahmins, 2 houses of Rajputs, and 4 houses of Moslems. Overall 16 castes within Hindus and Moslems live together, quite peacefully without any conflicts.

A need survey was conducted. This survey revealed that the village was underdeveloped because of the preponderance of *yadavas,* who are primarily uneducated milkmen. Their work is to haul hundreds of tons of milk every morning to the city on bicycles. Again, hundreds of villagers are unemployed. They play cards, drink and fight with each other. The government gave loans to some weavers to weave saris but they used the money for other purposes. There are about 45 tubewells, enough to irrigate the entire land but the electric supply is erratic.

Most young men of this village have moved out in search of jobs. The village has a primary school but the high school is four miles away. Over the years, only 15 young

men have completed their high school. There is no medical facility in the village, the closest primary care centre being 4 miles away in Jalhupur. The need list just went on and on. A village committee consisting of 10 members was formed to serve as the village level executive committee. This committee was to work under the direction of the main committee, consisting of the Board of Directors, which was formed a few weeks later.

SRUTI — Society for Rural and Urban Transformation of India

More than thirty community leaders in Varanasi, including the professors at Banaras Hindu University and Kashi Vidyapith, medical practitioners, lawyers, social workers and others were contacted to formulate the society. The mission of the society is to encourage and assist people from India, the U.S.A. and other countries to adopt underprivileged rural villages or urban neighbourhoods in India and to work for an over-all improvement of their socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

The society is registered under Section XXI of the Indian Society Registration Act, 1869. It is managed by a general body, an executive committee and a policy making committee. The members share a sense of deep commitment to socioeconomic and cultural development. Drawn from different disciplines, they represent a wide range of expertise, including social work, social sciences, literature, law, medicine and others.

The society aims to work for the overall development of socioeconomic and cultural conditions of selected villages and urban areas in India. It assists people from India and abroad to adopt underdeveloped villages and urban areas and to work intensively to meet its objectives, using local, national and international resources.

It engages in a range of activities in the areas of education, social welfare, health, economy and environment. It covers a vast range of activities including individual and family counselling, family planning, work with women, child-care education, formation of self-help groups, training of indigenous leaders, adult literacy, plantation of trees, agricultural improvement, encouragement of local industries and so on.

The society, initially established in India, will soon have its counterparts in the U.S.A. and other countries, inviting global participation. Florence Weisfeld, a social worker in New York and Marian Esquire, a social worker in the Los Angeles area, are working on developing its branches in their areas. Its headquarters are located at Shivam Complex at Lanka, and at Varanasi, in India. It provides free lodging and boarding facilities to people from India and abroad who are interested in this. It also provides collaboration with a full time social worker, consultation with experts, office space and transportation to the fields.

The Three Basic Principles of SRUTI

The three basic principles that the SRUTI work is based on are those of advocacy, empowerment and strategic international collaboration and globalisation of Social Work.

I. *Advocacy*

The principle solution to the current need for the social workers is to develop a social advocacy model for problem solving, in relation to specific cultural groups (Chung and Singh, 1991). It argues that professionals must move beyond the traditional commitment of helping people just help themselves and progress more personal involvement in the socio-legal causes of their clientele (Cloward and Elman, 1966). It encompasses both the case and class advocacy on behalf of the underprivileged. Since one of the basic trends of advocacy is the distribution of authority and resources from those with power to the common masses, there is an inherent conflict of interest. In this conflict the gains are often won for the powerless at the expense of those who have traditionally held power. Naturally, it leads to a lot of resentment from those with traditional powers and involves risks (Pratt, 1972). The advocate is viewed as a professional who identifies with the victims of social problems and tries to modify the unjustifiable social conditions (Brager, 1968). Advocacy requires lobbying on local, state, national or international levels and working through the blocks that make it harder for an average citizen to benefit from the local or national resources (Zweig, 1969).

It did not take much time for me to realise that the traditional Indian hospitality for a guest, called an "atithi", that is, a guest who makes a surprise visit is welcome any time, and, can be strategically used to influence the villagers as well as those in power. In a country with a history of colonisation by the Britishers, a foreigner still enjoys a special status. America, being a world power and a great democracy enjoys quite a respectable position in India. The average American citizen is viewed with great respect and trust. It was quite an experience to note how deep an impact Marian Esquire, Florence Weisfeld, Dennis McDermitt, and even my daughter Seema Singh, (both from Tennessee) made on the villagers, because they were Americans who had travelled ten thousand miles just to meet them and help them. It was a unique and most gratifying experience for them. Considering its strategic significance, I found it quite an effective way of dealing with the Indian bureaucracy and social system for the benefit of the poor by using American or other foreigners interested in helping the poor.

II. *Empowerment*

The sense of powerlessness, victimisation by poverty, the hierarchical structure of society dominated by a privileged group, and a fatalistic attitude, causes the lower socioeconomic classes to feel powerless and to accept social injustices and exploitation as a way of life. These villagers need empowerment. Empowerment is defined as a process whereby persons who belong to stigmatised or oppressed social categories throughout their lives, can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued social roles (Solomon, 1976).

Such empowerment needs a strategic community action, a social service plan based on community participation and a reorganisation of the village power-system. Guided by age-old beliefs and folklores that support their belief systems, the rural societies in India operate on the basis of a map or maps of reality that they have

carved for themselves. They do so in order to desensitise themselves from feeling helpless and, therefore, remain self satisfied with whatever condition they are in. They easily fall victim to the elite power group in the community (Singh and Haynes, 1992).

Moreover, most of these villagers subscribe to a just world theory. However, later on when they are hit hard by social injustice, they withdraw and isolate themselves, rather than fight with those in power to demand their rights and decent living conditions. The villagers need general education and education for their rights and responsibilities. They need training in being assertive and how to boost their self-image. Within a rigid hierarchical social system, the engenderment of the feeling that "I do exist" and that "I am an individual" and that "I do have some rights and can make some difference" is extremely essential for an individual's growth. Such positive feelings are reinforced a thousand times when an individual from a far-off country comes to help these villagers. It was quite a thrilling experience when a villager at Chhitauna looked at Marian Esquire and said that, he thought of her as a Goddess who had come to awaken them and that the villagers would like to make a statue of her and put it inside their temple. They had the same intense feeling for and an instant rapport with Florence Weisfeld, Dennis McDermitt and Seema Singh who later came to help the villagers.

III. *International Co-operation and Globalisation of Social Work*

In the currently fast re-shaping world-community, the age-old narrow boundaries of nationalism and provincialism are crumbling. The ideal of Jesus Christ "Love thy Neighbour" today is not limited to the next door neighbour, but it implies the neighbour in a country ten thousand miles away as well. And it is also important to remember that the purpose of helping the neighbour is not to covert him/her into a new religion, but into a new humanitarian philosophy, the age-old Vedic principle that the entire world is a family and that there is beauty in diversity.

It leads to a question that we must answer today. To what extent is social work education around the world addressing the growing interdependence of nations? Are social workers being prepared to contribute to the search for improved strategies to address developmental problems? Are students being made aware of opportunities for international cooperation in Social Work? We must not forget that global perspective in social work curricula can effectively be used to influence social development and social rights around the world (Healy, 1988).

Today, more than ever before, the American social workers are faced with a great challenge to get out of the tradition of intellectual isolation and get actively engaged in the field of international social welfare, particularly in the developing countries (Hartman, 1990). It is unfortunate to note that despite the unprecedented changes in the international scene, our curriculum and conceptual framework are still parochial, and the cadre of internationally active social workers is still negligible (Guzetta, 1992). We must not forget that the problem of poverty no longer lies within the National boundaries. It has been pointed out that "developing nations suffer poverty because developed nations have plundered their resources" (Elliot, et al., 1990). Let us give a positive shift to the image of the West in the past, to the young

West of today, vigorously engaged in participating in its current socio-economic revolution. Thus the need for the social workers from the U.S.A. and other developed countries to get involved in a project like SRUTI, can hardly be overemphasised. We need to continue developing new resources to internationalise social work education and practice (Ester, 1992).

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