SOCIAL CHANGE

Exploring the Inner and Outer Dimensions of Transformation

by Varun Vidyarthi

Beginning the search

Asking the right questions and searching for honest answers is fundamental to evolution in human development. I was fortunate to begin this quest early in life. While working as an engineer in a major Indian multinational company, I remember examining the hierarchy and the leadership in the organisation. It appeared that climbing the ladder of hierarchy was the goal that everyone in the company pursued. But where did the ladder go?

Being the executive assistant of the leader of the organisation, I could closely watch his life and personality. Deep within, I was not impressed. I considered the path of my own life. Was this path to be determined by circumstances, by a pre-set movement towards some destination not genuinely of my choosing. I asked myself: 'is this to be my life?' – a constant struggle to achieve something one is not completely sure of?

Several years later, I found myself asking similar questions in a different context. I abandoned a rosy career in engineering and began work among the poor in rural India. My experimentation with technical interventions like solar cookers, improved cooking stoves and biogas plants had relatively little impact on the energy situation of the poor. I discovered this fact when I revisited the village where we had introduced solar cookers. The plan was to change villagers' cooking habits so that they would use the solar cookers rather than cut down trees for cooking fuel. Who could object to this plan? Everyone would gain. However, the villagers had different priorities. We discovered that the box mirror was being used as a vanity mirror when combing hair and the metal cabinet was used for mothproof clothes storage.

Clearly, I first needed to ask myself questions about how I could usefully intervene. The villagers' lives were full of problems and I was hoping to work towards improvement in their living conditions. However, I was engaged with issues that did not carry priority in their lives. I asked myself: What am I trying to achieve? For what real purpose? More importantly: Who is trying to achieve? Is it the people or I?

In the mid eighties, peoples' participation had become a valued goal. My wife, Amla, had just completed her doctorate and had decided to abandon her career with the conventional university system. Together we started looking for participatory solutions to problems of the rural poor.

We were young, inexperienced in social work and had almost no resources to start with. Our first accounts were written when Amla got school dresses stitched and sold them on the pavement. We gradually worked with people's groups of different kinds: artisan groups, farmer groups, youth groups. In most cases, the groups did 'achieve' something.

For example, Amla assisted a carcass flayers group in winning an auction bid which enabled them to work for their own community organisation rather than work as wage labourers for others who merely invested in winning the auction for lifting dead animals in an area. At another place, youth groups were successful in making a village road by using 'Shramdaan' (voluntary contribution of labour). Similarly, we assisted a weavers' community in a village to install a warping drum so that they, through collective effort, could get their warps ready in the village itself. (Otherwise they had to go a long distance and this was costly in time and money.) In each case, people involved did go through a positive experience.

But we soon discovered that the process was not sustainable.

In reality, there was little participation or collective decision-making and benefits were usually hijacked by a few. Besides, there was often a lack of transparency in the use of funds, sometimes triggering violent conflicts. As outsiders, we could not possibly be alongside people all the time and we wondered what kind of institutional mechanism would enable the people themselves to deal with their own problems.

I had read widely in the literature on participation and empowerment. But, when considered in real life situations, these writings seemed to be little more than 'nice words' – good on paper but rather irrelevant in practice.

The situation was made more challenging by the fact that we were dealing with high levels of contradictions and conflicts among people we worked with: feudal mindsets, deeply imbued caste differences, powerful gender divisions and extremely low literacy levels (usually less than ten percent). We were aware that every society is faced with contradictions of various kinds and developing people's ability to deal with them is the essence of social change.

So, we set out to develop processes and methods that could deal with such contradictions not just in specific local situations but more widely. The challenge was not just to work towards improvement in the lives of a few hundreds or thousands, but to deal with problems in a manner that would lead to meaningful, widespread and sustainable social change, especially among the rural poor in India.

Working on the outer dimension: the process of self-help

The ground level scenario

In the late eighties, the process of self-help was little practised or understood among development workers or institutions in Uttar Pradesh. The concept made excellent sense in theory, but real work on the ground using a self-help approach seemed impractical.

An average rural inhabitant had become accustomed to receiving grants and services from the government or other donors in various forms – be it a grant or subsidy for a 'pucca' brick house, a revenue-generating asset like a milch buffalo or a neighbourhood asset like a deep bore handpump. We could observe that a constant process of giving something for free to an impoverished population produced mindsets that created a dependency syndrome. Giving things for nothing produced a will to get more and discouraged the will to work for something. The notion of development itself had become distorted in the minds of people.

We could also see that the development approach and the attitude of the functionaries involved were responsible for this state of affairs. The job of a development worker had become reduced to distributing the 'cake' offered by the government and donors to people living below the poverty line. Everyone seemed busy finding ways of getting a share of that 'cake'. Development of local institutions, transparency, accountability, leadership, ownership, participation, sustainability, collective decision-making or even justice and empowerment were issues relegated to the background. These words seemed to have lost their relevance. Yet everyone was busy meeting targets and presenting achievements in prescribed formats.

Much of the money meant for the people was being gobbled up by the huge administrative machinery itself – directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly. A senior political leader of the era had formally acknowledged that only fifteen percent of the resources meant for the poor actually reached them. It was unfortunate that the notion of working for a cause was replaced by material pursuits, often ending up in mismanagement and waste.

The sector of development and social change, mostly considered to be a noble occupation, had fallen low in the eyes of many people. In fact, I often wondered whether it would be possible to achieve anything meaningful in such a development scenario. It was only the search for deeper answers and faith in the collective ability of people that enabled us to keep going.

Igniting the spark of self-help

Despite the challenges of such a working-environment, we went ahead with the idea of promoting self-help among the poorest section of the population. We thought that this was the only path that seemed sensible from the longer term perspective of meaningful social transformation, a path that enabled the poor to deal with their problems and that had the potential to restore dignity in their lives.

We started a process of open-ended, deep dialogue with people. Long discussions over several meetings would ignite sparks in the minds of some, but they would soon be extinguished by skeptics or by those who felt threatened by the involvement of an outsider. The initial attempts were like moving one step ahead then falling two steps behind. However, patience and persistence paid off and the human spirit among people triumphed. Many people believed that it was through self-help that they first tasted freedom in their lives. I recently recorded a conversation with a self-help group leader about the beginnings of the programme in his village in 1994:

> *'The first (self-help) group met for five to six months. Then people came to know that a group has been formed, and the big people started opposing it. They stopped renting out their land, stopped giving credit. When we started a school, they would send big boys to play gulli-danda (a local game) there so that we came under pressure to close down the school;… We never got full wages. If we worked for five days, they would give wages for three days only. Even the wage rate was Rs 15 only. When we started saving and formed some capital and started benefiting, then people stopped taking loan from them. Only then we got independence.' [from Vidyarthi and Wilson, 2008]*

Self-help was not just a concept for discussion. It was a practical tool for application in work and life after due reflection, individually and collectively. The collective commitment to the process was reflected by the willingness of members of a group to put in a monthly deposit. The pooled capital allowed the group to give loans to members having emergency needs. As the collective funds grew, members could take loans for various other needs in agriculture or trading.

At this stage, the apex bank in India allowed the commercial banks to lend to such groups after being convinced of their ability to manage their own money. With bank loans made available to such self help groups, the members could start small business enterprises. Such collective efforts quickly spread to several villages.

We realised, however, that such groups can easily run into problems. Though money had the power to bind people, it could also be the cause of disharmony and conflict in the absence of a proper management system.

Development of management systems: for the people, by the people

We were not amazed to find that handling of cash at group level is not a simple exercise. The person who kept the money always had a tendency to misuse it. Often people found that cash was not available at the time needed. The nearest bank branch was usually several kilometres away and the exercise of depositing and withdrawing small amounts from the bank was unthinkable.

In response to this problem, the concept of a cash box emerged. A small tin box with a latch, lock and key became central to the process. The locked box was kept by one member, the keys by another. The two came together only during meetings. The group could now match the cash in the box with the record of the transactions. This method ensured reliability and transparency in accounts. But who would keep the record of transactions? This problem was not easy to solve as most members were illiterate.

The simplest answer was, of course, that the promoters of the group, continue to write their accounts. However, this could not be a permanent solution. How long could an outside agency provide free services? The riddle had to be solved. We started working towards the system of a paid local accountant called 'Munim'. Most groups opposed the idea at start. After all, who wants to pay when free services are available? Besides, people thought that a local accountant would not be reliable. To resolve the issue, we had to go back to the basics of self-help. The message was clear:

A. It was their group. They must be bold enough to own up their responsibilities.
B. A transparent and effective accounts system was fundamental to growth and sustainability of the process.
C. The benefits of having proper accounts far outweigh the costs.
D. People must have faith in their own capacity to manage their affairs.

With some experimentation and persistence, the groups in our area of work understood. A well maintained accounts system in groups of illiterate people is now part of a phenomenon that people come to see from all parts of the state.

No management system is complete without inbuilt checks and controls. With such high levels of contradictions in society, collective decision-making by people was not free from conflicts, procedures were not free from risks of non-compliance, and relationships could be disturbed at the drop of a hat. The self-help groups ran into scores of problems created by outsiders and insiders alike.

Examples given above give only a small indication of early struggles in the promotion of self-management methods. Problems of non-compliance, non-recovery of dues,

mistakes in accounts, leadership struggles: these were some of the several challenges faced by self-help groups over time. Suffice it to say that such challenges are resolved using a systematic approach through dialogue and learning from the groups themselves. Learning in dialogue with the groups is the key to understanding methods of effective management and the success of self-help groups.

Values and leadership at local level

In a struggle for survival, several habits and prejudices develop among the poor. Early successes or failures can also encourage or discourage further progress.

To overcome these problems, leadership is critical. Inner strength and special qualities of leadership are vital in enabling a group to overcome the ordeals and difficulties in its path. At the same time, over-dependence on an individual and absence of vigilance around decision making procedures and the role of leaders can also create problems. Issues of leadership, therefore, constitute one of the biggest challenges of evolution and progress of self-help groups. We found that, in the initial stage, there was a need for regular guidance and coaching of members to take initiative and leadership roles. We did this through training and discussion about challenges they faced in their lives.

For example, whenever a discussion was facilitated on the subject of inner discipline among group members, the women members pointed towards excessive alcohol consumption and family violence by men. Other subjects like caste rivalry or the role of men in household affairs (usually a taboo subject) attracted considerable discussion in groups. We learned from such experiences that there was a need for constant reflection and debate on values and leadership.

Such debate helped in reducing the incidence of conflicts and often enabled a new leadership to emerge in tune with people's aspirations. It was, therefore, important to create space and moods for such collective reflection. We identified an all-religion prayer for the purpose and found that collective singing of the prayer was one of the most effective means of initiating deep discussions. The prayer helped in setting the mood, enabling people to settle in the meeting with a calm mind. This is essentially because singing together is a local tradition. In the international context, this can be replaced by meditation or quiet reflection. We find it amazing that the prayer, initiated by us in early nineties, has now spread to groups all over the state and is now called the 'self-help group prayer'.

Spreading Out

By the mid-nineties, the concept of self-help groups had started spreading and there was a demand for guidance and training on how it all worked. We knew that a simplistic knowledge-sharing approach to training would be inappropriate, especially for professionals accustomed to using a top-down approach of 'giving' and 'managing' solutions. There was a need for a different approach, one that could perhaps enable a person to rethink their way of working, thinking and living.

I remember some people who came to our institution with an arrogant attitude: they knew what social development and poverty alleviation is all about. Most of them had spent much of their professional lives in the social sector and we respected their knowledge. But we also felt that promotion of self-help is a human process that had little connection with knowledge per se. It was more about sharing a vision, about having faith in the capacity of people, even the poorest. We wanted to discuss the reality of poor people's lives, the truth behind the external façade of events and consequently the vision of development and social change.

This was usually an unnerving experience for many. The role-plays that we conducted at the start of a programme usually revealed a lack of depth in understanding and working methods. It was clear that sharing information on the outer dimension of group dynamics was inadequate without exploring the inner dimensions of participants' life and work. In our programme, we had to create a separate space for such reflection. As we did so, we realised again and again, that the human dimension is present in all of us. All one has to do is to create a conducive environment for it to emerge. The influences of the social environment around us, the prejudices we carry , the fast pace of life and its multitude dimensions and pressures bewilder even the most intelligent among us. If we are to be balanced, well-directed and effective in our work we must first learn to calm down, take time for quiet self-reflection and look within in order to connect with our essential self.

Some related observations by professionals serving the government:

> This programme has created an interest in knowing the feelings of the poor. Upto now, my approach was to complete the target somehow, as I believed that no group would work anyway. A fundamental change in my perspective is to do reflection every morning and have a feel for my faults.

> I had never thought about myself. After coming here I realised my responsibility towards my ownself, towards society and the country. It is true that my earlier notions were based on an arrogance that whatever I am doing is right. Not any more, I realise that I know so little. I can learn from an honest caring attitude towards one another.

Unfolding the inner dimension

Humility and learning

Humility is a pre-requisite for any genuine learning. A process of facilitation for meaningful social change begins with learning from the lives of people: learning about their circumstances, about their perspectives, about their capacities or incapacities and so on. An attitude of learning is also essential if we are to enter an effective dialogue with people. An equal and respectful sharing of experience is what dialogue is all about. This calls for humility and sensitivity in our approach.

Unfortunately, as professionals we are already labeled as 'experts' and so are expected to deliver knowledge and services 'successfully'. We are educated to be smart and aggressive for quick success, instead of being humble and patient. The two approaches appear to be contradictory. Not necessarily. We learned from our experience that being humane is more important than being smart.

We learned to recognize the fact that nobody can be changed. Besides change could be cosmetic and misleading. We could, instead, initiate a process of reflection. We learned that reflection was fundamental to the development of new perspectives and openness to learning.

The same persons who had earlier refused to believe that self-help was a valid approach in the current scenario of development, now acknowledged a need to learn from others – including the poor themselves. Several of these people later performed exceedingly well in the field and helped spread the concept to the far corners of the state. Participants in the process are clear about the benefits they experienced:

> *There has been a fundamental change in our way of thinking (Samskara) through prayer and reflection. We can create an environment of participation and end social evils for society's better future. Through introspection, self reflection and a sense of sacrifice we can now successfully communicate and coordinate different programmes of development. The transformation in us lies in being able to sit with the poor with a new thinking and share in their sorrows.*

> *The earlier negative thinking has completely changed. We have realised fully that with positive thinking and hard work, we are capable of doing everything. This will start a new chapter in my life. It will be possible to bring social change only after abandoning selfishness and consumptive nature.*

Collective reflection

Having organised collective reflection sessions on a regular basis for more than ten years now, I believe that this method is of immense value in enabling clarity of perspectives on life and work particularly in the context of social transformation. The process of reflection has already led to significant changes in the lives of thousands of people working for social development and poverty alleviation. The credit goes to them entirely for their willingness to honestly reflect on their lives and take decisive steps to mould their behaviour and action.

Why reflection?

Disturbed or confused minds can only create more disturbance or confusion at the community level. Social workers, teachers or trainers, development facilitators at various levels often have a strong desire to lead a purposeful life and be of use to the community.

Unfortunately, many do not understand how to fulfil these wishes. Many are immersed in routine problems that become more important than the real aims of their work. Many others feel threatened or made insecure by the pressure to perform or to comply with orders from above. In such a situation, the real work of enabling or motivating the less advantaged appears as an inconvenience. The real purpose of meaningful social transformation is lost.

Collective reflection helps participants to unwind and share their views in a peaceful reflective setting. Even if one does not speak much in such a setting, one is forced to think about the issues being discussed because they usually relate to the challenges being faced in one's own life and work. Comments by some, counter-comments by others, total disagreements or the sincere desire for learning about alternatives are common features in such a reflective process. This makes the process very involving, enjoyable and above all educative for everyone.

Collective reflection brings out dimensions of a subject that one has never thought of before. It helps one to discover or clarify short-term and long-term goals and priorities. As a result, it often leads to significant changes in perspectives and attitudes towards life and work. Taking part in the process can bring about dramatic changes in the working style and performance of social workers. For those taking part for the first time, collective reflection can come as a revelation, which they describe in passionate terms:

> *Our work was more like a burden earlier. After this programme, we feel that it is more like a moral responsibility. By doing so we shall be able to bring about real social development ... This programme has produced a lot of happiness and brought about a change in my thinking too.*

I now feel that the bureaucratic quality in me was wrong. As we are associated with development administration, we have to abandon this evil. We have to work with affection whatever be the area of work.

How? The method

Although the experiences described here have evolved from the Indian cultural context, the approach and usefulness are universal. Collective reflection has been used in international programmes, too. One can always modify the details according to the needs of a particular group of people.

The setting

We have always insisted on a residential programme, enabling participants to move away from routine responsibilities. A peaceful reflective setting is a must and there is a need to find appropriate ways of creating such a setting. However, as mentioned before, we find it useful to initiate a reflection session after some meditation or collective singing. The idea is to start with positive mindsets, free from anxieties that could cloud one's thinking and responses. Collective meditation helps in calming the thought waves in the mind. For many of us involved in busy and complex lives, our minds can otherwise be filled with an inefficient and unsettling buzz of clashing thoughts. Especially as we are dealing with subjects connecting to important challenges in life and work, calmness is an important prerequisite for effective action.

Introducing a subject

The facilitator must effectively introduce a subject and enable the participants to understand the deeper significance of the subject from varying perspectives of life. In this introduction, the facilitator could present his/her own perspective, faults discovered by the facilitator in his/her thinking, changes /evolution with honest reflection and experience. He/she could then open the discussion for others to respond from their perspective. The real challenge is to relate the subject to the circumstances of the participants in order to gain their attention and participation. The facilitator can take a strong stand if necessary, but must be willing to share his/her weaknesses or follies.

Facilitation

The facilitator should not be dominant and must be willing to act as an observer, intervening only when the discussion gets off track. He/she must be willing to summarise the ongoing discussions, put in guarded comments and throw in new challenges/issues to the group occasionally.

Caution

Collective reflection is not an exercise in making clever arguments to show off one's mettle. It is deep reflection on important issues or problems affecting life. The real benefits unfold when participants start speaking up and sharing their stories of success or failure. It is important for the facilitator to help everyone feel relaxed.

> *"I would like such a training to be imparted to all development officers. I learned a lot for my own self too and I have perhaps freed myself from alcohol, smoking and tobacco. This six days programme has brought earth to sky difference in my thinking. My mind and heart is now feeling relaxed. I feel like I am reborn."*

Living by values

Collective reflection throws up many challenges. Several participants pointed out in the past that it was not easy to stick to a life of principles. Challenges arose from all corners of life: family, friends, colleagues at work, almost everyone. The challenges arose due to the fact that the society followed certain norms of consumption and behavior. If one did not follow those norms, one was considered a fool. In fact, some participants argued that it is almost impossible to exist without following prescribed societal norms in different situations. Such norms could be quite regressive and even condemnable. The question often raised was: 'how does one tackle such a situation?'

Participants have often answered such questions themselves. Arguments have never helped. Instead practical alternatives have often been proposed by participants. In the following section I briefly present the learning from such presentations (summarized in Eight Steps) together with my own understanding relating to the subject of living by values.

The Principle of Yoga

Living by values begins with increasing consciousness and understanding about the source of one's thoughts and actions. As we develop an ability to watch these closely, we are able to note that many of our problems have their origins in our own shortcomings or weaknesses. We have to take decisive steps to overcome such weakness through increased control over the thought waves in our mind. This is the principle of Yoga.

Yoga is both a science and a universal philosophy that enables us to have better control over ourselves in all spheres of life. It helps us to come closer to our self. Material needs are important, but obsession with the same detracts us from reality and produces greater unhappiness instead. One can start with small steps for achieving better self-control and happiness.

Eight Steps

Some initial steps have been proposed in collective reflection sessions by development workers and professionals gathered at Manavodaya. Their value lies in their simplicity and the fact that they are based on reflection by individuals representing a wide cross-section of society: government officers, bank managers, NGO leaders, villagers, and international scholars. In that sense, they represent the aspirations of the concerned citizen to move towards a new social and economic order. These are

1. SELF REFLECTION
2. COLLECTIVE REFLECTION
3. SELF DISCIPLINE
4. SPEECH CONTROL
5. SHARING DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES
6. LOCAL PURCHASE
7. TIME SHARING
8. INCOME SHARING

Details can be seen on the Manavodaya website www.manavodaya.org

The importance of networks

Energy levels can be raised and a strong positive impact can be felt from an exercise in reflection, as seen from many comments above. The process can also lead to significant changes in the professional and personal lives of many people.

Some real life stories are described elsewhere (See Vidyarthi and Wilson, 2008). However, it is also true that there is a tendency for people to slip back to old ways of working over a period of time due to the constant pressure of circumstances. Some form of networking for regular sharing of information and energy is an important factor in staying on track.

The search for truth: initial learning

- Life presents challenges at every step. There is a larger context to every small decision we make from day to day, moment to moment. Every decision is important, as it affects our journey towards our goal. The search for the Truth is a continuing process.

- Setting the goal early enough is critical. We can continuously work and do a lot of things without knowing where we are going. My life's journey had many turns in the search for Truth. It was in the larger context of this search that innovations relating to self-help were conceived and made possible, despite adverse circumstances. The adverse circumstances only helped to refine the methods further.

- Self-help is a scientific method of empowerment of marginalized populations. It builds on a process of awareness raising through dialogue and evolution of group dynamics based on groups' own decisions and discipline.

- The self-help process must be based on methods of self-management, independent of the promoting agency. This must include simple and transparent accounting systems that are self-managed.

- A people's programme can falter anytime due to non compliance by members. The programme should include built-in checks and controls for taking care of irregularities.

- The problems faced by people are multi-dimensional and are often based on contradictions and conflicts within. Effective social intervention implies constant debate or discussion on beliefs and values. This also helps new leadership to emerge in tune with the aspirations of the people.

- In the context of social change, it is important for the development workers to realise that they are not the doers. They are only facilitators. The credit for any achievement goes to the people themselves. However, the quality and character of their facilitation will be reflected in the quality and character of the achievements of the people. In the villages where we worked, for example, the strength and fearlessness of my wife, Amla, was reflected in the strength and fearlessness of the people in overcoming their problems on innumerable occasions.

- A large number of professionals and workers are already engaged in assisting disadvantaged people in overcoming misery and hopelessness. It is essential to enable them to develop skills and attitudes that contribute to humility and willingness to learn from people. Our experience shows that this is possible and is often the basis for creativity and innovation.

- Attitudes cannot be changed directly. But one can create opportunities for deep collective reflection. Collective reflection is a useful method of enabling participants to break free from the shackles of prejudiced thinking and behavior. This is particularly important for social workers responsible for guiding the life of others.

- Yoga is a way of life based on increased self-control. One can easily get swayed by the distractions or pressures of life and being diverted in this way can lead to misery and unhappiness. Inner strength and control is fundamental to progress.

- One can start working towards such control through simple means outlined in the Eight Steps.

- Despite efforts to work on the inner dimension of life, there is a strong tendency to slip back to old ways of working. There is a need for some form of networking to prevent this happening.

Concluding remarks

Poverty, exclusion, drug addiction or disease are symptoms of imbalances creeping into our living system. The pressures of being 'successful' in accordance with the ever increasing consumption norms of society are creating increased tensions and behavioural problems at one end and abject poverty at the other. Social change is not about dealing with symptoms only. It is a process that must manifest into increased awareness and self control among people as well as a will to act collectively through democratic means for the benefit of humanity as a whole. This requires deep reflection and attention to both the inner and outer dimensions of change.

Quick fix approaches based on grants and subsidies are of short term nature having a face saving value needed by formal institutions of governance, and are hardly suitable for genuine long term well being . The self help approach described briefly here has a holistic perspective enabling communities to move towards all round and sustainable development. Though the method has evolved in the context of rural India, the basic approach of self help and self management has universal value that can be applied to any situation.

It is my firm belief, however, that true self help or true social change is not possible without touching on the inner dimension of change as reflected in our attitude towards work and life in general. This is an aspect that is usually overlooked in education, discussion and action relating to development and social change.

Working with communities can become a fairly mechanical exercise limited to following of well laid out instructions. Not only does this thwart creativity, it gradually leads to insensitivity and cynicism about the process itself. One works simply for sake of a livelihood. There is a need to enable the facilitating workers to go beyond and have a feel for the larger purpose. This is not possible without deeper reflection on goals, values, conflicts, challenges and alternatives. Here the dividing line between personal and professional life vanishes, one feels more relaxed and starts relooking at perspectives relating to all aspects of life.

The inner and outer dimensions of change are like two sides of the same coin. By focusing on one and ignoring the other, we are restricting our understanding of true and meaningful social development. As we start working on both, we come closer to Truth and life becomes more enjoyable for everyone.