

DEVELOPMENT AS CONSCIENTIZATION

The Case of Nijera Kori in Bangladesh

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Foreword

1. This is a study of the relative socio-economic impact of conscientization work by an NGO – Nijera Kori - with socially and economically very depressed people in rural Bangladesh . Nijera Kori (NJ) has shunned conventional top-down ‘delivery’-oriented development work of the general run of NGOs in the country and has concentrated on raising awareness of disadvantaged economic assetless people on their rights and on ways of society and the world. Conscientization has been conceived as right-based education on social, political and economic injustices and related questions, including stimulating actions against such oppression as part of such education.
2. The study investigates what conscientization work alone can do to both the economic and social status as well as to the overall personality of oppressed and disadvantaged people. Promotion of all these is viewed as integral components of ‘development’. The development philosophy with which the authors have approached this investigation is liberation of the human potentials of oppressed people, joining in the ongoing challenge to conventional economic development philosophy. Conscientization or liberational education is seen by the authors as the key to promoting such development.
3. In view of its many ramifications the notion of liberational education/development may not be fully captured in one formal definition. The study contains a rich discussion of the many facets of the liberational view of development, of conscientization, of freedom, and of human development as a deeper notion than captured in the Human Development Index. These articulations should be of value in discourses on this philosophy. The study also shares the holistic view of ‘poverty’ and ‘poverty alleviation’ in terms of comprehensive human urges and aspirations,

opposing the conventional economic, 'dollar-a-day' kind of view of poverty that reduces downtrodden people to the category of livestock useful to others in the society mainly for their cheap labour.¹

4. With this philosophical perspective the authors have sought to put to rigorous empirical test the conscientization work of NK, perhaps initiating such exercise for the first time in development research on a major scale to mark a welcome beginning of scientific exploration of the subject rather than merely taking inspiration from this philosophy. In this sense the study can claim to be a path-breaker, and a major contribution to promoting the debate on a scientific level between the economic and humanistic views of development.

5. The methodology of the inquiry has rested predominantly on the participatory approach, combining approaches both of the PRA (Participatory Research Appraisal) and PAR (Participatory Action Research or "gonogobeshona" as it is being called by the oppressed in Bangladesh involved in such collective self-inquiry elsewhere²) varieties. In total respect for the right and ability of the concerned people themselves to articulate their own needs and goals as full subjects, the study has followed participatory procedures in total purity for them alone (involving also non-NK members of the landless in some of the final stages) to arrive at their own indicators to assess what conscientisation has done to them. A highlight of the methodology of the study, this example of returning to the people the right to assess their own development with their own collectively chosen indicators however poverty-stricken they are, stands out as of seminal quality and frontally challenges external indicator-setting by development professionals and international development-financing institutions. Participation in such exercise, which has been lengthy and vigorous, constitutes an integral part of the very *praxis* - rhythm of reflection-action-reflection - of conscientization, taking such praxis to a higher level to search for how one would seek to assess one's own attainments and develop intellectually in that process. This is also a very important development action by itself by way of directly raising awareness of disadvantaged people in such process. It also demonstrates the ability of the people, however poverty-stricken and formally 'illiterate' they may be, to themselves articulate their own needs and urges for knowledge that is of value in promoting their own lives as well as to fulfill their *human urge to know*.

6. Another very important revelation of the participatory indicator-setting process in the study is demonstration of the ability of economically and socially deprived people not only to think deep, but also *to arrive at democratic consensus* on complex questions of social and political governance. That they do possess this ability notwithstanding their economic and social condition deserves to be highlighted in view of the sadly barbaric culture of national politics in the country. The obvious illiteracy of the country's political elite and their 'educated' followers as to procedures of democratic discourse in the national parliament and outside that is tearing the country apart is calling into question the received notion of 'capability' assumed to develop through formal education. The demonstration in the study of the superior culture of democratic decision making of the disadvantaged people signifies that something basic is being missed in conceptualizing development primarily in economic and formal 'capability' terms, and that conscientisation of an appropriate variety is direly needed at the level of the political elite of the nation as well.

7. As poet-philosopher Tagore said, *the essence of civilization is in uniting people*. 'Development' that tears a society apart is, fundamentally, an uncivilized process, and hence constitutes, in this sense, negative development. We have by now seen two major examples, involving first Pakistan and then Bangladesh, of the disastrous consequence on national scales of such negative development notwithstanding conventional development indicators giving a more rosy picture – one when the nation of Pakistan disintegrated at the very height of its “decade of development” celebrations in which foreign development establishments had also joined, and the other the events preceding January 11 in Bangladesh when this nation was brought back from the brink of another great disaster even though its pace of 'development' was being considered by conventional development pundits at home and abroad to be accelerating impressively. One hopes that this study will add significantly to drawing attention and stimulating rethinking as to what is it that we are after in the name of 'development'.

8. As the work of Nijera Kori shows, the principle of becoming self-aware does not deny the role of outsiders who come with a hand not of patronizing compassion or pretence of superiority but of genuine comradeship. Extrapolation of this principle of relation with outsiders at the level of relation between nation states is immediate. A nation may not be said to be developing unless its leadership that represents the nation is also

conscientized to seek and assert the nation's self-determination, in a truly democratic framework and culture, accepting for consideration knowledge being developed elsewhere in the world but opposing external domination. In this sense Nijera Kori provides us, as this study establishes, with a grassroots demonstration of the working of a philosophy of development that has claims for application at the national level as well including international development cooperation.

9. The result of this unique empirical inquiry has been to demonstrate impressive rise through conscientization in awareness of the concerned groups on their economic, social, gender and legal rights; on fundamentalist views on women, state and religion, religion-based politics and madrasah education; and on selected aspects of national and world affairs. Such rise in awareness is directly giving these disadvantaged and oppressed people a sense of self-esteem and fulfillment that is human development by itself. In turn their heightened overall awareness has impacted very positively on the pace of progress not only in their social status but also in their economic status together giving them an overall higher sense of well-being, comparing favourably with progress in such fronts of non-NK landless groups. The economic gains have happened not only through better access of the NK groups to public services and public resources including *khas* (government-owned) land but also through better management of their own economies including handling of credit from other NGOs as well as initiation of numerous kinds of collective economic and mutual-distress-support activities by the NK groups. In view of the recent international fanfare on the operation of micro-credit of the money-lending-business variety to disadvantaged people in the country and elsewhere the many thousands of self-managed savings-and-loan schemes of the NK groups with hardly any overhead costs and with many humane features easily stand out as a challengingly superior alternative to external micro-credit for the disadvantaged. These positive economic effects have happened even though promoting their economic development has not been a direct objective of Nijera Kori.

10. Together, these findings of the study convincingly demonstrate the effectiveness of conscientization in advancing people's overall lives both economically and socially, including greater empowerment of women and their mobility, their access to public services, the overall well-being status of these people and their total human personality. The exercise also demonstrates in its wake the paramount importance of promoting *as a*

precondition of their development social knowledge of disadvantaged people, as distinct from formal literacy and job-oriented technical education being emphasized in the “capability” theory of modern development discourse. Gaps in achievements in terms of the various indicators exist in absolute terms that the study has pointed out as a constructive guide to the directions in which NK could further improve its conscientization work.

11. In thus demonstrating the overall effectiveness of Nijera Kori’s work, the study puts NK in the frontline among – yes - *development NGOs* in the country contributing to development of the oppressed in a holistic sense including their economic development. And, although not investigated in this study, it is presumed, by the modest life and official field-travel styles of Nijera Kori’s staff, that the overhead costs of this NGO should compare favourably with those of the major delivery-oriented development NGOs in the country. Taking all together, there is a message in this study and for that matter in the work of Nijera Kori worthy of the deepest reflection in development thinking.

12. In conclusion, some reflections may be offered on the directions in which further thinking and research work along these lines may be directed. First, on a note that is deeper than its semantic garb, we all need to watch our words. There is evidence that the oppressed, whatever be their economic condition, resent being called “poor” unless they have been overwhelmed by the ‘gaze’ of the ‘rich’ to internalize this derogatory/patronizing term. On this there are two experiences worth repeating many times over: one is that of *tepitans*, an indigenous community in Mexico, who were self-mobilized to stand up after being ravaged by a devastating earthquake, when a visiting scholar remarked that they were still so “poor”, and to this the *tepitans* immediately stiffened, to say “*we are not poor, we are tepitans!*”³ The other is a personal experience of mine with a village blacksmith involved in a mobilization for collective self-development of his community in the province of Matabeleland in Zimbabwe, who *thanked me for telling them that they were not “poor”!*⁴ When shall we ourselves say to the world: “we are not a poor nation, we are Bangalees, showing the world what we can do under the greatest adversities”? And aren’t our frequently flood-and-cyclone-ravaged people showing precisely this?

13. And also, if we “target” someone no matter how great a friend of him/her we profess to be, we are shooting something vital in the person.

Words have a power of their own irrespective of whether they come from a friend or an oppressor, and we should constantly be on our guard and search for words that complement and strengthen, not hinder, attempts otherwise at empowerment and liberation. And let us also pause to ask if words like “poor” and “target group” are not in the category of “banking concepts” that Paulo Freire so categorically rejected. Old man Marx, the Father of liberational philosophy, never called the working class “poor” – he wanted the revolution so that the working class could “create its own history”. In the process of thus creating its own history the problem of its material poverty would naturally start getting solved to the extent that the working class would consider it a problem; but much of it would still remain in the lifetimes of many of them. The failure to overcome their material poverty in the lifetime of all of them would not take away the glory from them for creating their own history for the world to be dazzled and to say “what a people it was that lived!” Just think of Bangladesh’s, and for that matter any people’s, independence struggle through which so many have departed so early in their lives, but living ever so gloriously by contributing to making the nation’s history! Isn’t this the essence of liberational philosophy, to empower people to ‘lose themselves’ in search for fulfillment of their humanhood?

14. Secondly, the methodology of the study, pioneering as it is, has been rightly presented as “exploratory” in nature, inviting thereby refinements on it. One important direction for refinement could be to present external views as well to the people to design their indicators for assessing the impact of conscientization (or for that matter indicator-setting for any other kind of assessment) - the concept of rights should also include the right to know others’ views for consideration by the oppressed people without surrendering their absolute right to self-determination. The whole world of human knowledge and thinking should be available to the oppressed people to consider, by way of right to information as well as ideas. In fact, the ability to consider outside views without being overwhelmed by them may be considered as an ultimate test of the quality and fullest success of conscientization itself.

15. This brings us, finally, to the much larger question of social transformation of the radical variety to which the philosophy of conscientization belongs. What this study has achieved, besides contributing significantly to the ongoing challenge to received notions of development and poverty, is to implicitly join in the questioning of the ‘vanguardist’

variety of radical thinking for social change as well as on the given view of the 'revolution' as change in the *relations of production* only without concern for the *relations of knowledge* in society. The importance of changing the *relations of knowledge* also for true liberation of the oppressed, as it is being emphasized in the discourses of "participatory action research", is implicit in the philosophy of conscientization.⁵ The failure in the last century of experiments in revolutionary social transformation has left a great void in radical thinking at least in Bangladesh, that seems even now to be unable to formally dispense with the notion that 'intellectuals' know better than the ordinary people. Gramsci, as referred to in this study, has given us a lead to move away from such false and paternalist notion, asserting that all persons are intellectuals, and has outlined also the concept of "organic intellectuals" who specially articulate in various ways working class experience and knowledge. Conscientization and other kinds of participatory people's self-inquiry processes are a very effective way through which such organic intellectuals can be discovered. Some of them may also be assisted to develop further into social leaders of their class on a wider scale. Such organic intellectuals are undoubtedly emerging in Nijera Kori's work as well. I wish that Nijera Kori, to which much tribute is due for its courageous and committed work in conscientization as a lonely endeavour in the country, will take it upon itself to help as a systematic task the development of this *genre* of leaders from within the landless communities it is working with. The test of lasting success of its conscientization work, I suggest, is whether as the 'mother agency' it may itself become progressively dispensable to its grassroots partners leaving them to "create their own history" led by their own organic intellectuals directly accountable to them. As this starts happening NK itself may progressively move out to newer areas for spreading conscientization, visiting the older areas occasionally to touch and be fulfilled in what one has thus created. Thus only, by demonstrating concretely through conscientization work the ability of the oppressed to themselves create their own history, may the great void in liberational thinking in the country be stirred up to create a new liberational vision that more souls than today's might find fulfilling to struggle for. And it may also be remembered that the key to continuation of NK itself as an NGO is not in its own hands, so that continued dependence of its grassroots partners on its helping hand contains its own risks.

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¹ As discussed in Rahman (2004). "Globalization: The Emerging New Ideology in the Popular Protests and Grassroots Action Research". *Action Research* 2.1. March.

² As in the animation work of the Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) and of the Hunger Project being undertaken in collaboration with RIB.

³ Sachs, Wolfgang (1990). *On the archeology of the development idea*". Paper presented at the Christophe Eckenstein Seminar "Towards the Post Development Age". Geneva, Switzerland, 5-9 March 1990.

⁴ The full account of this experience has been presented in Rahman, M.A. (2007). *Through Moments in History, Memoirs of Two Decades of Intellectual and Social Life (1970-1990)*. Pathak Samabesh. Dhaka. pp 244-45.

⁵ For a discussion of the philosophies of conscientization and participatory action research together see Lykes, M. Brinton & Amelia Mallona (2007) "Towards transformational liberation:: Participatory and action research and praxis". Reason, Peter and Hilary Bradbury (eds). *Handbook of Action Research* 2nd edition. Sage Publication. London.