

Available online at: <http://www.iimb.ernet.in/iimb/html/man-review-article-01.jsp?aid=489&isvol=19&issueno=1&monyr=March,%202007>

Volume 19, Number 1, March 2007

Article by Smita Premchander and V Prameela

*Organizing for Social Change: A Dialectic Journey of Theory and Praxis* : By Michael J Papa, Arvind Singhal and Wendy H Papa, 2006, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp 297, Price: Rs 36 :

Developmental change theories which propound change from below are largely informed by the work of Freire<sup>1</sup>, who first advocated a shift from the 'banking' perspective of education (which deposits information and attitudes that it will reap later) to a more 'conscientising' approach, whereby the poor learn to think, question and challenge existing systems of oppression, and begin to articulate the contours of an alternative system. Over the past three decades, a lot of literature has developed on involving the poor in finding their own voice. This spans participatory techniques<sup>2</sup>, which help the poor to articulate their needs and opinions, and practical efforts to help them actively participate in development. The latter includes measures like organisation building<sup>3</sup> and political participation of those who are socially excluded.

Even as there is recognition that development processes are by no means linear, much development planning by external agents assumes linearity, resulting in schemes that provide one-time grants, or short projects with two to three year time schedules. In this scenario, this book is a welcome addition, as it brings out the dialectical dimension of development: one that is full of contradictions, pulls and counter-pulls, thesis and anti-thesis. The book balances theory with practice, cites several examples establishing the non-linearity of development processes, and discusses how the same processes can pull in opposite directions, creating binding at the same time as freedom.

The discussion is drawn on the basis of an in-depth analysis of four experiences: Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, the empowerment of women dairy farmers in India, the impact of on-air-entertainment/education broadcasts in India, and the processes of participation in community suppliers in Appalachia (USA). The cases cover different institutional forms, a bank, cooperatives, media and NGOs, and together the analysis of dialectical tensions informs the process of organising for social change. The methodology of each of the research projects is qualitative, using rich, nuanced narratives, wherein contradictions are used to enhance and deepen understanding of phenomena rather than being treated as anomalies. Each of the topics is discussed with practical examples interspersed with the discourse on the issue, as well as a wide range of other examples external to the case study.

The book describes organising for social change as 'the process by which a group of individuals orchestrate their skills, resources, and human potential to gain control of their future' (p 31), and perceives it as an empowering and transformative process, wherein both means and ends are considered equally important. The central idea of the book is that 'a bit of empowerment in one sphere may lead to oppression in another sphere. Dialectic struggles between competing opposites are fundamental in organising for social change processes' (p 39).

Dialectics have then been conceptualised as a combination of four elements:

- Contradiction: the coexistence of opposing forces
- Motion: activities, movement or changes that occur along with people's actions

- Totality: the interconnection and reciprocity of individual, interpersonal and social factors
- Praxis: prioritising the human being as a communicator and producer, and the product of choices made within a given external context.

In organising the discussion on dialectics, the authors have spelt out four dialectic tensions, and exemplified each using one of the case studies in the book.

The first case study elaborates on the tension between control and emancipation. Examples of behaviour of both Grameen staff and the women borrowers show how discipline and control gets internalised, through a redefined identity as 'Grameen staff' or 'Grameen borrowers', which then acts to create collective processes of emancipation, and ensures collective access to credit. Yet, it also incites behaviour that can lead to individually harmful effects, like extreme social pressure for work or for loan repayments, which, ironically, is not admitted explicitly by any of the Grameen staff. The book rightly critiques an internalisation of discipline to the extent where the line between cooperation and exploitation gets blurred.

The dialectic between oppression and empowerment is perceived as the action of a person, or the effect of a plan, which may empower at the same time as it oppresses. The cooperative dairy movement exhibits processes of collective organisation of people to benefit from a business, yet the movement has failed to give due recognition to women, who perform over 80% of the dairy related tasks. Women's inclusion, representation and empowerment in dairy cooperatives has needed to be supported externally, and faces resistance from the patriarchal attitudes and structures that permeate the system. The gender dimension of women's acceptance of their own oppression, internalised through their self-perception as care-givers, and meanings women assign to their actions, is particularly well-elaborated in the book.

The third dialectic, between dissemination and dialogue, is highlighted through the analysis of the broadcast of a radio programme called 'Tinka Tinka Sukh' and 'Taru', wherein the audience begin to identify and emulate the characters in the programmes, and are motivated to bring about social change through personal action in their own lives and communities. The case study of dissemination – how pro-social messages are transferred into local dialogues and action – is atypical because it was accompanied by on-the-ground activities that helped listener's clubs to be formed and to take action.

Community suppers, which are a popular means of community support to the homeless in USA, involve volunteers cooking a meal and sharing it with the latter, with the poor (beneficiaries) sometimes participating in preparation or laying out of the meal and accompanying tasks. Rituals like saying grace or common work may create unity, while at the same time providing space for individuals to preserve their isolation and distance, share the meal but communicate little or not at all. The feature of communication of mutual support comes through strongly as an important motivation for change, and the processes exemplify the fourth dialectic of fragmentation and unity.

The authors view the four dialectics as united by the meta-dialectic of stability and change, with control, oppression, dissemination and fragmentation signifying forces of permanence, and emancipation, empowerment, dialogue and unity signifying the opposing pole of communicative action that contribute to bringing about social change.

An important feature of the book is the incorporation of principles of self-reflexivity, wherein the authors have not only detailed the field research methodologies but also their own theoretical beliefs, and acknowledged the relationship between the two. It has a multi-disciplinary character and is relevant for community organisers, NGOs, other civil society organisations, governments and donor agencies. The book makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of dialectics in development, establishing how

contradictions and contrary pulls and forces are not only normal but also necessary and beneficial in a bottom-up-people-centred development process.

#### References

1. Freire, Paulo, 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
2. Chambers, R, 1986, *Whose Realities Count? Putting the Last First*, Harlow: Longman; Mayoux, Linda, 1997, 'Impact Assessment and Women's Empowerment in Micro-Finance Programmes: Issues for a Participatory Action and Learning Approach', Background paper Submitted to CGAP Virtual Meeting on Impact Assessment Methodologies in Micro-Finance Programmes.
3. ILO, 2002, 'Conclusions on Decent Work and the Informal Economy', Report of the Committee on the Informal Economy, International Labour Conference, 90th Session, Geneva: ILO; Premchander, Smita (forthcoming), 'The Importance of Organisation Building in the Informal Economy – An ILO Perspective', Geneva: ILO.

Reprint No