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POWER, POVERTY, AND KNOWLEDGE – REFLECTING ON 50 YEARS OF LEARNING WITH ROBERT CHAMBERS

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‘Oh what a goodly outside falsehood hath’ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

THE CONTEXT

Accelerating Change

In all history there has never been a period as dramatic for the scale and scope of unexpected changes in the human condition as the late 1980s and early 1990s. Among the less obvious of these changes have been those in the realities of rural life and conditions in the South. But changes there also appear to be accelerating. The revolution in communications is increasingly touching rural people: in some parts of the South, not just radios, but television and videos are to be found in villages. In some economies, urban-style consumer goods are more and more demanded and available. In others, war, civil disorder, drought and famine have driven people dramatically down into destitution. Almost everywhere, in different ways, and in different directions, change — often rapid, often unpredictable — seems increasingly the norm.

At the same time, though slower, less striking and less obvious, there have been steady shifts of view of the ends and means of development and of the role of the State. Three clusters of view can be distinguished (Chambers 1991): neo-Fabian, neo-Liberal, and third, an ideology of reversals of the normal. The neo-Fabian ideology, which gave the State a major direct role in development, is a survival from the 1970s and earlier; the neo-Liberal is a creature of the 1980s; and the third ideology has been evolving and coalescing over a long period, but gaining support and coherence in the 1980s. The normative thrusts and themes of this third ideology or paradigm include:

- putting people before things, and poor people first;
- development through learning process rather than blueprint;
- decentralization, democracy, and diversity (to value local knowledge, participation and small group and community action);
- open and effective communications and access.

What is especially new is the value placed on adaptive and iterative rather than linear processes, on learning and changing rather than implementing a set plan, on differentness, on empowering local groups, and on demand from below.

Normal Professionalism and Bureaucracy

While these ideas gain currency especially among intellectuals and non-government organizations (NGOs), two inert masses maintain the status quo, and insulate decision-making elites from the changing rural realities.

The first is normal professionalism — the ideas, thinking, methods and behaviour dominant in professions. Normal professionalism reproduces itself through hierarchical learning, university curricula and examinations, textbooks written by middle-aged academics, mostly men, professional societies, journal editors, and the traditions and rewards of government departments into which graduates pass after university and college. It values things more than people, numbers more than judgements, high technology more than low, and whatever is urban, industrial, clean and hard more than whatever is rural, agricultural, dirty and soft.

The second is normal bureaucracy, meaning the characteristics of large, especially government, organizations. Normal bureaucracy reproduces itself in the Weberian idiom as professionals climb the ladders of hierarchy by conforming to convention, avoiding error and abjuring innovation. Normal bureaucracy values central authority, control, standardization, regularity, conformity, and quantitative targets.

Normal professionalism and normal bureaucracy are antithetical to the new views of development. In the State, they combine to resist the new paradigm. Among rural development professionals, though, some changes are slowly occurring. These are reflected in the burgeoning literature on local knowledge (also described as indigenous technical knowledge, indigenous agricultural knowledge, rural people’s knowledge . . .), on development alternatives, on the NGO sector, on gender, on the environment, and on people’s participation.

In contrast, normal government development bureaucracy appears resiliently static, robustly buffered against change. Yet major changes are implied by and required for the new approaches to development. The challenge with such bureaucracy is to find points of

leverage for change. The search for means of bureaucratic reorientation is not a new enterprise (see e.g. Korten and Alfonso 1981). But two aspects of bureaucracy have been relatively neglected: standardization, and false feedback. In search of explanation and prescription, this paper analyses these in some of their manifestations, drawing examples from Indian field bureaucracy.

Administrative Stasis

Indian field bureaucracy does change in the programmes which it carries out. The steady flow of books by retired administrators about rural development in India during their lifetimes makes this clear. In devising and promulgating programmes there has been imagination and inventiveness. Special programme has followed special programme — for different types of disadvantaged district, for different types of disadvantaged person, for the development of water and wastelands, for social forestry, seasonal employment, credit, productive assets for the poor, midday meals for school children, housing for vulnerable groups, adult literacy, and much else.

At the same time Indian field bureaucracy changes little in its structure and norms. These reproduce themselves. Innovations are absorbed and transformed with reversion to type. The same District Administration headed by a Collector or Magistrate, and with a hierarchy of Block Development Officers and lower staff, implements many of the programmes. Planning is top-down. Ideas are conceived in Delhi or in the State capitals and promulgated as instructions with funds to be disbursed and targets to be achieved. Districts and Blocks are told what to do. Whatever the programme, the style is the same, or becomes the same. One programme, DW CRA, for women's employment, was initiated in the early 1980s with a planning workshop in Delhi. It was agreed unanimously that no targets should be set; but within a year targets were there. It is as though there is a top-down magnetic field in which individual magnets cannot be turned around. The central conception is standardized and transmitted through the field for peripheral implementation, with targets set at each level. What is to be done can change; but how it is to be done is determined by a dutiful homeostasis.

The stable continuity of Indian administration, can be partly understood in terms of three pervasive aspects: culture, conservatism and corruption. Cultural dimensions appear significant. Hierarchy is a deep structure in Indian culture, thought and behaviour. Linked with this, the Hindu concept of dharma, or 'duty', is a strong force. Stanley Heginbotham's observations 15 years ago still apply, notably at the lower levels of administration:

... the dharmic tradition provides its adherents with

a set of norms relating to work that differ in many important ways from the norms of a growth-and change-oriented society. It does not prepare an individual for situations of work overload. The concept of setting priorities is a foreign one, as is the notion of calculating costs and benefits in order to determine optimal work strategies. One does not strive to achieve results, nor does one feel concern if the performance of one's duty produces what appear to be undesired consequences. One keeps to established procedures and standards — neither seeking innovations nor quality of work that exceeds the traditional system-maintaining norms.

(Heginbotham 1975: 34)

Hierarchy and the dharmic tradition reinforce the second aspect, the conservatism found at the lower levels of most bureaucracies. A preference is shown for behaviour which is correct and approved. Rules and procedures may be bent or used in ways not intended, but the outward form is respected, giving a sort of liturgical pleasure to those who master its sequences and observances, even when it is exploited for private rents. Procedures tend to be additive: new ones are superimposed upon old. Rules and lists tend to be for ever, reproduced more or less faithfully, unless there is strong reason to change them; and when there is reason to change, adding and patching are preferred to abolition or restructuring.

The third factor is corruption. This includes informal fees, division of spoils, and the transfer trade. Informal fees for services rendered vary by region but are sometimes almost formal — with a well known and well understood fee for obtaining a form, registering a land title, and so on. Division of spoils from kickbacks reportedly follows well established 'bureaucratic' norms, with set percentages from contracts and other illicit monies which are distributed as rents to different officers, especially at the lower levels. At higher levels, as analysed by Wade (1984) and corroborated by articles in the press, the transfer trade is widespread. Officials buy posts from the politicians who control them. Partly in consequence, the frequency of transfer from post to post 'is typically so high as to make difficult any engagement between the official and his particular responsibilities' (*ibid*). There are officers who courageously stand out against this system. But generally, in these circumstances, there is little incentive or opportunity for an official to institute reforms. Indeed, where they do so, a penal posting can be the prompt reward: Arun Bhatia, the Collector of Dhule District in Maharashtra who exposed corruption in the Employment Guarantee Scheme was quickly given the opportunity to exercise his talents as officer in charge of the Maharashtra Government's filing system. The transfer trade is a slipping clutch in development, oiled by money and preventing engagement and effective drive.

The effects are conservative. Lower-level staff have a strong financial stake in the status quo. An analysis of who would gain and who lose from reforms in groundwater exploitation and in forestry has suggested that almost any reform would reduce their incomes (Chambers, Saxena and Shah 1989: 232). For their part, middle-level and senior officers involved in the transfer trade need to recover the outlays and redeem the commitments made to obtain their posts, and to make a profit. If they threaten vested interests, or stay outside the system, they are vulnerable to transfer to penal postings or backwaters. The incentives and disincentives of the system make it a model of sustainability.

Fordism: the 'Model T' Mode

Culture, conservatism and corruption reinforce the top-down tendencies found also in other field bureaucracies. Hierarchical culture resonates with normal bureaucratic culture. Conservatism maintains central authority. Corruption presents incentives for rules which inconvenience the public and create leverage for rent-seeking officials. There are then cultural, procedural and personal reasons for centralized insensitivity.

This permits another phenomenon, the promotion of standardized development packages. This has been described as 'Fordist'. The term 'Fordist' refers to mass batch production as an industrial process associated with Henry Ford the First, and epitomized in his supposed remark that Americans could have their Model T Ford any colour they liked as long as it was black. Bureaucratic, top-down development is similarly standardized and driven by supply. A Fordist or 'Model T' approach has been common in Indian rural development: in the early green revolution in Northwest India you could, as it were, plant any wheat you liked as long as it was the new HYV Sonora; in social forestry, at one time, you could plant any tree you liked as long as it was eucalyptus; in parts of the Gangetic plains you could have any public tubewell you liked as long as it was a World Bank tubewell.

To understand this 'Model T' phenomenon better, let us examine four other examples of Indian rural development programmes: the Training and Visit (T and V) system of agricultural extension; the **warabandi** system of water distribution on canal irrigation; watershed development; and the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).

First, the Training and Visit system represented an attempt at bold and radical change. Earlier, agricultural extension was undertaken by Village Level Workers (VLWs) responsible not only to the Department or Ministry of Agriculture, but also to other departments.

VLWs were often expected to implement an impossible number and variety of programmes. They were overwhelmed and buried under geological layers of instructions from different masters. Reporting requirements alone took much of their time. T and V was a management system (Benor and Harrison 1977; Benor et al 1984) which sought to make them responsible only for agriculture and only to one department, to programme their work so that their supervisors would know each day where they were and what they were doing, and to institute regular meetings and training. They were to propagate and popularize appropriate packages of practices through contact farmers, who would be in touch with other non-contact farmers.

T and V was introduced in most Indian states. Much evidence suggested that the reality was far from the theory (see e.g. Moore 1984, 1986; Howell 1988). Common weaknesses were that extension staff in practice often continued to have many responsibilities; that good extension recommendations were often not available from research; and that standard packages were not sensible for the diverse and difficult conditions of much Indian farming. By the late 1980s promotion had given way to post-mortem as the dominant style of discussions of T and V, which was more and more spoken of in the past tense.

The second example is the **warabandi** system of canal irrigation water distribution. This entails timed turns for farmers to take water (for a fuller account see Chambers 1988a: 92-99). **Warabandi** is successfully practised in Northwest India where four conditions are met: water is scarce and rainfall low; landholdings are consolidated with clear ownership; channels lead to individual fields; and a constant flow can physically be assured through the outlet which supplies a group of farmers. In these conditions, farmers will accept timed turns proportional to their land, and will irrigate at night. These conditions are, however, rare in India outside the Northwest. But this did not deter the Seventh Five Year Plan from setting a target of 8 million hectares to be brought under new warabandi during the plan period (GOI 1985: 96).

Attempts were dutifully made to introduce the **warabandi** blueprint rapidly into widely differing environments. But since the necessary preconditions rarely existed, the outcome was almost universal failure. Boards giving names and times for taking water were erected on canals; but they were a facade. Almost everywhere, farmers ignored them. They can be found standing there still, relics for future bureaucratic archeologists, with rust and fading paint giving the lie to official fantasy.

Watershed management provides a third case of top-down standardization. Mounting concerns about deforestation, erosion, siltation, the drying up of springs, and other forms of environmental degradation led in the 1980s to a strong drive for watershed development and management. In at least 40 pilot watersheds, treatments were undertaken, leading to scaling up and a momentum for much larger programmes, some with World Bank support. In the scaled up programmes, if not in the pilot projects, treatments were standardized. Professionally, the approach was that of engineers. Works were of set designs, and often constructed in the field without regard for local topography, let alone farmers' knowledge, technology or wishes. Physical and disbursement targets were set, and despite a rhetoric of participation, implementation was top-down.

An example is the Maheshwaram watershed near Hyderabad. There the uniform treatments changed over the years, but not the style. Contour earth bunds were standard at first, but then varied and replaced by vegetative bunds of khus grass (*Vetiveria zizanioides*), a technology promoted with enthusiastic World Bank support over large and diverse areas of India, and indeed of the world. A special study of the Maheshwaram programme (Sitapathi Rao et al 1989) found many shortcomings, and stated that:

... what is being done as part of soil and water conservation activity ... appears to be execution of these measures as per a set pattern, to achieve the target coverage. The anxiety of the field staff could be seen in their efforts to achieve the targets, as this is the only point of discussion in the monthly and quarterly review. The scope for any initiative at the field level to observe and modify the activities is very much restricted because of the regimented approach.

(*ibid*: 59)

The study also found lack of consultation and participation, ploughing in of bunds by dissatisfied farmers who never wanted them in the first place, erosion actually resulting from anti-erosion bunds, and cause for doubt about the universal efficacy of khus grass. Nevertheless, the Government proceeded with plans for massive expansion of watershed programmes during the following (Eighth) Plan period.

The fourth example is the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). This vast programme seeks through subsidized credit to provide families who are below the poverty line with income-earning assets which will enable them to move above the poverty line. Each administrative Block has had an annual target of 600 households to receive loans and assets. This target presents a considerable administrative strain. Lists are meant to be drawn up of households below the poverty line, and enterprises identified for them to undertake.

These, one might expect, would have to be quite varied in any environment, in order to exploit different economic niches. But in practice, the programme has tended to standardize, which makes it less demanding administratively and easier to routinize corruption. In consequence, certain enterprises have been over-subscribed. Milch buffaloes have been the most common, although in several respects (lumpiness, risk, fodder requirements, dry periods with no income) they are unsuitable for very poor people. In a village of 143 households in Uttar Pradesh, the pattern was different: of 26 IRDP loans, 12 were issued for 'shop-keeping', and another eight were issued by the same bank for the same purpose over the same period. Only four of the IRDP recipients had a 'shop' of any sort, and there was no scope for 20 shops in such a small village (pers comm Jean Dreze).

Detailed village-level studies in a social anthropological mode (summarized in Dreze 1990) have shown the IRDP to have been, in most parts of India (the exception being West Bengal), an unusually bad programme. Corruption has been almost universal; the beneficiaries have often been the better off; and poor people have quite often become poorer as a result of loans and loss of assets or failure of enterprises. Yet the IDRP remains the major thrust of the Government's anti-poverty programme.

In these four domains — agricultural extension, the distribution of canal irrigation water, watershed development, and the IRDP — the analogy between 'Model T' batch production and rural development packages holds quite well on the supply side, of what the factory or the bureaucracy provide. But the analogy breaks down on the side of the customer, client or beneficiary. To survive, a factory must produce what people will buy: the market is the discipline. There is no comparable discipline with the State. When rural programmes do not fit what people need and want, it might be thought that those responsible for planning would learn and change. But this has happened only slowly. In the four cases I have discussed standardized rules of behaviour standard outputs continued to be the norm even when they worked badly or did not work at all. When there was feedback and change did occur, as with watershed programmes, the tendency was to switch from one standard prescription to another, rather than to add to the options. In psychologists' jargon, this is 'slot-rattling', keeping the same slots but putting different items in them, rather than changing the slots themselves. So some rural development remains stuck in the Fordist era of mass production.

There is then a question to be answered. When field level realities suggest widespread misfit and failure, how is it that 'Model T' programmes continue to be planned and implemented? There is something to explain.

PSYCHOSIS: THE SELF-DECEIVING STATE

By anthropomorphic analogy, part of the explanation can be sought in how the State perceives reality. Human psychosis can be defined as 'any form of severe mental disorder in which the individual's contact with reality becomes highly distorted'. In this sense, in the illustrations presented above the State can be described as psychotic: its contact with reality is distorted; it does not respond to the misfit between intention and effect.

The thesis of this article is that much of the explanation is to be found in false positive feedback, in misperceptions and misinformation. There are dangers here of exaggeration. In India, the Programme Evaluation Organization of the Planning Commission has a good track record with its investigations and reporting which some Northern countries could do well to emulate. The National Sample Survey has a well deserved international reputation for the quality of its work. But most of the time, for most field organizations and programmes, misinformation cloaks the truth: the misfit of 'Model T' programmes is not seen. The Emperor, though naked, is reported by sources close to him to have clothes.

How does this come about?

False Positive Feedback

False positive feedback is mediated in five main ways. These are misreporting; selected perception; methods which mislead; diplomatic prudence; and defences against dissonance.

1 Misreporting

Perhaps the most pervasive source of misleading positive feedback is misreporting. This is a syndrome of interactions between:

- time-bound target-setting imposed top-down;
- performance judged on the reported achievement of targets;
- a punitive style of management;
- an overload of reporting (making exact reporting impossible anyway);
- corruption (so that there are facts to conceal or figures to change);
- tacit connivance between levels in hierarchies;
- knowledge that the 'Model T' does not fit or does not work (leading to demoralization).

When these combine, as they often do, targets tend to be reported as achieved when they have not been, or at least performance is exaggerated. The remarks of a District Agricultural Officer to his subordinates in the early 1970s reflect conditions which still persist: 'We

have achieved all our targets. Do you understand? Make the necessary arrangements in your blocks'. In these circumstances, the achievement of targets becomes 'a largely book-keeping affair' (Mook 1974: 143).

When, in this style of management, targets are raised annually, misreporting builds up misinformation cumulatively. This occurred in India with annually raised targets for areas under High-Yielding Varieties of rice. For 1972/3, officially reported figures for the area under paddy HYVs in two taluks (administrative areas) in North Arcot District in Tamil Nadu were 39 and 48 per cent respectively, but a survey in 12 representative villages in the two areas gave a figure of only 13 per cent (Chambers and Wickremanayake 1977). In one of the villages, the survey showed less than 50 per cent adoption, but the reports of the hapless Village Level Worker had risen to 95 per cent, leaving him nowhere to go, and a problem with how to conceal the truth from visiting senior officers. A growing divergence between report and reality stresses the reporter, who is then driven to make up the appearances of reality in the cosmetic as well as numerical sense.

Especially where corruption is involved, misreporting takes the form of lies. Subsidies play a part here too. In practice subsidies support corruption, providing a surplus which can be extracted as rents. Subsidized inputs (as in some agricultural extension) or assets (as in the IRDP) are also patronage for staff who can share them with some of those for whom they were not intended. Reporting cannot, however, reveal this. It has to be falsified to conceal it. So when corruption is endemic, so is false reporting. Work is reported done which has not been done, and workers paid who have not been paid. Costs are inflated. In one case in 1989 this was by a factor of four: a Forest Department was accounting a cost of Rs40 per running metre of protective stone walling, when an NGO working on the ground found the cost to be only Rs10. Or again, administrators receive figures which they know are already false, and are then ordered by politicians to falsify them further. In one technical department, the annual meeting of some 500 senior staff is said to have been confronted by their Chief Statistical Officer who asked: 'Why do you all lie?' There was no reply. The question was repeated. There was still no reply.

2 Selected perception

A second origin of misleading positive feedback is special and unrepresentative sources of information. Two phenomena interlink here: islands of salvation; and rural development tourism.

Islands of salvation are villages, areas or projects which have received special treatment. To an astonishing degree, a single village or project can be quoted and requoted back and forth at conferences and in papers without any analysis of its atypicality. One village, Ralegaon Shindi, in Maharashtra, has been repeatedly cited as a model for sustainable environmental management, although accounts agree that it has most exceptional and unusual leadership; and it would seem that it has never been replicated. One canal irrigation cooperative, the Mohini Water Cooperative Society, the recipient of extraordinarily privileged treatment from Government, has been the source of a myth accepted both by the Planning Commission in India (GOI 1985: II: 82) and by authorities outside India. This is that, to quote one, 'In Gujarat State in India, the irrigation agency sells water volumetrically in bulk to cooperatives, which distribute it and collect fees from their members' (Repetto 1986: 33); in fact, Mohini was probably almost or entirely alone in this respect, and the myth of water cooperatives in Gujarat had a capacity to spread not shared by the institution itself (Chambers 1988: 59-62). Or take T and V. When T and V was pioneered in India in the Chambal Command Area, it achieved 'apparently astonishing success', but this could be attributed to the 'pilot project effect' — because the World Bank was intensively involved, staff were therefore motivated, and irrigation and input supplies arrived on time (Moore 1984: 306-7). Specially nurtured and protected, islands of salvation like these systematically mislead.

Rural development tourism — the brief rural visit by the urban-based senior officer — reinforces the island of salvation effect, being often directed to special places and people. Visits by senior officers are usually planned and orchestrated by local-level staff to ensure carefully selected perception. Nationally renowned islands of salvation are favourites for visits by VVIPs. At a more humble level, Block development staff often have a special village, and special 'tame' people in that village, to solve the problem of how to mislead visitors. Rural development tourism has other built-in biases against perception of poverty and meeting poor people (Chambers 1983: 10-25). In agricultural extension, farmers are rehearsed in the answers they are to give; and the resource-rich farmer (known variously as a master, model, demonstration, progressive, or contact, farmer) who is visited can show the package of practices in the field before presenting the visitor's book to be signed. In canal irrigation, a **warabandi** committee is mustered, though it only exists when visitors come. In watershed development, the area visited in the watershed follows the road along the top of a ridge where erosion created by bad conservation works are not to be seen. Experienced staff package their tours for visitors, and in one case had a 'two hour treatment', and a 'four hour treatment'. In the IRDP, the same poor

person with the milch buffalo is shown off to a succession of visitors to the village, and has been carefully coached and supported by staff to ensure an impression of dutiful success. Only the best is shown and seen. Worse, the more senior and influential the visitor, the more elaborate the preparations, and the more biased the impressions. The glowing words of the VIP in the visitor's book then reflect not the wider reality, but the skill and care with which the visit was managed.

3 Methods which mislead

A third source of positive bias can be found in the methods used for monitoring, evaluation, research and other investigation. Of these, the most common is the questionnaire survey.

Questionnaire surveys are vulnerable to a host of distortions, and especially to overfavourable impressions of the achievements of government programmes. Three examples — from agricultural extension, watershed development, and the IRDP — can serve as illustrations.

For agricultural extension, one survey conducted in Hambantota District, Sri Lanka, found that 62 per cent of farmers said they had been visited by extension workers in a single season, while a more careful survey found only 16 per cent and that over two seasons (Chambers and Wickremanayake 1977: 158-9). The first figure was absurd, and the second still most probably high.

For watershed development, a questionnaire survey reported that only one farmer out of 272 (or 0.4 per cent of farmers) interviewed was cross ploughing (a practice frowned on by agricultural extension) while questions posed after group discussions yielded 28 per cent (a figure suggested by field observation to be closer to reality) (pers. comm. C. Sitapathi Rao).

For the IRDP, Dreze's (1990) persuasive analysis has shown that a greatly inflated impression of success was given by the methods used in evaluations. Among these, one was a question to beneficiaries (who were all meant to be initially below the poverty line, but who often were not) as to whether they had been below the poverty line three years earlier when they joined the programme. Not surprisingly, positive responses were high, over 85 per cent, a figure suggested by other evidence to be far wide of the mark.

In these three examples, there was overfavourable distortion of the reality. The strongest explanations are that informants knew what the 'right' answer was, and gave it, for reasons of prudence or deference; and that enumerators knew what responses were hoped for, and recorded them. When such distortions operate, positive responses to more general questions about the value of a programme have little credibility.

When such biases can occur, monitoring, evaluation and research data from questionnaire surveys about government programmes are open to challenge. One can ask, for example, what credence can be placed in the reported negative replies of farmers when asked if they have been visited by extension agents. A study of T and V extension impact in Northern India (Feder et al 1988: 82) examined T and V evaluation reports from seven states. The average percentages of 'no visits' from extension were 15 per cent for contact farmers, and 34.5 per cent for non-contact farmers (i.e. those meant to meet the contact farmers). The study concludes that 'The demand for T and V extension services as measured by non-contact farmers' interaction with extension agents thus appears significant.' But since farmer respondents must have known that contact was meant to take place, a similar distortion could be expected to that with reported cross-ploughing; it would seem likely that actual 'no visits' would be much larger than reported. On similar lines, other monitoring and evaluation data from questionnaires are open to question for overfavourable methodological bias.

4 Diplomacy and prudence

The fourth source of positive bias is diplomatic prudence on the part of those engaged in research, monitoring, evaluation and consultancy. To put it bluntly, consultants and researchers do not want to bite the hand that feeds them.

The World Bank in India commissioned research by a large consultancy organization to assess the impact of a policy the Bank was known to be keen to promote. This was the subdivision of **chaks** — the areas below outlets on canal irrigation systems — into 8 ha **subchaks**, and then the rotation of water between the **subchaks**. The consultants conducted the research and concluded that this preferred intervention led to benefits in higher yields, more uniform yields, and less time taken to irrigate. The World Bank and the Indian Government adopted the policy. But a tiresome analysis (Chambers 1988: 54-59) of the evidence in the report indicated that none of these conclusions was supported, and that another factor, a good water supply, was the key variable. It was difficult to avoid confirming the hypothesis that the consultants had produced the answer they knew was wanted.

More widespread than such misinterpretation of data, is the more insidious self-censorship by those (and who is without guilt?) who conduct commissioned research. The conflicts will be familiar to some who read this. Do honest consultants who write the truth find it easier or harder to get further work?

5 Defences against dissonance

Even if bad news is reported, it may be avoided or rejected. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's words 'People only see what they are prepared to see.'

On avoidance, independent researchers were once invited to a workshop at the World Bank to present their findings from field research on a World Bank supported project. These were negative compared with a mid-term review. One staff member, who had taken part in the mid-term review, came to the session, listened, was convinced, and said he regretted the errors. But other staff members who were also involved did not come to the meeting. Whatever the reasons, an obvious conjecture is that they did not want to know. By not being present, they did not have to know. Avoidance worked.

On rejection, in the case of the consultant's report cited above on subdivision of **chaks** and rotation of water supplies, a meeting was called to discuss interpretation of the data. The critic's points were half accepted but then finessed into a sort of limbo. The misleading conclusions drawn by the consultants were then, far from being rejected or modified, actually published unchanged, and without reference to the criticisms (Chadha 1981).

As defences, these five sources of self-deception interlink. Those who deceive know that those they are deceiving know they are being deceived but also that they want to be deceived in a way that does not show that they know. So there is implicit connivance, captured in the following personal communication (April 1992):

IAS Officer: 'I said to my BDOs — you must each have a VIP circuit. It is part of the game.'

Question: 'Do the VIPs know that they are being given this treatment? Do they know they are not getting the truth?'

IAS Officer: 'They don't want to know. For them, it would only make trouble.'

These five sources of misinformation are mutually reinforcing. The flows of misleading positive feedback to which they give rise are homeostatic — conservative at the centre through misperception of the periphery. They reinforce top-down reflexes. The single universal solution when inspected on rural visits is seen to do well; routine reports rarely damn; independent evaluations confirm the impression; prudent respondents, researchers, evaluators and consultants refrain from brutal honesty; and when bad news does get through, it may be rejected. So though local conditions differ, evidence of misfits is filtered out. Positive misinformation props up standard programmes. Psychotic, the State deceives itself.

The Costs of Self-Deception and Error

In India, the costs of self-deception are enormous. First, there are the direct financial costs in vast programmes of misdirected and unproductive agricultural research and extension, of erroneous irrigation development, of blueprinted watershed development, and of the misjudged priorities of the IRDP. Second, there is the demoralization of field staff who find themselves required to extend advice, or negotiate and impose programmes, which people do not want and which do not make sense. Third, there is the alienation of the public, whose cynical realism about the State is reinforced. And for all these, there are the opportunity costs of foregoing the alternatives. Similar costs are likely in other countries, but cases will differ.

Worldwide, the costs of past and present error are beyond any calculation. Large-scale investment for research and programmes to reduce post-harvest losses of grain at the village level can now be seen to have been based on a largely false premise. Nutrition programmes which heavily stressed protein rather than calories missed the mark. In environmental matters, misdiagnosis may be a special risk because of dogmatic convictions about the unknowable and the next decade may reveal gross error in some current conventional wisdom and prescriptions. For development policy and action generally, the question now is how to enable the State, and the development professions, to be closer in touch with reality.

IN SEARCH OF THERAPY

Reversals for Local Diversity

With accelerating change, with declining resources for development, and with widespread and often increasing deprivation, it matters more than ever for policy makers and professionals to be right about what is happening. The evidence and argument above suggest that the more top-down, supply-driven and standardized a programme package is, the more likely misleading positive feedback becomes. The converse is that the more bottom-up, demand drawn and diverse a programme is, the closer will be the fit between data and reality. The key is reversals of the normal, as in each of the four domains of rural development discussed above.

In **agriculture**, the change is from the T and V approach of transfer of technology (TOT), to what has been described as farmer participatory research (Farrington and Martin 1988) or 'farmer-first' (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp 1989). In the TOT mode, research priorities are decided by scientists; technology is developed by them on research stations and in laboratories; and recommended packages of practices are then passed to extension organizations for transfer to farmers. TOT has had successes with some green revolution agriculture where environments could

be controlled for a uniform fit, but a poor record with rainfed agriculture which is more complex, diverse, and risk-prone. In the reversed, contrasting, farmer-first mode, analysis is carried out more by farmers themselves; technology is developed and adapted more on farm and by farmers; baskets of choices for farmers replace packages of practices; and farmers' own capabilities are enhanced and experiments supported.

Innovations in seed-breeding illustrate the shift from a top-down 'Model T' approach. In the normal professional mode in India, breeders make crosses, screen lines for good characteristics such as disease resistance and yield, and then select only a very few, perhaps two or three, out of as many as two hundred lines for assessment by a central committee. The committee chooses material for multi-locational testing, following which those lines judged best are chosen, certified, and passed on for seed multiplication as a stable, standard output, and then for Extension to transfer to farmers. Before 'adoption', farmers play no part, and much promising genetic material is lost. In contrast, D. M. Maurya (Maurya *et al* 1988; Maurya 1989) of the Narendra Deva University of Agriculture and Technology in Uttar Pradesh has been making a wider range of lines available directly to farmers for them to try out, on condition that if other farmers ask for seed, they will also give some back to him. Farmers thus have a wider choice, and themselves test, evaluate and disseminate, for their diverse and particular conditions. The package with a single seed has been replaced by a basket with choices.

In **canal irrigation**, two forms of reversal can be noted. The first is the participation of farmers in determining how they wish to distribute water among themselves. This has been the focus of much research and writing. The second is appraisal and analysis of each irrigation project separately leading to operational plans which are tailor-made. In India this approach has been central to the National Water Management Project, and contrasts with the longer-standing Command Area Development Programme which has sought to implement **warabandi** and other standard measures over most large projects.

In **watershed development**, the major reversal is to involve farmers themselves in appraisal, mapping, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation for the development of their watersheds (Mascarenhas 1991; Shah *et al* 1991). Participatory evaluation has been the most recent development (SDC 1991). In late 1991, in a participatory evaluation involving farmers, MYRADA (an NGO), the Drylands Development Board of Karnataka, and the Swiss Development Corporation, farmers were empowered to demonstrate and argue the merits of their own soil and water conservation works. Participatory appraisals in the field were followed by farmers' presentations backed

up through showing and explaining slides of their fields and of alternative technologies, to senior officials in Bangalore. This led to Government agreement to modify its standard ('Model T') soil conservation structures to benefit from farmers' technology and to conform closer to farmers' priorities (pers. comm. Martin Sommer).

In **anti-poverty programmes**, the major reversal is to allow poor people to choose **when** they need support, by providing them with optional safety nets. The classic example is the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, where the policy was that groups could demand as of right to be given work when they needed it, and to be paid a daily wage if work could not be provided.

All four sets of reversals share common features. All allow for local diversity. All empower local people with choice. There is a shift from standardization to differentiation, from a package of practices to basket of choices, from the black 'Model T' to the Toyota with its colour chosen by each client. Decision-making is decentralized to people with local knowledge and reasons to want it accurate. All sets of reversals make lateral links between people and knowledge and short-circuit the vertical channels of communication which so often distort. All are thus therapeutic for the psychotic State.

Rights, Communications and Empowerment

Therapy often meets resistance in the patient. With the psychotic State, much of the resistance originates in the vested interests of politicians, officials and contractors. They often have personal and pecuniary interests in maintaining and exploiting the system through hiding or distorting information.

Corruption and the extraction of rents are hidden by falsifying or withholding information. Reports passed upwards conceal the pickings from construction and maintenance in canal irrigation and watershed development, or the routinized rents extracted from IRDP subsidized loans and purchases. Reports falsify statements of work completed, of prices paid, of people employed, of benefits disbursed, and of services rendered.

Rents are levered from the public by withholding information, wilfully misleading, and spreading lies. In canal irrigation, this takes the form of not informing farmers about water supplies, even when they are known, and of pretending that water is scarcer than it is. When farmers are uncertain how much water is available, believe it is short, and do not know how much they will receive or when, they pay up in the hope of assuring themselves a supply. In social forestry, this can take the form of pretending to farmers that the

cutting and transit of trees are prohibited when they are not. In ways such as these, officials manage and manipulate information to gain power and profit for themselves and for their patrons and allies.

Therapy can take many forms. Among the more obvious is clear definition of people's rights together with multiple channel dissemination of information about those rights. The rights can concern, for instance, access to supplies of new seeds, supplies of irrigation water, physical on-farm conservation works according to farmers' plans and priorities, subsidized loans, or freedom to cut and transit trees, all of these without having to pay for them. The multiple channels can include village meetings, handbills, notices, broadcasts, videos and television broadcasts. The communications revolution of the 1990s will present new opportunities to inform people of their rights, and could be used to encourage them to organize, to resist extortion, and to make demands for their entitlements.

Free communication about rights requires open government. It requires that Government circulars be made public. In India this has begun to happen, for example with a Government Order of 1 June 1990 concerning involvement of village communities and voluntary agencies for regeneration of degraded forest lands, which was published in *Wastelands News*, the widely circulated bulletin of the Society for the Promotion of Wastelands Development.

Effective therapy can also occur through citizens themselves making information public. Sometimes corruption at the grassroots appears an ecological condition as unalterable as climate, a fact of life to be accepted. But at Ahmadpur in Latur District in India, a voluntary agency brought out a handbill which said:

'Report a case of corruption and get the bribe-money back.'

Villagers met on an appointed day and testified to payments made. Officials were told that prosecution was not sought, only return of the money. The results reported were dramatic. Some officials asked for time to pay, but in all cases bribes were returned, the sums being designated as money that had been 'lent' (Joshi 1989).

In various ways, then, rights, information and communications can empower and enable individuals and organizations to make demands for good and honest service. The reversals implied will be resisted by those — mainly lower-level officials — who stand to lose. But the determination of policy and information resides higher up in the hierarchy; and there, in central administrative places, are to be found officials and political leaders whose behaviour is not fully determined, who do have room for manoeuvre, and

who do have power to modify and reform the system, especially through their use of communications, if they wish.

Personal Reversals and Realism: Truth, Trust and Diversity

'If they wish' is the crux. Therapy through reversals for diversity, and through rights, information and empowerment, can only occur through the behaviour of people. In the reform of any administrative culture, there are questions of who starts and where. The key people are those in a position to take and implement decisions. For those who work in large bureaucracies there are many obstacles to change on which much has been written. But the personal, psychological dimensions of these obstacles, and of the reversals to overcome them, have tended to be neglected.

The first reversal concerns knowledge, and attitudes to information and error. The normal pathology of the self-deceiving state is mirrored by the normal pathology of self-deceiving individuals and professions. Even psychotherapists themselves lack feedback on the effectiveness of their work and are said not to seem interested in it (Howarth 1989). 'I would rather not know' captures a common attitude of prudent self-defence among those with responsibility for actions and programmes who know or suspect that appearances are false. To turn the blind eye, to avoid facing awkward facts, to bury error, and to believe against the evidence that what one is doing is good, these are common failings in the human condition. The challenge is to abandon concealment, to be open about error, and to want to face factual reality. The reversal is to seek, and be honest about, the truth.

The second reversal concerns the common administrative reflex of control, and the drive to control more rather than less. In March 1992, a group of Indian administrators were asked what would be the basic minimum to be standardized and regulated in setting up village-level savings and credit societies. Their collective list included rates of saving, application forms, eligibility, purposes of loans, rates of interest, repayments, penalties for default, and credit ratios. In contrast, the programme of over 1,600 savings and credit societies spread and supervised by MYRADA, an NGO in South India, entrusted all these aspects to individual societies to decide, and limited control and supervision to accounts, records and bookkeeping. The members of the societies and their committees had discretion to meet their diverse needs in their own way, and each society made its own rules for loans, interest rates, penalties for defaulters, and so on. The challenge posed by this example is to see the minimum that does need to be controlled — the bookkeeping, and the wisdom and courage to control no more than that, for all else trusting people to make their own decisions.

The reversal, in short, is to replace control with trust.

The third reversal concerns standardization. To fit the diversity of social, economic and ecological conditions requires a decentralized plurality of organizations, services, activities and choices. But control centralizes and standardizes. Caution calls for care to guard against all imaginable error or deviation, and for uniform and universal regulations to prevent these. Local discretion is limited. The credit and savings societies need more choice of what to do and how to do it. The reversal here is to replace uniformity with diversity.

These three reversals — concerning truth, trust and diversity — combine against the self-deceiving state. But officials trapped in hierarchy and a web of corruption and misinformation, can seem to have little incentive for change and little room for manoeuvre. And there are costs for them: truth embarrasses; trust weakens authority; diversity undermines control. And introduced together in a corrupt system, truth, trust and diversity reduce the incomes of officials and politicians.

Practical Theory

It is at this point that most academic analysts give up. But the same is not true of courageous officials who struggle to act as therapists from within. For them, there are no easy solutions, but two approaches can be proposed: working with allies; and direct personal field experience.

Allies for those who want to change can be found both within and outside government organizations. Within government organizations, informal networks of the like-minded can support each other. Outside government organizations, support can be found in NGOs, aid agencies and foundations, and among academics. NGOs can have several roles as allies, empowering local groups to make demands, training government staff, setting examples by implementing programmes for government, raising questions about corruption and low standards, exposing the misfit of government 'Model Ts', and developing participatory approaches and methods and training and socializing government staff to use them. For their part, aid agencies and foundations can use the leverage of funding to back participatory programmes, innovations, training and the like. The Ford Foundation has shown the potential from professional interaction in support of bureaucratic reorientation, as in the now classic case of the National Irrigation Administration in the Philippines (Korten and Siy 1989; Bagadion and Korten 1991). There, the changes introduced and evolved touched many aspects of participation and management; and the key element, modestly underacknowledged in the literature, was the commitment, continuity and alliance over almost a decade of two professionals, one in the NIA, and one in

the Ford Foundation. As so often, the history of a success points to the primacy of the personal.

The question then becomes how to multiply and strengthen personal commitment. One promising answer is direct field experience for senior decision-makers. Normally, the more senior a person becomes, the more removed he or she is from rural realities (though this is less true in East Africa, where so many are farmers in their own right, than in most other regions). New opportunities for direct interaction, without the constraints of rural development tourism, are now accessible with the approach and methods of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (see e.g. Mascarenhas *et al* 1991). In India, the 320-odd probationers for the Indian Administrative Service each year now use PRA methods in their village fieldwork. Elsewhere, a few senior officers have been on field camps organized by NGOs and have found it a revealing and rewarding experience. A wide repertoire of means for learning from rural people and about rural conditions is now available. Besides requiring relatively brief periods in the field, using these techniques is also interesting and enjoyable. The questions now are how well they can be used; how many can use them; and how well they can effect reversals, through learning from below, keeping up-to-date with change, and being sensitive to diverse priorities, especially of those who are poorer.

Neither working with allies, nor using and spreading PRA, is an easy, quick or universal means to realism. Nor are these more than two out of many interventions which could be put forward, case by case, to reduce misleading positive feedback, to limit corruption, and to diversify away from 'Model T' approaches. But they

have the merit of being strategies which more and more senior officials could adopt if they wished. Almost all have some scope for finding allies. Almost all have some opportunities for less rushed and more relaxed and participatory interactions in rural areas and with poor people. To turn around whole bureaucracies, though, is a massive task requiring sustained commitment, repeated reinforcement, and many actions. The best approach is to start and learn by doing. It can be hoped that the next decade will present more and more examples of progress from which others can learn and draw encouragement.

Finally, the most effective and lasting change will come from combinations of pressures and people. To phase out Fordism and self-deception in Government administration is more difficult than in the private sector. The sanction of the market is missing. One surrogate is political demand from below. This can provide direct negative feedback and force more realism and diversity into government programmes. In India, West Bengal stands out as an example where political ideology committed to the poor, backed by political organization at the grassroots, has led to reforms which have largely eluded the rest of India. These have been based not just on a democratic environment, freedom of speech, the free flow of information, but also on the commitment and continuity of key officials and politicians. The discipline which market forces exercise for the private sector can be provided for the State both from outside by popular organization and pressure, and from inside by the personal commitment of powerful people. There are then two therapies for the psychotic State as patient: from outside and below, and from inside and above.

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