

Universities & Intermediaries
in Inclusive Innovation & Development
The Case of AUD-PRADAN's
M.Phil in Development Practice

110

Anup Dhar, AUD

Paper Reprint from



Rethinking Universities for Development: Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion

**Rethinking Universities
for Development
Intermediaries
Innovation &
Inclusion**



IDRC * CRDI

CCO Centre for Inclusive and Sustainable Development

Universities & Intermediaries in Inclusive Innovation & Development The Case of AUD-PRADAN's M.Phil in Development Practice Anup Dhar, Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD)

Going by present trends, by 2030, at least 60 per cent of the population in India is likely to live in rural settings (UN, 2007). However, currently, there is little societal focus on the issues faced by rural people; rural areas continue to be seen as both transient and 'backward'. After 60 years of independence, there remains a huge deficit in the availability of quality human resources to work in the villages, along with communities. In order to transform such mainstream perspectives, there is an immense need to institutionalize, legitimize, and bring rigour to the field of rural development practice, research and policy. This requires a new thinking about development (beyond mere critique), that is grounded in everyday rural realities of poverty, lack of basic services and inability to influence larger societal processes and that builds on local traditions of sharing and collectivity. PRADAN, the Ambedkar University, Delhi partner in this MPhil programme, has been engaged in giving shape to this for over the past 30 years. The plan is now to build on their existing work and bring their work to a University (in the form of a programme that gives an MPhil degree in Development Practice), guided by the vision of bridging equality and social justice with excellence. This would also offer to the country at large and to the developmental sector a cohort of trained professionals every year.

Rationale and Objectives:

The proposed programme thus has two broad goals:

- i. (a) to institutionalize in a University setting the professionalizing of rural development practice (where developmental practice is seen as a socially meaningful and legitimate arena of work)
- (b) to de-institutionalize the existing imagination of the University (which is largely academic, urban and elite) through its partnership with a grassroots level developmental sector agent of change (here PRADAN) and take it to the rural sector, make its University-level work relevant to the needs of the rural poor and
- ii. to build 'capacities' in terms of developing and increasing the pool of quality human resource in the developmental sector

Thus the idea driving this MPhil is that a new set of professionals trained in rural development/transformational skills are needed to fulfill the bottom-up version of the Indian developmental dream. There is no programme in the formal education sector that meets this need. The experience of the Ambedkar University, Delhi's partner organisation PRADAN has demonstrated a model to meet this need. Through this MPhil programme, Ambedkar University, Delhi wishes to live up to this felt need of trained rural development professionals. Keeping further with the larger mandate (marked by a commitment to equity) of Ambedkar University, Delhi, the MPhil programme in Development Practice seeks to link 'transformation of self' to the larger goals of social justice and collective transformation. This would involve an understanding of development paradigms over time, alongside building a perspective on the normative themes of social justice, transformation and change. A practitioner working in rural settings with poor men and women faces continuous challenges and dilemmas in relation to his/her own role and positionality vis-à-vis the community. It is not easy to work long-term in rural areas; given the primarily urban or semi-urban upbringing of most university students, it would require a somewhat higher level of psychic resilience. The programme would therefore address important personal conflicts and self-doubts that may arise out of one's rural location by enabling the learner to be self-reflexive and in touch with their own emotions, which in turn could enable him/her to be sensitive to and be in tune with the needs and feelings of 'rural others'. Interactions based on principles of mutual respect, willingness to listen and to learn, can potentially transform the lives of

Anup Dhar

both the practitioner and the communities with whom he/she is working. Such understanding can contribute to a process of collective solidarity and action whereby demands for change are pursued in relation to larger goals and structures. There is no such programme that builds on these premises of reflective practice, of change in self, as key to the processes of education that focuses on changing society. This would perhaps be the first programme of its kind, based on these premises, and would help to evolve a professional identity for the development professional and a model for the country and development sector to spawn such a cadre to meet the growing needs.

Overview of MPhil Programme

Facilitating rural transformation requires intellectual resources alongside personal maturity. The programme envisages coalescing theory, research and practice, self-reflection and community engagement as well as epistemological openness to different knowledge systems/streams. The programme is fundamentally interdisciplinary in its approach, combining a mix of methods for transacting the curriculum, and strengthening the balance between knowledge (theoretical and practical field-based), conceptual clarity and reflection. The programme, in addition to philosophies and histories of development, shall also be informed by the long history of work in 'depth psychology', so as to attend to the psychic processes of students and the rural community. This will help students cope with the stress and the hope/despair dyad of transformative work in the rural.

The programme is based on a learner-centred and immersion-based pedagogy. The structure of the field and course work allows for reflection-based learning, so that the learner can draw on real life experiences to understand and engage with key conceptual ideas as well as develop grounded theory. The immersion component has multiple benefits: it can help make an informed decision about career choice, provide hands-on learning through exposure to the field under the supervision and with the support of mentors and guides, help concretise the theoretical learning of the classroom, and finally enable safe experimentation in the field under supervision. The programme will also strengthen research skills, particularly in relation to developing appropriate methodologies, both participatory and action-oriented, for answering critical questions arising from the field. It is envisaged that dissertations would involve reflective exercises applying analytical tools to understand the implications of specific development interventions in which the learner may have been involved themselves.

The programme provides the conceptual, methodological and emotional skills for a unique progression from understanding the rural context and problematising the developmental issues therein to engaging with processes of change and transformation. The focus on discovery and open-mindedness is coupled with intellectual rigour and the development of professional skills.

Pedagogy

The pedagogy of the programme comprises of two integral aspects – experiential learning and learner support and reinforcement systems. Experiential learning premises itself on the immersion of the learner in actual life experience and engaging with the milieu of practice; the opportunity to reflect by her/him as well as receive observations and feedback from peers, mentors, supervisors and members of the milieu itself. Building a cognitive map supported by existing or evolving theory ties the experience of the learner in an attempt to help her/him make meaning of her/his experience. Drawing up fresh hypothesis, evolving new ones to experiment with and learn from, becomes the next step. Learner support groups and reinforcement systems are meant to create a learning community. To build consonance between experience 'out-there' and experience and learning 'in-here' in the classroom, group-centred pedagogy will focus on the learners' sharing, critiquing and helping each other examine stances, approaches and methods that they have used in practice. Over a period of time it is envisaged that a vibrant learning community will emerge in charge of their own learning and deriving joy through contribution towards each other's learning and growth.

The M Phil Development Practice programme raises two important questions. How can “development” and “university” come together? What are the philosophies of development practices that are informing us? Considering that the idea of the university is itself not unique, we were forced to think what kind of university AUD would be and what kind of development we should think of.

Our ideas about education were influenced by Kant’s writings that education should nurture, discipline and offer scholarship; hence a student could be seen as a child, a budding citizen or a scholar. Development could be seen from the perspective of three different ages – the classical civilizing model of development, a post independence model with largely top to bottom philosophy, or a neo-liberal turn which focuses on competition, entrepreneurship and efficiency of human capital. The corresponding signposts of development result in either a growth with poverty alleviation model or a growth with ‘trickle down to the poor’ model. Two practices of development take shape then – a primitive accumulate and annihilate practice and inclusive development for the dispossessed practice. We therefore see that inclusive development comes in a very complicated package.

In studying these different alternatives of development and practice we realized that the content of this programme should address the huge deficit in quality human resources to work in the village communities. There is a need to institutionalize and bring rigour to the field of rural development practice, research and policy. The content should go beyond critique and be grounded in the everyday realities of poverty. Working with PRADAN helped us do that. It also helped us to institutionalize a professional practice of rural development as a meaningful area of work and not merely as a development studies course.

The programme emphasises a strong element of self worth in relation to others. The first semester thus has a specialized course to focus on the reflexivity question. Within the programme the developmental is taught through political theory, philosophy and sociological studies by faculty drawn from across disciplines. There is also emphasis on working as a collective in a community. There is also a psychoanalytic lab where students learn over a 10 day period on how to experience oneself in a group.

The 22 month course has an immersion programme dispersed across eight months in which the students are sent to villages. In the first two months, they study the village; the next two, they perform gap analysis; and in the last four, they conduct action research and try to effect some transformation in the village. The students are assigned two supervisors, one each from AUD and PRADAN.

Discussion

The M Phil programme would need to have a strong element of the personal – that is notions of the self, and experiencing this self in the practice. This would also involve the understanding of the psychological, of listening, and the interactional.

The course stands on a tripod a) theoretical and concepts of development and political economy, b) sociology – in terms of understanding the rural and the socio-economics and c) Understanding of the self and collective action – The self, how does the self work in a group, through group psycho-analytical labs, etc. A major innovation is eight months immersion programme in the village, with emphasis on field study, gap analysis and action research.

While designing the course, theoretically, we had to come to grips with how the two concepts “development” and “university” come together.

When we are talking about university, we are dealing with different concepts:

The university as a centre for nurture or discipline, or scholarship.

The students as child, a budding citizen to be disciplined, or self knowing citizen.

Anup Dhar

Post independence, the university was contextualized in the developmental state and education included deepening and widening freedoms. The neo-liberal turn also brought in issues of competition, efficiency, human capital etc and a host of contending ideas.

Development concepts too have their binaries: development around use value or exchange value, private good or public good. It also raised the question of relating science and technology to development, whether it should create use value or exchange value, it is a public good or a private asset. Which in turn would determine structure of ownership even within the university of disciplines like medicine, engineering and other science would develop in the university? Social Science too, would it dwell on the specific needs to the neo-liberal regime, or would social science be social in the ownership and purpose?

Thus the idea of development would mainly be growth, and since trickle down has been discredited, it would contain the idea of poverty alleviation. Today we have the notion of inclusive development, which straddles the concept of expanding development to include neglected sections or examining the development systems under which the excluded are integral to development. In each case, would the university have a critical relationship with development, would it interrogate development or be a part of it as primitive accumulation, as violent annihilative process or an included subject.

Thus we have concepts of development, then we have alternative development path as exemplified by Amartya Sen, and then alternatives to the idea of development (Escobar, Asish Nandy etc). Gandhi and Tagore are also seen as tacking a civilisational development notion rather than the economic vision post Truman.

Vasavi: Where would you locate caste/class structures, hierarchy/exploitation in this post-developmental paradigmatic course? What about retrieval and recognition of knowledge forms?

Anup: We take up these questions in the courses on 'equality, discrimination and marginalization' and 'gender and development'. The courses are not water tight compartments, but each subject forays into the other. We also make students write field diaries from their immersion program and urge them to write about their personal experiences as well as rural realities. We are also looking at how students can study flows in a village – what comes in and what goes out – and how this can revise our thinking in terms of the people, knowledge and objects that flow in and out of the village.

Rajni: What is the projected student profile? Is it only for the urban students? If you have also had rural students, the course itself would act as a meeting ground between urban and rural or the rural. Also it would be a good way to redeem the rural students who may have a dysfunctional BA or MA. Also are you planning a Gap training for them?

Anup: The idea did come up but we have not had the courage to build it into the design of the course, as our experience with the MA course, tells us that we have not been able to fill the OBC, SC & ST seats, despite waivers, fellowships and other incentives. Regarding the issue of entrance tests, we notice that students in the reserved category perform better as we have several modalities and not just the written tests. So much so that in the MPhil admin course, we had two SC students who stood first and second, and they came in through the general merit category.

Amalan: The idea of using psychoanalytic labs is based on the assumption that it is an effective device to make people more empathetic, but this needs to be interrogated more closely. Also, how does the collaboration with PRADAN unravel in the compromise of theory and practice?

Anup: We also engage with issues in psychology by bringing the aesthetics into the field-classroom relationship. We do have challenges in working out the theory-practice gap with PRADAN but we are working very closely on that.

SS Jodhka: It is a little concerning that this course rests on “othering” the rural, that somehow we are all urban and someone else is rural. This attitude of looking at the rural village in 2013 as someone in trouble and who needs to be trained is problematic. This can create problems both in the theoretical as well as the practical notions of what development is.

Anup: We are careful that we do not take go-gooder attitude to the rural. When we discuss the rural experience, we take care that we don't homogenize the rural and discuss problems as specificities related to larger trends.

Gopal: The course is not very clear on what are the drivers of the markets and therefore the architecture of inclusive markets. Since you focus on development practice, what is the system of evaluation of 'development practice' and is it different from evaluating development studies?

Lama: At the Sikkim University, we bring the community to the classroom, whereas your model is to take the student to the community. We chose to bring the rural practitioners like farmers and the community so that the community is able to be part of as well as contribute to the classroom. It helps the university to engage with issues on knowledge retrieval and recognition.

Urmila: As a student I wouldn't mind staying in the village, rather than a slum, but I feel that there is a lot to learn about realities of urban poverty and urban issue and slum stays would help in this.