

# Whither Socially Inclusive Innovations of the Seventies?

Looking back at the Graduate Volunteer Scheme  
of University of Mumbai. 58

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Paper Reprint from



Rethinking Universities for Development: Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion

## Rethinking Universities for Development Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion



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**Whither Socially Inclusive Innovations of the Seventies?  
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Innovation and social inclusion is “in”. TV Channels have been active in this field and project it as their “social responsibility” -- Times Now highlights Mahindra sponsored “spark the rise”, CNN-IBN has, in collaboration Reliance Foundation, a widely televised social event celebrating “the Real Heros”, the S R Jindal Prize for Chemistry teachers got CNBC-TV 18 coverage sponsored by Tata Chem. The question is where is the University in this space? Is it stuck in the discourse of social change, development, and justice which were the earlier keywords that outlined the innovation and social inclusion agenda? Why is it that the University is far behind?

Is the University capable of extending its role from epistemology to praxis – which is get involved in practice, so that a reflection on that practice provides for better and more discerning reflection. In other words, does the University offer an alternative space for experiential learning such that it can take forward or theorise on such social inclusion?

There are a few examples today of individuals in the university who do foray into such spaces. For example, in the recent Indian Against Corruption (IAC) agitation, we did see substantial sections of students join in. In fact we saw a prominent professor of politics, who is normally a political analyst, join issue, and provide some kind of academic legitimacy to the newly formed Aam Aadmi Party. The same professor was also present at the India Gate demonstration protesting the Delhi rape, whose understanding of the police action would certainly bear a dimension, not really explored in academe.

Similar protests filled the campuses against police encounters against Naxalites in the early seventies. What was the socially conscious student of the seventies thinking? Is there any relevance for it now? As one of that generation, I remember that the mood in the campuses was one of critique, if not rebellion to the existing order. Today, barring the IAC, much of the social consciousness is circumscribed by the “fortune at the bottom of the pyramid”. What was the consciousness then? More importantly how did the University respond to it?

### **The beginnings**

In November 1972, under *Project Change 1*, twenty-five students supplemented college lectures with discussion on topical problems and practical work like analyzing polluted water in Ambarnath and digging a drainage canal. Under *Project change 2*, twenty students spent thirty days in Kondan village, in the Thane district. Project change evolved into the Land University Project.

Late 1973, a group of 40 students camped for 120 days at Malthan in Pune district and devised projects combining manual work and youth initiatives. They were also expected to conduct a socio-economic survey of the village that they were living in. This was sponsored by the Ministry of Education as an educational experiment under the National Service Scheme. The programme was initiated by Mr. Aspi Chinoy now a successful lawyer. This was the time when the campus was abuzz with activity as the sixties movements combined with the spring thunder in Naxalbari fired youth. Organisations like PROYOM (Progressive Youth Movement) discussed radical alternatives in and out of campus. Some students even left their studies to join the movement. Aspi Chinoy himself was a student leader who led a “freedom of speech” agitation at St. Xavier’s College as the principal has veto powers over matters discussed at the College Students Union. The agitation led to the

John D'Souza

democratization of the Union and the formation of a Staff Student Council with equal representation of students and staff. The march of student power seemed unstoppable.

Project Change had its share of critics. Narendra Punjwani writing in the Times of India<sup>1</sup> criticized the Kondan camp, saying that the camp was run in a dictatorial manner and students were made to do hard manual work without proper tools for four to six hours, and that the well dug by the students was on private property and that the students had to sit till late at night doing the assignments. The process, Punjwani alleged, paralleled decision making at the universities, where students and teachers were left out. A genuine alternative system of education would not only overhaul the university but also put the primary school student at its centre.

The Land University Project was converted into the Concurrent Study Service project (CSSP) a programme which was taken forward by a professor of Sankrit, Dr Gopal Rane, one of the co-founders of Project Change.

At more or less the same time as the evolution of the CSSP, there were other movements. One group of students decided to work full time in villages led by Lancy Fernandes, now writer of the Amir Khan starrer serial "*Satyamev Jayate*", and formed VISTAS, one of whose off-shoots was the Centre for Education & Documentation which spoke in terms of accessible knowledge on contemporary social issues away from the ivory tower. Another student initiative was by Darshan Shankar, now leading the alternative medicine movement and action in the country, who was a student at the Department of Economics at the University of Mumbai. It was the Graduate Volunteer Scheme also known as the National Graduate Scheme (NGS).

### **The Graduate Volunteer Scheme (GVS)**

Muneer Alavi a co-founder of the GVS, describes the rationale for the scheme within the context of the restlessness among students about development, with "when you want to say that something is wrong you have to say what is right, and when you have to say something is right, you have to get first-hand experience". That was the idea of placing the graduates in a family of a small farmer or a landless labourer, especially with tribals. Initially one or two students were placed in every village, where they had to understand the requirements and problems of the village and figure out how they can help. Before starting any activity, they had to undertake a lot of studies – studies related to peoples' livelihood, their environment, their skills etc. After a detailed study, they would be required to initiate programmes, especially social education programmes by getting a group of people together to discuss their problems." They did a timeline exercise similar to what we (now) call Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal (PRRA). They would get the people to recollect the village and the surroundings 30 years before, and compare it with the present and then discuss what they would want the village to be 30 years down the line and then work out what they would do to make that happen.

Under the GVS, a group of twenty graduates from various disciplines were placed in selected villages of Thane, Pune and Nanded districts. The main aim was to "study the appropriateness of university education for the then social environment. The proponents felt that in order for education to be relevant to society at large, it was necessary to include within the educational system, a "feedback" element which got its inputs from society. The keywords then were Inter-disciplinary, experiential and imaginative. Normally the feedback element is provided at the faculty level in the form of academic

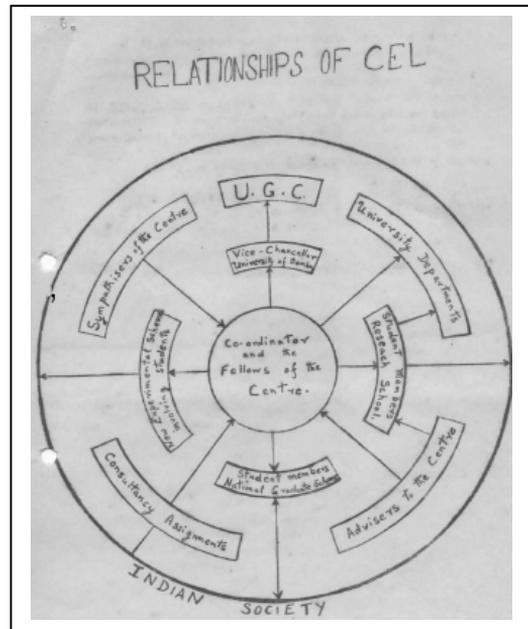
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<sup>1</sup> A Dubious Project by Narendra Panjwani. Times of India. 17 june 1973. [CED Code: C.N20a.19730617] e-copy at [[eldoc1/n20a/N20aB1223.pdf](#)]

councils and committees in the university environment. The kind of issues they were talking about in those days were appropriate technology, relevant education, family planning knowledge etc. and instruments such as Land University, adult education classes, mass media education. (In those days there was only three areas in India which received television signals – Delhi, Mumbai and one rural area around an experimental transmitter in Pij in Gujarat)

Apart from giving young graduates “an education for life”, the NGS programme was to initiate experiments in developing channels of communications and mass media techniques and preparation of extension education material for the benefit of labourers, farmers, village youth, children etc.

Further research would be carried out with the help of post-graduate students on the dynamics of social change with the aid of various sciences including technology, economics, sociology and politics in its relation to education. This was also supposed to help evolve new approaches to and techniques and procedures for regional planning.



Besides the graduates doing full time field level work and post graduate students undertaking research, local youth from the area would work alongside graduate volunteers to implement various development projects. A systematic training programme would be evolved for these youth so that they would be able to identify and analyse the village problems and work on the projects. Undergraduates under the National Social Service Scheme would also be used as “conscious inputs” into the plan.

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Feedback: The proponents of GVS said that the problems faced by the students indicate

1. The lack of understanding of the social economic and political institutions resulting in the lack of confidence in students dealing with local institutions like the *talhatis*, bank managers and BDOs
2. Lack of scientific attitude to analyse concrete practical situations and
3. Inability to communicate in a different social environment.

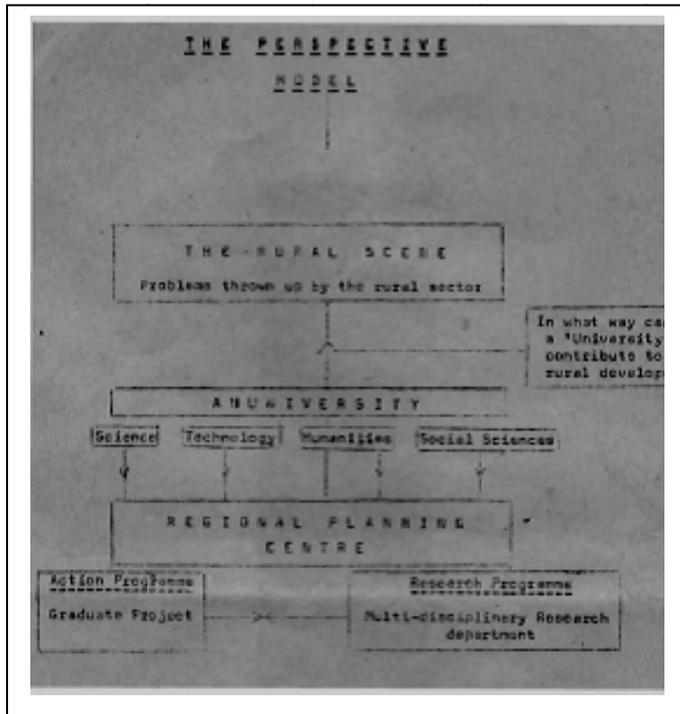
Converging Formational and Inclusive perspectives

Immediately after the first two batches of GVS, the National Graduate Scheme, in February 1975 put up a proposal for a “research and training Centre for Exploration of Learning processes through Participatory Action” (CEL). The proposal said that the NGS experience indicated a necessity to do experimental research in learning processes both in form and content and to integrate the results of such experiments into the educational system. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Proposal for establishment of a research & Training Centre for Exploration of learning processes through participatory action. National Graduate Scheme, Department of Economics, University of Bombay. February 1975 Cyclostyled copy of the proposal. Proposal drawn up by a “group of people

John D'Souza

Consequent to the proposal, the vice chancellor set up a committee headed by Prof B R Brahmananda, with Darshan Shankar as a member, for the establishment of a centre for studies in regional planning. The committee recommended bringing the NGS School under this centre. It quoted from Report II of NGS, July 1974 to say that “the work that the volunteers will be doing in the rural areas or backward areas generally will need strong Intellectual aid (emphasis in original). They try to introduce new varieties of crops without knowing how exactly the resistance to innovation is to be overcome...knowledge of all kinds helpful to planning for the development of an area, knowledge not only regarding the known technology of agriculture and other activities but also knowledge about how to plan for an area and how to integrate various forces leading to development. This kind of knowledge, in fact a continuous supply of it, to the volunteers in the field is essential”. (There was no Google or Wikipedia, those days!) .



On the back of the GVS, two major centres were set up: a ) Centre for Studies in Regional Planning – a post graduate centre for studies on Area Development b) Inter Disciplinary centre for research & Training in Social Development which was to relate to the work of GVS, the NSS and the CSSP ( Concurrent Study Service Project). On the recommendation of the Education Ministry, the GVS won the “Commonwealth Youth Award for 1976”. From 1973 to 1978, GVs fielded 50 university graduates. Nine year into the scheme, the University decided to discontinue GVS programmes.

### **After GVS, what?**

In the perspective model envisaged in the proposal (see figure 2), next to the link between the rural scene and the university, the specific question reads “in what way can a “University” contribute to social development. Given such a perspective, it needs to be asked, why did the University decide to discontinue the GVS programme, nine years into the scheme? Muneer’s understanding is instructive. He says, “The University really did not stop. The funding came from the NSS budget, which was meant for undergraduates. In the 80s we were asked to crystallise the programme, and various committees were formed. So finally as a follow-up to the GVS programme, the University introduced graduates and post graduate courses in Rural Development, and now many rural colleges have these courses. We lost interest in that because it became like any other course, where only the course content is rural and the field work more as assignments. We wanted the course to be 50% percent

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associated with the NGS programme from within and outside the University of Bombay. [CED Code: C.N50.19750200] e-copy at [[eldoc1/n20a/N20aB1228.pdf](#)]

theory and 50% should be practical learning by involvement in the rural issues rather than the university system of assignments.

“That is why we started the same programme as an NGO called the Academy of Development Science in Karjat. Here again there was a divergence, one group felt that the knowledge and experience should be developed by the Academy, after which we take the responsibility of capacity building of the students.” This is where the split between the two founders Darshan Shankar and Muneer Alavi took place. Darshan Shankar went on to form the FRLHT ( Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions), which has now fathered an Ayurvedic and traditional healing programme including a major hospital near Bangalore, and Muneer Alavi became the patron of a whole range of NGOs, and Village level Youth workers through the “Rural Communes’

An article<sup>3</sup> in Youth Affairs March 1982, says Rural Communes (RC) set up a Centre for Experiential Learning (CEL), a Training and Resource Centre at Khalapur as a voluntary organisation totally independent of the University. Under CEL, RC developed a Village Level Worker Training Programme which was a one year programme.<sup>4</sup> Their concept of experiential learning was to have village level workers in the field, undergo an initial intensive residential training programme, after which they undertook development work in the village, starting with village analysis, identification of issues and problems and initiate action on development programmes. Every month, the students would return for five days intensive feedback and reflection along with theoretical and skills inputs.

In 1976, the SNDT Women’s University also headquartered in Mumbai decided to work for rural women by adopting nine villages 200 kms. from Mumbai in South Gujarat. By October 82 the University launched activities like disseminating information about simple useful technologies in rural areas, building a women’s cooperative, training in traditional skills, organizing awareness generation workshops and legal counseling programmes. In a brochure<sup>5</sup>, the university says that the programme plays a dual role of catalyst and interventionist and that its constant battle has been to retain the balance between academic stance and commitment to action. In this context, the objectives of this programme includes “scientific” awareness of social situation, Training in traditional and non-traditional skills, link between rural women and government bureaucracy for better implementation of govt. schemes.

Two year ago, the SNDT University decided to formally recognize the VLWT experiential training process, and decided to award certificates for students who successfully passed this course. Says Muneer, “Around four years ago, we revived the Graduate Volunteer Scheme, under Continuing and Adult education of the SNDT University, because we felt that these courses are good as extension education for adult learners. The student may be graduates, may be 10<sup>th</sup> standard or may be just farmers. If they have the spirit of self learning, we want to make it possible for them to formalize their learning and at least get recognised in the form of certificates.”

### Now what?

Four decades down the line, barring for a few examples like ASTRA, the bulk of work which started off as “making university education appropriate for the social environment”, has come down to preparing

<sup>3</sup> Rural Communes, Youth Affairs, March 1982 [CED Code:C.Q40.19820300] e-copy at [\[eldoc1/q40 /Q40\\_B1008.pdf\]](#)

<sup>4</sup> Our Involvement in the Field of Empowerment of the rural poor. Note by Rural Communes. 20th Jan 1999. [C.Q46.19990120] [\[eldoc1/q46 /Q46\\_B1092.pdf\]](#)

<sup>55</sup> University goes to villages. Rural Development Programme of SNDT University, Research Centre for Women’s Studies, SNDT University. [CED code: R.K02.600]

students to take up “premium jobs” which is tapping what is now described as the “fortune at the bottom of the pyramid”. Your first day at a typical TISS, or IRMA would be peppered with Hollywood style dialogue of entering the portals of an elite career and as you are there you are already made to wonder whether you would be picked up in campus placement at six figure salaries. You may even be asked to compete for a post degree stint within an incubator programme sponsored by an international bank or a corporate giant spending CSR money. You get the posting if you can focus your energies on dreaming up a “bottom of the pyramid” project, which has the potential to generate profits, while serving some social or environmental need. Thus clearly most of the “feedback” which the GVS envisaged as necessary for education to stay relevant, is being decided by the Piper. Today the tune is Innovation, social inclusiveness, bottom of the pyramid etc.

Some tentative questions for further study

There is the issue of standards and objectivity in experiential learning and field involvement. How does one understand and evaluate it? Expecting students to make an assignment of their involvement seems to detract from involvement in issues. It adds a burden which requires more research and detached frame of mind. For example, given the current agitation in Delhi, where student upon teacher and political parties have worked themselves into a frenzy asking for the death sentence for rapist, the essential legal jurisprudence around due process, on the linkage between harsher punishments and conviction rates, or socialization of gender equity and justice into the law and order system or the more recent academic work done in women’s studies on around issues of power within family and between the sexes and so on have been given the miss and declared politically incorrect. Even the government seems to be on the backfoot. Would the University be able to rise above this?

Similar issues did come up strongly in the earlier phases of the project especially in the land university project where students were driven to extremes of manual labour. In the ADS and RC standoff, there was the issue of research. Whether only that knowledge which can be mustered and captured in an academy, is worthy of transmitting, teaching and capacitating? Finally there is the issue of professionalization of the faculty. Is it possible to have a faculty for experiential programmes who are rooted in academics and full time engaged with it. A corollary to that is whether the high cost of maintaining faculty in professional position can be maintained? As a counter, is it possible to have a faculty based not on academic achievements but on field based achievements, who may not fulfill the formal academic requirements of the University system, but can be instructed to develop a minimum academic rigour and the objectivity referred to earlier. What are the possible synergies between the two models?



In conclusion

Socially inclusive innovation today as seen by the youth of today, is, as it should be, different from what it was in the seventies. In this recent article for instance, a group of students of HR College, are

giving business classes to rural youth, based on a model in Singapore. This was a purely student based initiative. At the University level, we have the Tata Institute of Social Sciences which offers a course of Social Entrepreneurship, where students are working on innovating and developing the business plans for a project in a rural area. They are simultaneously competing for an incubator programme which will be sponsored by the DBS bank at the Institute, which gives their start up a two year support.

What then is happening in the University? Will the dominant trend towards financialisation and knowledge economy, overtake the innovation and critique space ?

## Discussion

Dhruv: You left the last part of your presentation open ended. I think we need to explore the ideological premises of our own disciplinary foundations including the management sciences.

On the issue of there being no way of evaluating the students in this work: Founding groups like this within the university structure, as did the ASTRA project at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, creates all kinds of structural problems. One problem was how were you going to evaluate the work of the faculty who were doing the research work. There was no mechanism because if somebody increased the efficiency of a *chulla*, from 8 % to 25% where would that work be evaluated? The IIS was a research institute which had no mechanism to evaluate this kind of outreach. It was a big problem. I know of two faculty who were leading scientists in their right and whose promotion to professorship was postponed by two years simply because they hadn't published in some international journal.

ASTRA had a policy not to recruit people as assistant professors. They only took in project assistants. The result was that they have not produced a second generation who had a standing within the IISc.

Rajni: On the question of experiments like GVS and ASTRA, the question is how much of the mission of these projects affected the parent institutions. Is the institution anymore engaged in the critical problems of our times? These are not just matters for economists and sociologists; they are also fundamentally issues of science and Technology.

Dhruv. ASTRA itself has become the Centre for Sustainable Technology. It is something else because the social agenda has changed.

Shambu: When IISc spoke of its contribution to society when it celebrated its 75th or hundredth year, four of the points were related to ASTRA's work. So to showcase the University, such work is considered important, but on a day to day basis it is insignificant.

Student: In Kerala where I studied, the compulsory social work was never taken seriously. To get the exam hall tickets, the teachers would just fill up the register.

John: There is no serious attempt today by the faculty and existing teacher community to do anything innovative or engage in. In fact they see it as a burden. You have to correct so many assignments. In Bombay University they had started this foundation course, which was supposed to be project work on social issues. All the teachers led by a progressive teachers Union rebelled, and now the assignments system has crashed. Now this work is done by having a visiting practitioner speak to them for three hours. They call it a seminar, and thus fulfill their requirements. There is no serious attempt to engage with issues in the field.