

## HOUSING THE POOR IN INDIA A PROFESSIONAL DILEMMA

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A visitor to India rarely fails to notice large pockets of poverty, which pervade the land. This poverty is most dramatically visible in the vast areas of slums and squatter settlements which are rapidly becoming an important and often dominant feature of the Country's towns and cities.

Against this backdrop a growing number of young architects and planners in India are beginning to question their role and hence the professional training they receive. Their lifestyle keeps them alienated from the world of the underprivileged, and their education is primarily structured so that they end up working within a professional environment confined to the design and construction of a few show places - high-rise hotels, office blocks, imposing government and civic structures, and mansions for the rich in towns and cities. In such roles they bypass the needs of the majority of the urban and rural poor who lack even the most rudimentary shelter and basic services.

Some key questions, which must therefore be posed, are whether the professionals have a useful role to play in solving India's housing problem? Does their current training fit them to play that role? If not, then what can be done to devise a suitable training programme to enable them to make an active contribution?

In order to examine these questions, and perhaps find some answers, the first step is to understand the scope and dimensions of India's housing problems and to see to what extent its population patterns and available resources dictate the housing policies and priorities of the government. It is then necessary to examine the role of the professionals by looking at the differences between the practice of traditionally trained professionals and those involved in community-based programmes, thus highlighting the dilemmas facing socially concerned professionals. A case will be made for "learning by doing", and the potential role for professionals as teachers of field workers will be examined in light of the experience and performance of other

professionals, such as the medical practitioners in the People's Republic of China.

## Housing Crisis

Four decades ago, in the late 1940s, the total population of India was approximately 400 million, with an urban component of 60 million. Now double that figure, i.e. 800 million, It is almost equivalent to the combined population of Africa and Latin America, and all of It squeezed into an area considerably less than half of Australia. It has been estimated that, in another ten years, India will have approximately 1000 million people (1 billion) and a projected urban population the equivalent of either the USA or the USSR.

According to government statistics, there are over 600 million Indians living in 600,000 villages. Their livelihood depends on the 154 million hectares of arable land, of which 113 million hectares are un-irrigated. This means that a large section of the rural population is surviving below subsistence level, a phenomenon that is mainly responsible for the continuing drift by the villagers to towns and cities in search of improved opportunities.

India's census figures also suggest that in this drift, the rural migrants tend to bypass the smaller local towns which, like villages, are also economically stagnant. Villagers prefer to travel directly to middle level towns or metropolitan centres, which appear to offer better prospects of employment, rather than to the bright lights and so called superior amenities of large cities which are popularly believed to act as magnets. The greater work opportunities in large cit-

ies are there simply because they are multifunctional in nature and their economic activity is diversified, two of the main factors which combine to enhance their appeal to immigrants.

Most cities in India, particularly larger metropolises like Bombay and Calcutta, are not well equipped to receive the migrants from rural areas. The type of work the newcomers undertake generally determines the nature and place of their squatting areas but the majority are unable to find places where they can enjoy even the rudimentary amenities of city life - a good water supply, lighting, roads, and the means of removal of human and other waste. Instead they are forced to take their place alongside roads, railway lines, canals, rivers or any other available neglected, unoccupied urban land which offers the easiest access to a possible source of work.

In their attempt to build themselves some shelter in the cities, squatters are handicapped by the absence of traditional materials such as mud and thatch which are used in the villages. Instead, they have to rely on materials such as packing cases, flattened tins and rusty corrugated iron sheets, often salvaged from waste or refuse dumps.

These appalling housing conditions which exist in both India's rural and urban environments are but one indication of the enormous and complex task which India's political and professional leaders face - a task to plan for one billion people and to determine how to deal with the phenomenal growth of population, bearing in mind that this growth is specially high among the poor. The limits of this growth have to be assessed in terms of the material and human resources and the extent to which they can be made compatible with the

environment. Decisions also have to be made on how to reverse this growth of poverty, where should the extra number of people live, work and move, produce their food and their shelter and develop a stable and balanced social and economic life. In a rapidly urbanising climate the main problem is not that India needs more houses, land and services but that houses, land and services are needed for a growing population that has a decreasing capacity to pay for them. So far, efforts to deal with such a gigantic task have been akin to demolishing a mountain with a toy hammer.

The dilemma of housing the poor in India's rural and urban environments specifically boils down to two issues. The first is how to improve shelter for forty per cent of the rural population, which lives close to or below the poverty line. The second is what can be done to abolish or upgrade urban slums and squatter settlements and ensure the orderly growth of existing and new towns and cities in India.

## Failure of Government Policies

From the available evidence it seems the Indian government's housing policies, despite good intentions, for the most part favour the middle and upper classes. In 1970 the Government-sponsored Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) was established to finance and develop urban housing estates and building material schemes. The Corporation has made some headway in providing serviced land for housing but its contribution to the building of dwelling units has been little more than a drop in the ocean.

The government, through HUDCO and other organisations, has also

tried prefabrication. The Hindustan Prefab Ltd company was requested to manufacture prefabricated houses. Its product has not been well received because of the high cost of manufacture and delivery. The expense proved well beyond the means of those whose needs were the greatest.

Because of the enormity of the problems, more recently, both central and state governments have all but given up trying to provide housing on a mass scale. Instead they have tended to use their meagre resources to upgrade the amenities and services of existing slums and squatter settlements, as well as to service new land for future growth. Currently, the broad aim of the official policies is to leave house building to the people themselves and to allow them to build their shelters by whatever means are available. In many instances building codes and bylaws have been revised to facilitate this practice, which indicates that authorities are now prepared officially to accept sub-standard dwellings.

Slum clearance schemes were launched as early as 1956 but were given a real boost in 1972 when, under the Central Scheme for Environmental Improvement in Slum Areas, the central government offered generous financial assistance to state governments to provide water supply, sewerage and drains, community baths and latrines, street lighting, widening and paving of existing lanes and footpaths. Under this programme some token progress has been made to improve what were previously classed as illegally constructed temporary shelters in the areas variously described as *bustees* of Calcutta, the *chawls* of Bombay, the *charries* of Madras. Attempts have even been made to rehouse Delhi's 300,000 poor who now illegally

occupy *jhuggies* and *jhonpries* on government and public land. Despite these efforts, the main problem of the housing shortage in the country continues to present a major challenge. It is therefore understandable that India's housing authorities are more concerned with problems of finance and land, the two key ingredients of housing, than with the issues relating to the environmental quality and physical comfort requirements of shelter for the poor.

## Professional Dilemma

In all these programmes for housing the poor in India, planners and architects find themselves in a dilemma. They realise that they have been technically well trained in admirably staffed and well equipped institutions and therefore should be in a position to make useful contributions to the problem. But there are serious deficiencies in the way institutions in India organise their curricula largely to replicate what is traditionally offered in schools in Europe and the USA. While this education equips the professionals to perform well in housing projects in the formally organised building sector, it fails to train them to function effectively within what the economists call the informal sector. This is because in slums and squatter settlements communication with people is often more important than the dissemination of highly sophisticated technical and professional knowledge. Communication skills are rarely featured in the professional courses.

## Grassroots Contribution

At a grassroots level where housing policies are implemented the role of the professional lies in supporting those communities which are

already helping themselves. An informal sector provides very poor people with access to consumer goods on a scale well beyond that which any government or agency could ever provide. For example, a family with limited financial resources could shop around to obtain the cheapest deal available or salvage free materials from refuse dumps or purchase goods by payment in kind or through personal service.

In all such self-help housing programmes professional assistance has to operate at a micro level, requiring small scale effort based on common sense and the economical use of limited local resources. It is the kind of work British Town Planner Patrick Geddes proposed in India nearly half a century ago and which has been admirably recorded by Tyrwhitt.<sup>2</sup> Geddes proposed reducing the number and width of paved streets in residential areas, and turning the land into more usable forms of open space, thus minimising the cost of highly elaborate mechanical sanitary facilities. He suggested the money thus saved should be used to increase the number of gardens and playgrounds, to plant fruit trees and to improve existing tanks. His field work in towns such as Madura in south India, are classic examples of what he called “conservative surgery”.

Geddes’s painstaking and common sense approach requires professionals who are prepared to dedicate their lives to improving the environment for large numbers of urban and rural people in India. Improvements can only take place in this type of programme if the professionals are able to win the confidence and support of the people they are trying to help. It is also the kind of work which fails to attract the majority of architects and planners who usually come from



middle-class families and have been reared in well serviced environments.

Community-oriented housing programmes involve many problems, not the least of which being the meagre financial rewards for those who are prepared to undertake the long hours this kind of work demands. The programmes require enormous patience, humility and understanding, and an ability to communicate.

A fundamental difference between a community-oriented professional and the traditional practitioner is the way in which the former deals with the client. Often the professional is the promoter of the schemes. Money is always short and the “community” is not a stable client. In such a situation normal professional wisdom would suggest that the risks involved in this kind of activity should be ultimately borne by those who benefit from the exercise. It means that it is absolutely necessary for professionals to ensure that their clients’ resources are adequate for the task. Such advice is obviously valid for architects and planners who still view community work as an extension of traditional professional practice. It has little application in the informal environment of self-help housing. There are, however, some professionals - Hassan Fathy in Egypt, Laurie Baker in India and John Turner in England - for instance, who have devoted their lives to improving the environment of the poor. When interviewed by Varughese for Architecture and Design, Baker said, “I would rather see a million houses that cost only 500 rupees each, and one only 200 sq.ft. mud and thatch, than one more high-rise building, even if it were necessary. Unless I had done something for the 20 million homeless, I wouldn’t be happy doing a high-rise building.”<sup>3</sup> It must,

however, be recognised that professionals such as Baker, are the exception rather than the rule.

## Appropriate Education

Over the years a number of proposals have been made to train professionals specifically to provide low cost housing and community services. In 1972, Koenigsberger and Markus advocated training professionals called development officers at the then newly-established School of Housing, Building and Planning at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang.<sup>4</sup> Their intention was to produce graduates “who would be educated in basic physical and social sciences relevant to planning and building, and who would have some design skills, a grasp of building technology, surveying and building economics, and, in addition, have management training”. Unfortunately, owing to the absence of appropriate national policies and specific administrative structures where such graduates could be effectively employed, the proposals were considerably watered down on implementation. Koenigsberger and Markus were still aiming at training professionals who could only operate at an upper level, though later in their submission there were some references to the need to combine “learning by doing” in the field.

## Learning by Doing

The emphasis on “learning by doing” was also underlined by Geddes who had recommended that most slum improvements and rural developments involve conservation methods which require long and patient study. Such study could not be done in the office with ruler

and parallels for, according to Geddes, “the plans must be sketched out on the spot, after wearing hours of perambulation - commonly amid sights and odours which neither Brahmin nor Briton had generally schooled himself to endure . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the Indian government’s community development projects, Wilson expressed similar views. He emphasised the need for teachers of block extension workers to ask themselves questions, such as “How do I develop a community programme in such a way as to bring it into the daily lives and habits of the people?”.<sup>6</sup> Wilson suggested that the only way teachers could achieve this was by working at the village level themselves and observing the methods of the village workers.

One of the great needs in teaching, in choosing both the subject matter and the extension methods, was for concrete illustrations which grew out of actual experience and cases involving the problems and situations that the village level worker or other trainees were faced with in their day-to-day work.

Wilson mentioned the case of one teacher who had told him that “the training staff did pretty well in teaching the boys skills such as adjusting plows, making compost pits, etc., but they lack concrete experience and background for illustrating and teaching the skills involved in human relationships, the democratic processes and the many day-To-day situations involving judgement and action on the part of the village level worker”.<sup>7</sup>

## Facilitators

The need to train professionals to work in community-oriented projects in countries such as India was also discussed at a UNESCO workshop, where an attempt was made to spell out the nature of such work! The aim was to see what could be done to produce people who fall somewhere between professionals and tradesmen, and who would not only draw on the knowledge of such specialists but would also extend their work to include planning, management and community development. Such people could be called “facilitators”.

Although the UNESCO workshop went further than any other to raise the importance of this issue, it did not confront the problem of providing administrative and implementation systems necessary to translate the proposals into practice. It also failed to draw the line clearly as to where the contribution of the professionals ended and where the responsibilities of the facilitators began. Another problem lay with the sub-professionals who, after training, may prefer to work in the formal sector rather than in the informal sector, thus being lost to the people who needed them most.

A similar proposal was put forward by the Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia in Vancouver. The aim was to train “habitat workers” in urban environmental planning, engineering and building techniques to work in the poorest community areas.

The Centre proposed a series of “Technical Training Packages” for task-oriented courses. It also recognised that habitat workers should

be selected from the poor communities which were likely to benefit from the whole exercise. The aim was to pick out recognised local community leaders, train them and send them back to their communities either as local officials or as teachers of future habitat workers. However, the major weakness of the Centre's proposal was that it still viewed such workers as part of a public service which, being an arm of bureaucracy, was bound to alienate them from the local community.

## Lessons from China

In this context the Chinese concept of “barefoot doctors” may offer some lessons, even though it has only proved to be a partial success. The Chinese have trained medical university graduates to act as facilitators in the Chinese rural health educational system and also as community educators. These graduates train selected farmers to become part doctors and part fanners, who then return to their communities to deal with most of the common ailments prevalent in their region.

The origin of the plan can be found in 1965, when Chairman Mao Tse Tung made his historic statement about “barefoot doctors” at a time when China was experiencing a severe shortage of medical facilities in the rural areas. Mao's directive was straightforward: ‘Tell the Ministry of Public Health that it only works for fifteen per cent of the total population of the country and that this fifteen per cent is mainly composed of gentlemen, while the broad masses of the peasants do not get any medical treatment. First they don't have any doctors; second they don't have any medicine. The Ministry of Public

Health is not a Ministry of Public Health for the people, so why not change its name to the Ministry of Urban Health, the Ministry of UrbanGentlemen's Health?"<sup>1\*</sup>

He then, putting it bluntly, said that "medical education must be reformed. It was basically useless to study so much . . . three years was enough . . . the important thing was that they study while practising". Mao was critical of the system of examination and treatment used in China's medical schools; he said it was more geared for cities and was totally unsuitable for the rural areas. Mao believed that China's more than 500 million peasants needed medical care as much as urban residents.

Mao's 1965 directive clearly recognised that China's medical profession was unable to solve the problems of rural areas - both in terms of the attitudes held by the doctors and the numbers of doctors available. Consequently a decision was made to bypass the profession and establish a new organisation.

The new organisation was at first only a partial success as it failed to attract the wholehearted support of the established medical profession. As a result of years of training in an academic environment in the company of professional colleagues, medical practitioners tended to conform to the norms of the profession rather than to the needs of the society in which they were working. Already-scarce resources, advanced equipment and expensive research, were traditionally directed to sophisticated hospitals and medical schools. It was not possible to dismantle this well-entrenched system overnight and to install a new one in its place.

Finally, after receiving considerable, often venomous criticism, the Ministry of Public Health managed to persuade a sizeable number of doctors to go to the countryside. They also shortened the curriculum in medical schools in the communes to three years and revised it so as to combine theoretical study with practice. The end result was a “barefoot doctor” who was not the conventional type of health worker trained to assist fully qualified doctors, but who represented the development of a new role around which the delivery of medical services was organised.

The “barefoot doctors” (i.e. part fanners, part doctors) operate at the local brigade level where community participation is maximised and the lead is given by people who are the product of the local community. The strong hand of political direction from commune level downwards is clearly evident. The fully trained professional educator and the part fanner/part doctor meet at commune level.

In the Chinese model the hierarchy is clearly defined; the professional is essentially a teacher, and does not operate below the commune level. If this approach was applied to a housing programme, then the habitat workers or facilitators, though trained similarly, would not become officials. They would be part-time community workers with some rudimentary technical knowhow. They would operate at the local level, providing widespread services for a large part of the poorer sections of the population.

## Conclusion

The role of the professional, as it emerges from the above discussion is one of a middleman between those at the top who formulate policies and the field workers who facilitate their implementation on the ground. The challenge is for professionals to be flexible and move between the two disparate worlds with equal ease.

A possible solution to these massive problems would be if governments could limit their role to providing infrastructure development, some controls and funds, while generating a climate for spontaneous, and incremental grass roots building activities on an extensive scale. This would be impossible in a system which is rigid and stratified to such an extent that innovations and initiatives are lost in a maze of bureaucratic rules and regulations. So, in order to succeed in their objective, governments and policy makers would have to be flexible and be prepared to examine carefully achievements and mistakes, monitor progress and re-adapt their policies to what is possible and realisable.

An important message that comes from the Chinese experience is the need for professionals in India to examine their role within the broader perspective of the underlying processes of cultural change which is continuously taking place. At present, professional training is designed to equip students to live and work in a society which is already familiar to them; there is no need to teach the average professional student to think first of identifying major problems and then to work out solutions to these problems as the the major problems are quite obvious. The need is to solve them, not to identify them.



The professionals already know the kind of questions which will be asked of them and the job demands that will be made upon them. Consequently, most professional training is designed in terms of generating a product, in this case housing, rather than dealing with the underlying processes which lead to production. The architects or planners come to judge themselves by what they have to offer to the programme in which they participate.

Professional training, as it operates in India, produces programme-oriented specialists. Only rarely does it produce a problem-oriented specialist who is prepared to face the problems and try to look at them in a new light.

Specifically, in the case of housing, the answers to major problems still have not been worked out. What now becomes clear is that the task of professionals is not to produce a standard, watered-down, middle income version of a house, but to know how to adapt technical knowledge and skills to the economic, social, educational and political reality of the community in which they work. The successful professional is one who has learned to be problem or process oriented and not programme or product oriented.

It is critically important that professionals keep an open mind and be willing to learn continuously while contributing to the process of house building in an informal sector. Ideally this learning process should extend to institutional level where, as Schon has admirably stated, “professionals, individually as well as collectively, at various levels, learn through experience to detect and correct errors as the programme proceeds. According to Schon, “when an error is

discovered i.e. a mismatch between what you expect and what you get from an action, it is possible to go on to intervention, production and monitoring of an alternative action”.<sup>11</sup>

This “learning by doing” approach, which should permeate through all levels and which is dynamic and allows continual adjustment to new developments, suggests a different training than the kind widely accepted at present in India. It requires professionals who are not only trained to teach using knowledge acquired through “learning by doing” but who are also able effectively to play the role of intermediaries acting as conduits to keep the information flowing up and down the organisational ladder. The role is not an easy one in a country where government agencies and community facilitators are poles apart and where communication between the two is virtually non-existent.

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