

TECHNOLOGY FOR THE ARTISANS

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It is my purpose, in this note, to highlight some of the dangers of introducing technology into an unequal and exploitative social system even when this technology is 'appropriate', in the usual sense of the term, and introduced into the poorer segments of the society. My examples I draw from groups of artisans, mainly because I am somewhat familiar with their plight, but I imagine the dangers are equally relevant for other groups of people and other forms of technology.

II

Introduction of technology into the processes of production used by artisans seems primarily to be aimed at achieving at least:

- a) a higher rate of production, and thereby a higher income;
- b) a less labourious method of production, thereby minimising physical hardships;
- c) a more efficient mode of production thereby avoiding wastage and, consequently, enhancing profits;
- d) a better quality for the products; and
- e) sometimes, capital intensive modes of production, thereby partly or wholly releasing the artisan for other necessary work

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Most often, however, the purpose of introducing technology is to raise the incomes of the artisans, and all other effects are incidental, though welcome.

III

This increase in productivity, efficiency and product quality, and the resultant increase in incomes invariably leads to the following dangers, as both theoretically arguable and borne out by my experience with artisan groups:

Danger I

Inevitably, technology does not reach everyone at the same time, as it can't, both because such efforts are usually either aimed at or implemented through specific groups of artisans identified for the purpose, and that the capital and other inputs required are never available in the quantum that would make it possible to introduce the technology to all artisans in the country simultaneously.

As the market for the goods produced by artisans does not necessarily grow, and certainly not in proportion, with the introduction of technology, what very often happens is that artisans who have benefited from technology gradually take over the market of those who have not had this benefit.

Poverty not being a static phenomenon, very often the raising of incomes of one group of artisans is at the cost of the incomes of many other groups, and apart from the tangible and abject misery this causes in the less fortunate, it also encourages the formation of inequalities, among the artisans, similar to those which it was, in the first place, the effort to fight against ⁱⁿ the larger society.

Danger 2.

This uneven availability of technology sometimes allows some of the artisans themselves to start exploiting or undercutting those who have not had the good fortune of receiving this technology at the same time,

Danger 3

The introduction of new, even 'appropriate', technology into the production processes of the artisans sometimes makes what was traditionally a low-return activity (in terms of profits) into a relatively high-return activity. This, in turn, often results in the shifting of capital, by rich people, from some other activity to this activity.

The coming in of these rich people into the activity results in the displacement of the artisans, who cannot compete with the money power of these new investors. Either through the advantages of capital availability, credit capacity and economies of scale, or through even more

exploitative activities like undercutting or bulk purchase of raw-materials, these new and rich investors take over the production process and the once independent artisan becomes an employee, with all the attendant social and economic hardships.

Danger 4.

Very often, in making the production process less tedious and more efficient, the newly introduced technology also changes the social relations and production relations of the community. For example, in some communities the introduction of technology made it possible for the male artisan to, on his own, produce his wares without help from his wife or daughters. This, unfortunately, adversely affected the position of the women in the male dominated society, for their redundancy in the primary production process made them appear to be now useless in the task of earning the daily livelihood.

IV

It seems clear to me that if technology is to be introduced in a way that is at least not harmful to a rural community, leave alone being beneficial to it, ^{it} is essential that a proper organisation of the people be available wherever technology is sought to be introduced.

The larger the organizational base, and the more democratic and egalitarian the structure, the lesser the threat from danger I. Similarly, the internal strength of

the people's organisation in fighting potential exploiters within would ensure protection from danger 2. The collective money power of the organisation is essential to fight and survive the possible take-over bids of external rich investors.

The educational and cultural tone of the people's organisation would help ensure that discrimination against women, or other groups of people, does not follow a change in the production relations.

V

But introducing technology and raising productivity and incomes of people is, however difficult, much easier than building up an organisation. Income generation gives quick and easily tangible results and is both an assuage to the sincere worker's concern and publicity material for the developmental operator.

Building up organisations is slow, unglamorous often hazardous. So technology and gets proliferated every day, and we happily create problems for the next lot of well meaning developmentalists to confuse and confound further.

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