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# THE TAVISTOCK APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENS IN ORGANIZATIONS

We would like to share the conceptual framework behind what has become known as the “Tavistock Approach”, elaborate the concepts with illustrations, and share how the authors have used these concepts in their consulting and managing experiences. This is in order to demystify the approach, which in our experience is a “Living methodology” for individual and organizational state diagnosis and problem solving.

## The Tavistock Approach

Early theorists on organizations focused on the internal aspects span of control, levels of hierarchy, work place redesign, etc. As the environment in which organizations function grew more complex and fast changing, it became imperative to study how organizations were being affected by influences from outside. Along with this, managers and organizations theorists become aware that changes in one area, or aspect, of an organization affected the functioning of other areas. This awareness of the outside influence and the inside inter dependencies led to what was called the open systems approach to organizations. It was initially worked with at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, London. Social scientists there have continued to develop this approach, mainly through action research. However, many social scientists in various countries, including in India working outside the Tavistock Institute have also been using and developing this particular approach. The label “Tavistock Approach” has continued to be in use to describe the work of a limited number of social scientists working within and also independently of the Institute because, it is our impression, numerous others who also utilize this approach do not adhere strictly to the rigours insisted upon by the Tavistock Institute and the demands of the conceptual framework.

## Systems

A system consists of inter-related parts that together produce something that none of the parts by themselves exhibit. Let us take a simple example of a stereo system. It consists of a turntable, stylus, speakers, amplifiers, etc. None of these by themselves exhibit the property of music. It is only when the parts are working together appropriately do we get music. The interdependencies between the parts are obvious – anything that happens to one part will effect the whole system.

The concept of System, therefore, can be used to understand almost anything – from an atom to the universe. It seems logical then to try and understand what differentiates, or separates, one system from another. This brings us to the concepts of boundaries. Boundaries are “limits” that are conceptualized by human beings to separate systems depending on what they want to delineate as their unit of study or focus.

We believe that the key to understanding organizational dynamics lies in understanding the notion of boundaries – boundaries of systems that separate each system from others and from the environment, as also the boundaries that separate subsystems from one another, within a system.

## **Type of Boundaries**

Before we elaborate the various types of boundaries, an important concern to hold on to is that boundaries can be either “broken” or “negotiated”. If they are broken, there will be “noise” or dysfunctionality, in the system. If negotiated (i.e. if transactions across it are consciously planned) the system will continue functionally. The concept is as simple as the difference between week-end guests who have written earlier and received affirmative response from you, and a family that arrives at your doorstep late at night without prior exchange of communication and expect to be fed and offered a bedroom. The types of boundaries we find useful to focus on when working with organizations groups and individuals are:

### **Space Boundary**

The physical limits within which the organization functions. It may be the factory premises, a particular marketing territory, one section of the work place, etc.

### **Task Boundary**

The agreed definition of a task also defines what activities are legitimate for those engaged in accomplishing it. For example, if a task-force has been set up to deal with an organizational crisis, it is inappropriate for it to continue to meet once it has overcome the crisis. However, taskforces do continue to meet even after they have completed the task they were set up for, and this brings us to the next type of boundary.

### **Sentient Boundary**

This encompasses the values, attitudes, feelings and emotions (both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’) that individuals and groups develop around themselves and which form almost palpable boundaries that hold them together. In organizations, the nature and shapes of these boundaries are important to diagnose in order to find out what is really happening in the system. The example given in the previous paragraph illustrates how a sentient boundary continues to operate even when the task boundary has ceased to exist, thus bringing in a task irrelevant boundary.

Most tasks are cyclical in nature, i.e., they begin, end and begin again, like for example heating and cooling of ball bearings. However, if those engaged in this have a very positive attitude towards their own skill and rather negative attitude towards those who collect the cooled bearings for scraping and finishing, it is likely that the former will break their task, time and territorial boundaries and try to “ensure” that the next process is being properly done.

### **Time Boundary**

This refers to the times within which activities have been scheduled-the beginning and the ending. In our own culture (with this life being viewed as only one of many by a large majority of Indians) is continuously broken without realising that breakage leads to dysfunctions he is creating in his family, the families of his subordinates, other task and sentient boundaries. Further, it is also likely that the notion of “commitment” is being used as a defense against the anxiety of facing such realities as poor initial planning of task and time boundaries. To that extent, “commitment to work” is a fantasy to avoid hard, reality oriented work in terms of planning.

## **Importance of Understanding Boundaries**

Understanding boundaries is an integral part of understanding the Tavistock Approach and we shall now be elaborating the issues around the various boundaries at some length.

Time is a social construct that the human mind has manufactured to measure the state of decay of things. The boundary of time for organizations can be seen from this point of view. Of course some social scientists have argued that the process of entropy does not operate in so far as organizations are concerned i.e. numerous organizations regenerate themselves by utilizing available energy in new ways. Our understanding from history is that so far this has happened in a very limited scale. That is to say, time boundary or the life of organizations may have been quite long in course of which some organizations have been able to work themselves out of setbacks, but in the end those have reached the end of their time boundary. The history of the rise and fall of nations are there for everyone to see. There are also records of companies folding up or being taken over by other companies. The later are examples not of entropy but of new time boundaries coming into existence for both the company being taken over and for the one that takes over, because both undergo qualitative changes after takeovers and mergers. What however, happens is that the boundary held in the mind becomes a fantasy while the boundary in existence at a point of time is quite different. A classic example of that is the fantasy of India as a nation existing for over 5000 years, while the reality is that even the India of 1947 and 1986 are not the same in terms of its other boundaries.

So, in terms of time boundary, while some organizations are built with a very limited span, like a conference, others are thought to be immortal, though the reality may be different. There is also a widely shared understanding that most tasks when completed outside their planned or stipulated time boundary, become partially or wholly meaningless. This preoccupation with “immortalisation” and spilling over of tasks outside the stated boundaries may well be cases of defense against the fear and anxiety of future or even death of many individuals.

Space is another kind of boundary that is important, because it not only defines an aspect of each institution of its parts, it also helps us to understand the process of transactions of these institutions with their environment or between the parts of the same institution. Such understanding is essential for monitoring the viability of any system and measuring the outputs of the sub-systems and those of the total system.

We shall be touching upon task and sentient boundaries later. What we must hold in our minds for the present is that most of these boundaries are not thoroughly explored as we go about our activities. Consequently, at various times boundaries are broken without any realization leading to many unintended consequences. Further, the causes of such breaking of boundaries may lie embedded in deep seated anxieties and fears of people which go beyond rational explanations.

## **Using the Concept of Boundaries**

The notion of boundaries presents us with a common framework to understand the dynamics of individuals, groups and institutions of various sizes-right upto nations or even the organization of several nations. The individuals, groups and institutions as systems take in inputs, or import things, ideas, people, money, electricity, etc, from its environment, albeit paying a “price” for it, transform these into some kind of products and export the products into the environment, once again for some kind of a “price”. We have put the word “price” in inverted commas because the energy spent in loving is also paying a “price”, but it cannot be compared to the process of what one pays to buy a cake of soap, for instance. So long as the transactions at the import and export ends are appropriate, the system-be it an individual, be it a group, be it a large institution- survives and grow. When, for whatever reason, the transactions become inappropriate, the system begins to lose its viability and eventually perishes. Since boundaries are held also in the mind. One has to not only explore the actual transactions, but also examine whether the boundary held in the mind coincides with the actuality. Further, it has also to be noted that most abstract boundaries are often not sharply defined lines, but rather are gray areas.

Examples of grayness of boundaries are the interface between a manufacturing concern and its wholesalers or a church and its parish in a multi-religious community.

It will be in order to elucidate the point made in the foregoing paragraph with some examples around individuals and groups.

## **Individuals and Boundaries**

Individuals at all times live in two worlds those of the past and the present. The world of the past consists of memories of past experiences as well as the “forgotten” experiences. We have put inverted commas because the process of forgetting, as we mean it here, needs to be understood. Extremely painful and anxiety provoking experiences are put away beyond one’s awareness. For example, the infant and the child cannot ordinarily recall their experiences of hunger and the fear of annihilation on the occasions when the mother was late in feeding the baby. This fear of annihilation remains in all of us beyond our awareness. This storehouse of experiences is known as the unconscious. Every individual copes with the presence of these experiences in their unconscious through various kinds of psychological processes. One of these is called splitting.

To elaborate this process most infants perhaps get frightened of darkness more than once. This feeling of fear associated with darkness is then attributed to darkness itself. That is to say, darkness becomes ‘bad’ in many ways for the individual. When the infant gets frightened of darkness, it takes in (introjects) darkness. The infant cannot work out the logic of the darkness, it is only aware of its fear because it cannot see the familiar external world and feel comforted. Darkness and its associated frightening experience dwell in the unconscious. Later on, this fear in the unconscious is attributed in various ‘bad’ ways to darkness. Satan becomes the prince of darkness, a bad family member becomes the black sheep of the family, dark skin denotes inferiority for many people and so on. The experience and its associated feelings in one’s unconscious are split off and attributed (or projected) on to objects in the outer world. When many people share similar experiences and project, after a time the ‘bad’ meaning is again taken in (reintrojected) giving rise to such phenomena as apartheid. For reasons not understood, some pleasant experiences are also introjected and later projected as idealizations.

These processes clearly show the confusion of boundary. The fear is within the inner world of the individual, taken in at some time in the past. This is then attributed to something in the present. The result is as shown in one of the illustrations above, racialism. Associated with this process is the fact that we spend a good deal of our energy in keeping the anxiety provoking experiences in our unconscious. When we get in touch with this process, energy is released for other activities.

If any individual goes through too many anxiety provoking or frightening experiences, he sometimes begins to live in his inner world only, the inner world of fantasies, which he does not test in his here and now experience of reality. He is then called a psychotic and needs treatment. So an individual remains efficient and effective to the extent that he does not confuse between what is inside of him and what is outside and deals appropriately with the transactions across this boundary of what he is and what is outside of him.

## **Groups and Boundaries**

A similar process applies to groups of various sizes as well. A somewhat recent example from a public sector company illustrates this point. This company invited one of the authors (along with one of his colleagues, Leena Chatterjee) to help its senior managers examine problems of delegation and acceptance of authority. One of the findings in course of the project was that initially this institution was set up as an ancillary to a government department. Consequently, in those days all transactions with the environment were monitored through that department. The situation was somewhat like a little child relating to the world outside its home through its parents where all major decisions about the child’s relationships to the world at large were regulated by the parents. Since this boundary condition was taken in by the managers in the past, even today they

continue, in many ways, to abdicate their authority and its concurrent responsibility to deal with its external environment even though some time ago the institution has become a full fledged public sector company. One of the results is that the senior managers still wait for the government department to tell them about going in for new products or new marketing strategies.

## **Our Conceptual Framework as Consultants**

We can now use a label to describe the process through which we assist individuals and groups to look at the appropriateness of their transactions across their boundaries. This label is psychoanalytic or psychodynamic approach. We use the insights gained by the practitioners of these sciences and assist individuals and groups to make their own insights. Once a group gains an insight about the nature of inappropriate boundaries that it holds in the mind, it can change its internal structure and also modify its transactions with its environment. Let us now discuss some aspects of this insight making process.

The first one is that while “insight making”, or learning through exploring one’s experiences and testing one’s assumptions, is very effective because the learner has access to direct evidence, it is also painful. It is painful because one surfaces into one’s conscious part of the mind painful and anxiety provoking experiences of the past.

But then the process of growing is painful in any case. If the logic for avoiding situations that hold the potential for pain associated with psychic growth is accepted, one has to also decide not to have children because every child goes through all kinds of pain associated with growing, beginning with stomach ache and gum trouble during the cutting of their first teeth to eventually growing decrepit and dying of old age or worse, with many pains experienced in between.

The second aspect is that in such a learning process, one has to establish “mutual dependency”. Anyone who is assisting in this process can, at best, offer a working hypothesis with which the learner has to work. Otherwise, one learns a concept based another’s experience. The problem of learning beliefs or concepts based on others’ experience is that in course of time, as Erich Fromm (1969) points out, beliefs and concepts become structured and bureaucratized in the sense that some people with power in the system take charge of keeping alive these beliefs and concepts. As a result people stop testing these beliefs and concepts, and live with, in a sense, “stories” that most likely contain half truths or none at all. One of the functions of bureaucratization of beliefs and concepts is emphasizing differences and compartmentalizing them rather than managing them. Belief in God is a universal example in this context. Serious students of religion almost never have any reservation in stating that most great religious leaders have fundamentally made similar statements about the nature, of what they have called God and the interface between their idea of man and god. Yet, in course of time, their experience of god has been bureaucratized and religions, as practiced by the masses under the guidance of priests, more often than not emphasise the differences between religions rather that focus on their meeting grounds.

As a result of this kind of process various aspects of culture become stagnant, some aspects become irrelevant and some others exhibit downright dysfunctionality.

The third aspect of learning through experience is that it is one of the most effective ways of understanding political processes, which are fundamental to any kind of organization. The term “political processes” is being used in the widest sense of influence pattern. There is no organization, large or small, from family to international institutions, that do not engage in influencing their own people and those outside of them.

All of us learn about the influence process, or political process, in our families when we are very young. We experience whatever is called “authority”, whatever is understood as “management”, in our families. Some aspects of the idea of authority and management remain in our memory and some are repressed beyond our awareness, into the unconscious. W. Gordon Lawrence (1985) has used the term ‘picture of relatedness’ to

describe this picture of actual relationships that one experiences early in one's life and holds in one's mind, partly consciously and partly unconsciously. Later on one tries, again partly deliberately and partly without realizing it, to live up to this picture of relatedness held in the mind. To that extent, one brings to one's present relationships a process that was true for other kind of relationships. The fallacy of the idea that the pattern of relationships that is useful in one system will also be effective in another, as reflected in such beliefs as an enterprise is one big family, or that students are like teachers 'children', can be easily examined (if one wishes to understand) from some elementary evidences. Close personal relationship, where the parent-like figures are sometimes even willing to sacrifice their life, is a feature of the family which cannot be found in a commercial firm or an educational institution where most senior managers or teachers do not even know the names of numerous employees and students, respectively. In commercial enterprises the personal needs and desires of those who are low down in the hierarchy are just not treated anywhere near the way in which the needs and desires of the very junior members of a family are treated. In educational institutions, the record in India so far is that there have been no serious organized attempt by teachers to fight for the benefits of students. Further, members of a family relate to one another primarily through emotions and secondarily through tasks. Were it not so, the number of divorces would take quantum jump, many children will be thrown out of their houses and many grown up sons and daughters would walk out of the homes of comparatively incompetent parents. In work institutions, on the other hand, people relate to one another primarily through tasks. That is why they are given jobs. Yet this fantasy about family system in other institutions continue.

Various researches and our own continuing experiences show that this picture of relatedness held in the mind is sought to be reproduced in many situations in later life and even when such efforts fail, people hang on to their fantasies. This happens because this process takes place largely beyond people's awareness. One of the destructive results is that one pre-empts the growth of actual relationships that are appropriate to the objectives and tasks of various institutions to which one carries earlier pictures of relatedness.

Learning about group processes, making one's own insights about group processes, puts one in touch with one's unconscious efforts to live upto the relatedness that one holds in the mind and the consequent dysfunctional political process that exist in organizations, to which one contributes even if one dislikes some of its impacts. Perhaps the most telling illustration of this is found in the family. In trying to reproduce the picture of relatedness of childhood, one falls in the trap of the fantasy that one is exactly like one's parent of the same sex, one's spouse is also some kind of a replica of the parent of the other sex, and one's children are like oneself. Further, the fantasy also precludes an examination of the changes that have taken place during the period of one's growth from childhood to adulthood.

The situation becomes more dysfunctional when, as it often happens, the inner reality of past experiences to some extent converges with the present experience. The gap is ignored and the change needed to deal with a different environment becomes even more difficult.

In the conferences where this article was initially presented as a paper, J. V. Singh's (University of Toronto) example of TV Industry is telling. In the TV industry in the U.S. the inner reality of those in business and the environmental reality converged in the early days. The TV entrepreneurs did not feel the necessity to seriously compete with "brother" entrepreneurs because the market did not offer much competition, just as serious competition does not take place between very young siblings. But even when the environmental reality changed, people in the pioneer organizations in the TV industry held on to their inner reality. They began to explore the difference between this inner reality and the outer environmental reality only when the crisis hit them, resulting in the bankruptcy of several pioneer companies. Lack of exploration of what is inside the boundary of the enterprise and what is outside of it led to the obliteration of the boundary of the enterprises. In families this confusion leads to estrangements of various kinds.

As a personal level, the example given by Indira Parekh (IIMA) in the same conference illustrates this process. Parekh and one of the authors of this article in a consulting project helped managers of a company to explore their pictures of relatedness held in the mind and how they sought to reproduce these, albeit unconsciously, in their respective work situations. One manager, who was bright and aggressive, was trying to deal with his problem of changing jobs many times because of bad fights with his immediate boss in several companies. What he came to realise, i.e. the insight that he picked up for himself, was that in his childhood, adolescent and early adulthood he had many fights with his father and all along his grandfather had provided him with the protection and resources necessary to survive and grow. In his work life he projected this picture of relatedness. As a result he could always establish a good relationship with his boss's boss – the safe object similar to the grandfather – while he fought with his boss who represented the father figure in his unconscious. However, since enterprises are not families, he had to change jobs more often than his skill and capacities merited.

## **The Inner Reality**

What we have so far presented points towards the necessity of testing one's inner reality to update it with the demands of the external reality. Otherwise the current experience resonates with some experience tucked away in our unconscious, and we act it out. As illustrated, the boss is treated as the father who has to be fought and the boss's boss is treated as a safe object like the old grandfather. The new result is that many of our activities are directed towards engaging with tasks that are not functional either to the system or to ourselves because what we are really doing is relating to people on the basis of all kinds of values, feelings, needs, desires and so on, some of which we are aware of and some that we are not aware of, which, we bring to our work situations, as anywhere else. To live up to these, we unconsciously create boundaries of a kind that have no relevance to the tasks one overtly engages with. Often these task irrelevant boundaries are the sentient boundaries.

The relationships that arise out of these sentient boundaries are part of what are known as informal organization. When these sentient boundaries do not match with the boundaries necessary to engage with the acknowledged tasks, one engages with such tasks as are dysfunctional for the system. Such processes give rise to deep seated organizational problems. In order to diagnose these problems it is necessary to closely examine the symptoms. i.e. the phenomena. It is possible to begin to understand the nature of dysfunctional tasks people engage with through a study of the phenomena and interpreting the meaning of the phenomena. That is why such by functional tasks have been termed as phenomenal tasks by Lawrence (1985).

An example of legitimising phenomenal task is perhaps what the Film Censor Board in India does. While it is legitimate in a family for the father to censor what his nine year old child sees in a movie, it is difficult to accept that a nation of over 800 million people need a "legitimate" authority to tell it what kind of actions in films are bad for its morals. The idea behind this seems to be that adult Indians would indulge in bad or immoral or even sinful activities by imitating what happens on celluloid but for a handful of film censor board members interventions. The assumption seems to be that most Indian adults are immature lacking in the ability to decide what is good for them and generally having the minds of infants. Thus, whatever be the stated (normative) primary task of the Film Censor Board, the phenomenal primary task seems to be reproducing the family picture where experienced parents monitor the audio visual experience of their immature children. This becomes more clear when one looks at what such bodies do in some other countries. There they stamp a symbol on the film and the public are informed what the symbol stands for. They can then choose what is good for them and for their children. In India this adult choice is taken away. Our experience, borne out by research is that the more such choices are taken away by force (by the use of law or naked power), the more people are infantilised and begin to behave as selfishly and as chaotically as infants do. Consequently, once people engage with phenomenal tasks, the phenomena seem to triumph, reducing people to less than their capacities and potentialities.

## **Qualities of Boundries**

We have so far presented our ideas of boundaries and the transactions that take place across these boundaries and the degree of their appropriateness.

Now we shall talk about the quality of the boundaries that we hold in the mind and its results.

We have mentioned about the picture of authority and management that we hold in the mind as a result of our early experience in the family. In a sense, these pictures never reflect the reality that we experience later on in life.

The authority of the parents at home is one that we never delegated upwards because we had no choice. This phenomena of being choiceless about others authority is reinforced in schools and colleges. In that process we get out of touch with another reality, which is that as adults we have all the choices with us out of our personal authority, even if some choices are painful. This was one of the lessons that Mahatma Gandhi held before our eyes. We have the personal authority to disregard all kinds of impositions once we decide the true path of action for us in any situation. This was his Satyagraha. We can give our selves even the most painful choice to live up to what we think we ought to do for the sake of the society, and not for our narrow self interest. However, for most of us authority is something that exists outside of us and we only get that authority which is delegated to us. We forget that in most work situations we delegate authority upwards when we sign the joining letter and we agree to accept the rules of our workplace.

Similarly, management is confused with control. In our early life, the management of life in family appear to us as control. We are told what is good for us. Even in those situations where we actively participate in the activities, the fantasy is that we are passively controlled. Like for example being fed and taught. Unless we listen and understand, no one can teach us. Yet the strong fantasy of passivity on the part of the baby actively suckling milk or the child learning his 3 Rs is continued to be held in the mind. Later on this gives rise to the confusion between management and control.

Thus, the quality of boundary conditions in the mind becomes something like a valve or a one way glass. The fantasy is that stimulae pass on from outside to inside. Mutuality or the work done on the system by the individual is denied. As a result, later on too boundaries are fantasized as something that cannot be, or should not, be questioned.

This also happens to groups. In the conference where this article in its first draft was presented, Rajesh Vidyasagar (ITC Limited) presented a paper entitled “Colonialism in the Mind” in which he sought to show how the Indians as a very large group had rationalised their debasement in the hands of the colonialists and how, even after independence, this picture of debasement was being actualised. A telling example of this process is the use of the word ‘vernacular’ instead of mother tongue. “vernacular” means the language of the slaves, which the colonialists had introduced to undermine the power of the mother tongue. Today most people either continue to use the word “vernacular” or substitute it with “regional language”. The language learnt at home thus either puts one in a boundary of slavery or takes one out of one’s family boundary with all its emotional attachments into a large impersonal boundary called the region.

The fantasy of boundary being a one way regulatory demarcation destroys mutuality and creativity, change and growth. It actualizes pictures of controlling and being controlled, invading and being invaded-some kind of a prototype of facism.

When people hold this kind of a notion, or picture of boundary that allows major transactions in one direction only – from the outside to the inside – a corollary process of defence that grows is the notion of impermeable boundaries. This is evidenced in India through the impossibility of becoming a Hindu unless one is born of

Hindu parentage, and the rules of pollution and purity that guard the caste boundaries (which have to a great extent penetrated Christianity and Islam too) in India.

In either situation, the probability is high for people to become slaves to structures and stagnate rather than question and, if necessary, change structures and grow as individuals, groups and institutions.

What we have written above can be restated as the emphasis on containing what we think there is within boundaries rather than growing according to necessity by developing or incorporating things that are not there within a boundary.

Our understanding is that both the processes are necessary, most of the time, simultaneously. A system must regulate its boundary transactions in such a way that dysfunctional stimuli do not threaten it. So an individual avoids eating adulterated food, puts a handkerchief to his nose when he gets noxious odour and rejects such values as are repugnant to him. So also a group tries to see that dysfunctional intrusions into it do not take place. At the same time the individual and the group try to relate to the environment through a two-way process – taking in inputs, transforming the inputs into outputs acceptable or demanded by the environment, and exporting them. For the individual the export commodity consists mainly of his behavior. For the group, it depends of what is its reason for existence in the first place e.g. what is its stated or normative primary task.

## **Administration & Management**

One of these two functions, that of safeguarding the boundary from dysfunctional intrusions, or containing what belongs to the system is, in our understanding, administration. The other function, that of ensuring that the boundary conditions are such that people can engage with tasks, i.e. the appropriate input – transformation – export process continuum, is management. Thus administration and management are two sides of the same coin.

As it has been noted before, in India it seems that due to the nature of interactions within the family (and in particular between the young and the old in terms of our child rearing practices), the emphasis is on containing, or administering, and controlling. The notion of management is almost missing. One of the results of this emphasis on control is that adults feel like infants and after a while begin to behave almost like infants. The response of the powers that be is more in the nature of control than management. It is a vicious cycle where, in the end, the average or the majority of citizens seem to abdicate most of their responsibilities and only look for their privileges-like children looking for fair deals in situations where they have no control over their activities.

The dysfunctional impacts of this process are evidenced by a proliferation of laws that are broken with impunity, controls like those imposed by film censor boards which are evaded through private shows, and the senior civil servants forever complaining about the political interference of ministers where the reality is perhaps two-fold. On the one hand the civil servants are administrators who must learn to contain in such a way that allows the ministers, who are the managers, to interpret the will of the people and implement those. On the other hand, the ministers must understand that they represent the people's will in a democracy, not in a totalitarian system. Given the Indian childhood and its experiences, what perhaps happens is that most administrators fantasise that guarding a systems parameter is all that counts. As a result, creativity, growth and prosperity remain illusive ideals in India. Further, since control is mistaken for management, many ministers perhaps begin to interpret their own will as the people's will. To that extent at the national level too boundaries are perceived, albeit unconsciously, either as similar to one-way glasses or as impermeable. As a result over 40 years after our independence we have 500 million people below the poverty level-which is as many people as there were in India at the time of her independence.

Yet it is not as though in India no one ever tested cultural assumptions, questioned boundaries, and consequently prospered and grew.

The 5000 years old history (or partly proto-history) of India as a sub-continent shows that creativity, prosperity and growth have always remained the domain of the elite. In the four fold Varna system, the vast majority of Shudras were exploited by the three other minority Varnas – the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. It is perhaps not wholly an accident that out of these three elite groups, it is the Vaishyas or the traders, who have been most successfully able to question cultural assumptions, test boundaries and continue to grow. In the conference where this article was first presented, Vipin Garg gave such evidence from his researches, part of which has already been published as a book (1984), as support to the above statement about traders. The other two Varnas, the Brahmin and the Kshatriya have more or less degenerated in terms of their caste practices (dharma) and the result can be seen in the absence of dynamic values related to learning and righteousness as well as in the absence of the value on citizenship role to enhance the nation's welfare. Even when from time to time individuals in India have sought to provide leadership in these areas, the majority seem to have remained apathetic.

## **Applications of the Tavistock Approach**

The question that remains to be dealt with now is how this theoretical approach – the Tavistock Approach – can be applied in various situations. It will be our endeavour to present a framework with some examples in the following pages by sharing our experiences as consultants and during the working conferences that we conduct.

We try to utilize this approach in the role of consultants to assist our client systems. We perceive the role of consultant as one in which the individual uses himself or herself as an instrument of research to understand the subjective nature of the clients. That is to say, we try to understand which experiences our clients are trying to repress or “forget”, and in that process how they are splitting their painful emotions and projecting them into the organization. As consultants we make ourselves available to receive those projections and then offer them back to the clients in a more “digestible” form. These are the working hypotheses that we offer. The client can then choose to work with these hypotheses jointly with us. They may accept or modify them. They may also reject them, but offer alternative hypotheses to jointly explore and act upon. This can be done in a variety of ways.

In order to disseminate the skill for making working hypotheses and jointly exploring them, we offer what are known as the working conference. The idea of these working conferences come from the group therapy sessions of W. R. Bion. The actual idea was later on developed by others like Harold Bridger, John Allaway, A. K. Rice, E. J. Miller and W. G. Lawrence. Over a period of years the working conferences have changed in terms of methodology and their focus have covered the dynamics of business enterprise, social welfare agencies, educational institutions, the civil service etc. In India the present authors and some of their colleagues have been directing and working as consultants in various kinds of working conferences since the early seventies.

As consultants- internal and external – to organizations, the authors and some of their colleagues have helped their clients to make organizational diagnosis and problem identification through in – depth interviews and group meeting. The conference where this paper was originally presented, T. Madhavan Kutty (working for HMT Limited at that time ) described how he and his colleagues had utilized this approach as internal consultants to one of the units of HMT Limited.

The present authors are also engaged in such work as holding workshops for parents to explore the dysfunctional aspects of present day child – rearing practices, and for teachers to look at the learning process. They have also engaged in counseling parents to diagnose the dysfunctional processes in their relationship with their child and students to explore the real problems underlying such symptoms as poor performance or compulsive indulgence in personal anarchy of various kinds. One of the authors have also taken on marriage counseling to help the parents locate what projections they are making on one another beyond their awareness. Lately both the consultants have offered workshops to develop counseling skills at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National academy of Administration and the Sardar Patel National Police Academy, and counseled individual employees in work organizations in order to assist them mobilize their internal resources to deal with frustrating experiences rather than quickly seeking change of job (See notes at the end).

The basic framework of taking on a consultant role remains the same in all these situations, where one uses oneself as an instrument of research, as noted earlier. In order to successfully take on this role the individual has to be in touch with his or her inner world of fantasies. Some of us have gone through personal psychoanalysis to ensure as much as possible that we eliminate the possibility of introjecting what the client system projects on us, so that we can avoid dumping our projections on the clients and instead offer working hypotheses to highlight the nature of their projections.

In this kind of work the structure of the consultancy situation varies, depending on the nature of the client system, the purpose of the project, the primary task derived from the purpose or objective(s), availability of resources (time, money) and so on. By structure of consultancy we mean such things as the method of collecting data (or evidence) for offering hypotheses, the way in which these are offered (verbally or in writing) and the way in which one works with the client system after an agreed set of hypotheses have emerged. The label changes with situations. It is called Action Research when we work with complex organisations. It is known as a working conference when a temporary educational institution is set up to learn to explore various group processes such as how authority is used, what are the problems of using authority or even how to locate it, or one can explore the phenomena of managing innovation, managing differences, managing helping relationships (social work, teaching, etc.) or even to explore one's capacity for innovative self-employment or entrepreneurship. It is called a workshop when parents work with their experience of bringing up children – how they have handled, or are going to handle, new boundary conditions – infant to baby, baby to child, child to adolescent and from adolescent to adulthood. It is called counseling when a student is assisted to explore his experiences to find out, for instance, why while he can teach mathematics to his peers with great skill and effectiveness, he ends up by getting bare pass marks in his own examinations, i.e. what does mathematics symbolize in his unconscious so that he can help others but disowns the same skill when it comes to helping himself.

## **Some Examples from Business Organisations**

Whilst engaged in consultancy with an organization in Bangladesh, one of the authors was intrigued that most managers seemed to perceive the organizations as punitive and discouraging of innovation and risk taking. However, the managers, had no examples to support this perception. Over a period of time an interesting pattern engaged. Each time the group discussed the above issue, it very soon started talking about academics and qualifications. The working hypotheses put forward was that the managers who were also citizens of Bangladesh-were unconsciously bringing into their organization the trauma they had experienced when reading or hearing about the killings of the intellectuals at Dhaka University who had successively taken the risk of opposing the given order. The message they had unconsciously interjected was “it is really dangerous to be intellectually creative and risk taking”. That the hypothesis was valid was subsequently proven by the fact that immediately after it was made and worked with, many risks were taken by group members in confronting organizational issues, including those that meant putting seniors in uncomfortable positions.

A common phenomenon the authors come across is when one department ‘holds on’ to certain stances that other departments find uncomfortable and which they have split off and projected onto the ‘holding’ department. Thus we encounter production departments, who find it difficult to maintain financial discipline, projecting it on to finance departments who happily introject it and actually believe that it is they who are responsible for the money that is spent wisely or wasted. They find it difficult to accept that, in fact, it is the production departments that actually ensure financial discipline. Going still deeper we have found that finance departments unconsciously hold on to the myth that it is they that control financial discipline because this affords them a defence against the anxiety of being a service function. We have often found that service departments intellectually accept their “service-hood” but unconsciously reject it as “service” because in the Indian context it is equated with “servant”. We have often helped service departments get over this unconscious block and change the picture-in-the-mind so that they can actually own their primary task

The joint family model is often unconsciously transferred to the business organization. We come across departments and divisions locked in “sibling rivalry” for the head office’s attention, We have even come across the phenomenon of the head office departments of a large company unconsciously holding on to the “spinster sister” role where a number of managers reported that they had to slog and perform service for the “parents” (Chairman and Directors and for the other “brother” (division) but (like a typical spinster sister who stays behind to mind the parents whilst the other brothers go out into the world) they were never appreciated. Individually managers could actually narrate many personal successes and recognitions but, as a group, they all seemed to need to feel unwanted and unrecognized. It is only after they had worked through the hypothesis offered that this group-feeling could be laid to rest and it was okay to feel cheerful and optimistic.

## **Some Concluding Remarks**

What is seldom recognized is that the Tavistock Approach, as described above, very closely approximates to what may be called the model of work-ethic based on ancient India insights.

This non-recognition arises, most probably, from the fact that the ancient Indian insights have to be culled from an indeed formidable amount of literature comprising of such treatises as the four Vedas, the Vedanta philosophy. The Upanishads and even the Puranas, not to speak of the two epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Very few people ever read the original texts and even a lesser number of them are prepared to spend the energy of making sense of the metaphors that abound in these treatises. Consequently, when they at all try to experiment with ancient Indian psycho-philosophy, they end up with prescriptions like institutionalizing reciting certain slokas of the Geeta or the stories of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata (Jhunjhunwala: 1990). This simplistic and unworkable nature of rituals and practices to set up an organic resonance in work enterprises has been adequately dealt by Bhattacharya (1990).

Yuktananda, however, wading through tomes Sanskrit treatises come up with a model based on ancient Indian insights. The model is as follows:

- a. “To keep in view the contemplated goal we are to achieve.
- b. To define the situation in which one is placed.
- c. To identify one’s own location in the given situation.
- d. To ascertain one’s right relationship with beings, things and events appearing or occurring in the given situation.
- e) To initiate appropriate action depending on the right relationship with each person, being, event or things present in the situation, towards achieving the contemplated goal (P.41). Yuktananda further mention, “This model perhaps can be universally applied to any work field by any person” (P.41).

This last statement appears to us to be very true, and it also applies to what is known as the Tavistock approach.

No one sets up a work system without first having goals or objectives in the mind. It is obvious that such goals and objectives set the boundary of what the work system will seek to achieve or where it will arrive. In case at some point of time old goals are discarded or modified and new goals are accepted, that also have to be kept in mind. This boundary, will become meaningless if goal or objective boundaries are lost. We repeat the word “boundary” in this context because no goal or objective is unlimited at a given point of time.

We have earlier mentioned about the boundaries of task and activities, the latter given rise to the notion of “roles”. Yuktananda’s models (b) to (e) focus on how an individual in the organization can explore and figure out his or her relationship with the work system with numerous other kinds of boundaries.

Our understanding is that while both the Tavistock approach and the ancient Indian insights about organizations are extremely effective in understanding and participating in work organizations, the problem with both is that they squarely place responsibility on the individuals to work through many problems, rather than heaping adulation on the system when one feels that the going is good, and blaming it when one feels frustrated.

Since many persons seek, deliberately or through not being quite aware, to avoid exploring and living up to one's responsibilities in roles that one accepts, both the ancient Indian model and the Tavistock Approach are sought to be avoided, whatever the stated preference be.

As we have already mentioned, the hard work necessary to understand the ancient Indian model is avoided. This is also highlighted by Yuktananda (1990 P.47) in his concluding section where he mentions: "I have tried to offer in this essay some glimpses of the fundamentals of world-view and life-view of (ancient) Indian thought. Our general unfamiliarity with them keeps us away from taking a serious look into their implications for refurbishing and rejuvenating our work-life. This non education, coupled with a lot of mis-education about such timeless and priceless ideas and theories, is stalling effective human response in the long run". In the place of the sophisticated ancient Indian model some simplistic formulae, based on rituals, are constructed. Obscurantism is thus introduced to shy away from scientific understanding of the ancient Indian insights. In the case of the Tavistock Approach, it is avoided, without making the effort to understand it, by saying that a foreign model is inconsistent with the Indian psyche or culture. However, there seems to be no problem in bringing a foreign model of communication and entertainment right into one's home through the idiot box, which is merely destroying such Indian culture traits as support through cross-cutting relationship network. This is because a "cold media" (Mcluhan: 1964) like the television requires less effort and intellectual exercise than following the (a) to (c) actions of the Indian model, as presented by Yuktananda. The action steps indicated by the ancient Indian model and the Tavistock Approach are also necessary for living in a meaningful network of relationships.

#### **NOTE**

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In articles of similar nature, published in several national dailies, we have sought to offer working hypotheses to the readership about the very large system called the Indian nation. In Britain there is an organization called the OPUS (an Organisation for Promotion of Understanding of Society) which is doing something similar by creating "Listening posts: (where members and associates of OPUS regularly meet to interpret societal processes on the basis of their subjective experience of being in the society) and taking out a monthly journal. These articles draw on our experiences from action research type of consultancies, counseling workshop and some two scores of working conferences offered in India between 1973 and 1990.

In these various ways this approach has been put to use for the welfare of human beings as individuals and as parts of systems. It has derived its theoretical sources from the work of such psychoanalysts as Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Fromm, Erickson, Sullivan, Fairbairns and Guntrip. One of the present authors have also brought into this kind of work insights derived from the interpretations of portions of the Vedas, The Vedanta philosophy, some Upanishads and some Dahrmasutras (albeit in a limited way). We have also individually and jointly with some of our colleagues enlarged our understanding from our experiences of working conferences, action research projects and so on. All these go to show that the label of "Tavistock Approach" is a historical one. In actuality it is a dynamic approach that derives its strength and growth from many sources.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper presented at the International Conference (1986) on Transience and Transitions in Organizations, sponsored by the Indian Society for Individual & Social Development.

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