

Democratization in India: A Catholic Response through Positive Youth Development

Project Background

Over the last two years, through support from the Global Initiatives Incentive Fund and the Hank Center for Catholic Heritage of Loyola University Chicago, I have advanced my interest in social justice and democracy through both domestic and international research. The proposed project aims to advance more directly the work thus funded by the Global Initiatives Incentive Fund (2008) toward the development and implementation of a youth mentoring program within the context of India's developing democracy.

In the last two decades, India has emerged of particular interest within the developing world. Although officially declared a democracy in 1950, India has been called a "deviant" democracy due to its unique path of growth, both in terms of government structure and economic prosperity (McMillan, 2008). The Indian government faced bankruptcy in 1990, and India's democratic rebirth has surged most sizably in the last two decades (Singh & Srinivasan, 2005). During this time, international trade and investment expanded, trade unions were created, and agricultural subsidies were provided. By 2009, about 300 million people had escaped extreme poverty, and India posted a 9% growth rate of the GDP, making India the second fastest growing economy in the world (Singh & Srinivasan, 2005).

However, this economic growth does not benefit all Indians or, as stated succinctly by Father Jamels James, founder of LIFT, "India has growth but does not have inclusive growth" (personal communication, 3/5/10). Rather, there is a growing gap between opportunities and income of those in urban and rural environments in India. In the midst of prosperity within the urban centers, for example, close to a fourth of the population still lives on less than \$1 a day, and the nation's growth on the whole has not been employment intensive (Varshney, 2007). At the same time, the ongoing poverty often associated with India has not appreciably receded (Varshney, 2007). Further, while economic reforms have contributed to India's quickly developing economy, the country as a whole and particularly rural Indian communities continue to struggle with high poverty, illiteracy, disease,

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and malnutrition levels; rather, there are now “two Indias”, one of developing business, urban life, and the middle class, and the other of struggling villages and a large lower class (Varshney, 1998).

It is within this context that LIFT, *Leading India's Future Today* (<http://www.liftusa.org/>), was conceived over six years ago. Four Catholic priests, including Father Jamels James, decided to address the needs of rural Indian citizens by capitalizing on the hidden or forgotten resources within their immediate communities. Although the democratic system within India in theory could provide a voice for all citizens, these priests were concerned by the inequality in the ways by which citizens could access community resources, particularly education and employment. Further, Father Jamels and his brothers developed LIFT as a means of promoting greater participation, thereby protecting in part the fragile democracy that many in India so value.

Father Jamels and his brothers aimed to develop leadership education among LIFT youth by creating four sacraments, or “ways of overcoming challenges through God’s grace” (Father Jamels, personal communication, 3/5/10), via education, leadership, community involvement, and spirituality. In sum, LIFT’s mission, in partnership with other Catholic entities here in Chicago (e.g., Old St. Patrick’s Church, which provides financial support to LIFT), is to bring together children across religious castes in order to facilitate inter-religious dialogue (<http://www.idcrdialogue.com/>) while providing leadership-based education, training, mentoring, and opportunities for community collaboration. Long term, LIFT intends to facilitate opportunities for students to attend college and, in turn, contribute positively to their communities as adults.

Arguably, Catholics are the group best positioned in India to propose such an inclusive and ambitious endeavor. Given that Catholics constitute less than 2% of India’s population (Global Health Council, retrieved through <http://www.globalhealth.org/reports/text.php3?id=232>), they are in a unique position as a small but respected religious tradition within the country. In light of the religious violence that has occurred over the course of India’s history, such inter-religious dialogue not

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only allows Catholics to bear witness to Christ uniquely, but also facilitates the kind of sharing and community collaboration that is critical to the survival of the democracy.

LIFT facilitates such inter-religious dialogue between its students and community members, borrowing also from the Christian idea of mentorship so modeled by Christ's mentoring of his disciples during his three years with them. In particular, the leadership of LIFT is intended to mirror "servant leadership", or the "servant of servants" (based on Luke 22:7-18, 24; John 13:1-17). For example, graduates of LIFT make a commitment to return to the organization following their studies and contribute to the livelihood of the organization and community. This is already occurring, as all of the first graduates from LIFT are now members of the Advisory Board and visit regularly. Further, although over 50% of LIFT youth are Catholic, the inter-religious dialogue that characterizes the organization occurs at four levels, including intellectual exchange, emotional sharing, shared action (through shared community projects), and a sharing of daily life facilitated by the residential format of the LIFT program.

Since 2007, this writer has been working alongside LIFT to help develop the positive youth development and mentoring components of the program. Through two visits to India in as many years, this writer has had the opportunity to collect focus group data and other stakeholder input on the needs of the program, the strengths and resources of the mentors, and ways by which mentoring can promote youth engagement, leadership, and spiritual development. The result of this preliminary work is now in press in *International Social Work*. Findings illuminate the widespread support of LIFT by the community, the cultural sensitivity and knowledge necessary for successful engagement, and the great potential of LIFT to empower rural Indian individuals and families severely affected by poverty. These visits also allowed for the pilot of a leadership-based curriculum that aims to enhance youth engagement and inter-religious dialogue while facilitating relationships between non-parental adult mentors and LIFT youth. Finally, such work has enabled partnerships between other Catholic-

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centered resources, including St. Xavier University in Tamil Nadu, as well as with other professionals affiliated with Jesuit institutions (e.g., Institute of Dialogue with Cultures & Religions, Loyola University, Chennai, INDIA).

Objectives of project

The opportunity to engage the rural poor within the “LIFT” region provides a chance to contribute in multiple ways. This proposal aims to continue the development, implementation, and evaluation of the mentoring program curriculum that has been in development over the past two years, an effort based in part on the prior work of this author to apply evidence-based practices to similar programmatic efforts in Chicago (e.g., Pryce et al, in press; DuBois, Silverthorn, Pryce, et al., 2008). To date, six of ten curricular modules have been developed and translated to Tamil, the local language; three have been successfully piloted and evaluated in India (the first of which is attached as Appendix A). The remaining three developed modules are scheduled to be piloted in early 2010. To this end, limited funds have been provided to employ someone to implement and evaluate the curriculum in India. Even a small additional amount of monies provided through the CCIH, however, could be used to advance that effort an additional year. In particular, continued focus on the facilitation and promotion of inter-religious dialogue within this curriculum would assist in promoting the Catholic values core to LIFT’s mission. Further, support provided would assist in the development of the additional curricular modules, including one focused on teaching democracy, an example of which can be drawn by the international work conducted in Australia by Masada College (<http://www.abc.net.au/civics/democracy/schools/s48174.htm>).

If additional funds are available, this writer like to use them to further develop the connections between LIFT and the neighboring Jesuit institutions (such as St. Xavier’s and Loyola University, Chennai) who already have a commitment to the LIFT mission. This relationship development will better position Catholics within the LIFT region to further support the needs and

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strengths of LIFT participants. Additionally, it is this writer's aim to enhance the parental involvement of the LIFT programming so as to empower the parents of identified LIFT youth to engage in inter-religious dialogue and civic engagement within their own communities. While these efforts have been discussed through prior visits and contacts with LIFT, they are challenged by many logistics within rural India, including poor transportation, limited infrastructure, and limited financial resources of LIFT parents. However, through the support of CCIH, it is possible to revisit these ideas in collaboration with the LIFT community.

This project also aims to contribute to the scholarly literature in myriad ways. In addition to a more traditional contribution to the social science literature focused on positive youth development in an international context, this writer would like to contribute to the DCCIRP interdisciplinary volume through a piece devoted to considering such international positive youth development work through the lens of Catholic values and tradition. Further, journals that combine attention to religion with work in the social sciences, such as *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*, *The British Journal of Social Work*, and the *Journal of Social Work & Christianity*, may offer a home for the unique overlap offered by this project between attention to social systems (e.g., movements within a fledgling democracy, the role of the Church) as applied to the day-to-day delivery and outcomes associated with this positive youth development program.

Anticipated results and contributions

Preliminary results suggest that the mentoring program piloted thus far has been well received in India, and has successfully mobilized mentor engagement and community leadership, as well as positive adult-child relationships (Pryce, Niederkorn, et al., in press). It is expected that further development and piloting of the curriculum, and in particular the addition of a module on teaching democracy and inter-religious dialogue, will further advance the engagement and development of the LIFT community.

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This work could also benefit Loyola University Chicago and the field more broadly in ways beyond the published works referenced in the previous section. LUC has expressed interest in formalizing partnerships with India as part of the strategic plan focused on international growth. This project could facilitate international study and exchange programs, some of which have already begun in the School of Social Work. Finally, this work can contribute to efforts to pursue additional funding via Catholic-based partnerships in India (e.g., St. Xavier University) and community collaborators (e.g., St. Patricks Church).

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