

Sadamatsu, Eiichi. 2063 v.s. (2007 AD). *Sāmājik abhiyān yā bikās sahāyatā: gaisasako bhūmikāmāthi praśna* (Social Movement or Development Aid? Questioning the Role of NGOs). Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Foreign development aid, whether governmental or non-governmental, has always been an attempt at intervention in people's lives, attempt to shape and transform their material and cultural conditions, without any formal procedures ensuring accountability towards those whose lives are affected by the intervention. Most villagers, children, women, or urban poor, who become the target of a particular development program, have no idea why or through what process they were chosen as the 'beneficiary' of that program at that particular point in time. Those thus chosen to be the 'beneficiary' in mysterious ways are then asked to actively participate in the programs designed to 'help them help themselves'. If they don't participate voluntarily, or complain about the program, they are accused of being lazy, greedy, selfish, stubborn, or plain ignorant. The length of the program is also decided by the donors, not the beneficiaries. After two or five years, the project staff disappear, as suddenly and mysteriously as when they appeared, and usually you never hear from them again – even if you had important grievances or legitimate requests.

This book, *Sāmājik abhiyān yā bikās sahāyatā*, is a small but important exception to this general pattern. In this book, we are able to read an honest account by a foreign aid worker on what he thought and did while in Nepal, as well as his reflections on the experience afterwards. The author Sadamatsu wrote this first in Japanese, his native language. The book was well reviewed and widely read in Japan by those interested in NGO work. However Sadamatsu did not stop there. He made great efforts to enlist both Nepali and Japanese collaborators to have this book translated and published in Nepali language. In my view, this effort is a reflection of his personal change that is described in this book. In the beginning, he conceived himself just as many other aid workers do. He was going to engage with the aid recipients *temporarily*, give them the

right amount of stimulus and assistance, then once the recipient community became 'conscious' enough, 'owned' the project, and began to move forward in their autonomous development-path, he, the helper from outside, would disappear from the scene, almost without a trace, as if he never existed.

Had things happened the way he imagined at the beginning, it would not have been *necessary* to go through all the trouble to have this book translated and published in Nepal. Of course, it would have been nice to give the recipient community and his Nepali counterparts something more than a final evaluation report. But it would not have been necessary. In fact, towards the end of his tenure as the head of the Nepal office of a Japanese NGO, Shapla-neer, he was planning to write the book as a case study in successful community empowerment. In other words, the book was to be addressed to other Japanese interested in the work of development aid, and was to show them how, despite difficulties, community empowerment – or, in Sadamatsu's words, a process of development in which the locals themselves were the subjects and the active agents of the process – was possible.

The book that he ended up writing is a very different one. This is not a happy ending story. It is a story of difficulties, struggles, unexpected events, unresolved questions, and ongoing reflections. At the end of the book, we can see Sadamatsu becoming a very different person from who he was when he first arrived in Nepal in 1994, eager to put into practice here the wonderful concepts and techniques of community empowerment he studied at the University of Manchester. At the end of the book, he is no longer simply an outside development expert who can help the landless Nepali farmers one day, and say, the Ethiopian villagers the next – while himself being somehow 'above' or 'outside' all the process, unchanged by his encounters and engagement with the locals. Due to this change, in my view, he *had to* have this translated into Nepali. I will have more to say about this later. But first, let us go over some of the key themes of the book.

The book begins with Sadamatsu's recollection of the time when he first heard the word 'kamaiya' in western Nepal. He was told that the word referred to Tharu bonded laborers in that area, who were forced to work under the landlords like slaves. This made a deep impression on him, and he began to explore the possibilities of building up a project that could benefit the kamaiyas. From the beginning, he realized the difficulties of working directly with kamaiyas under the control of the landlords. With the help of his collaborator, Keshav Gautam, he learns of

the existence of a community of former-kamaiyas in Bardiya, who were living on captured land. Sadamatsu then asks the members of the NGO, SPACE to carry out a research on kamaiya system while living among the relocated former kamaiyas. Despite initial difficulties, young SPACE workers succeed in carrying out systematic and detailed study of the kamaiya system. The book, *Issues and Experiences: Kamaiya System, Kanara Andolan and Tharus in Bardiya* (SPACE 2000), based on this action research, is still one of the most systematic and lucid published accounts on kamaiya labor system.

Having spent unusual amount of time (six months) and energy for a small Japanese NGO on preliminary action research, and having gained a more nuanced understanding of the issue, it was time to design an aid program that would address the kamaiya problem.

After the preliminary action research, the members of SPACE recommended that Shapla-neer support 'pilot assistance projects' to be initiated in the settlements. In particular, SPACE fieldworkers proposed, in addition to literacy classes and vegetable gardening, support for the *Kanara Mul Samiti*. The Kanara Mul Samiti was an umbrella organization for the resettled kamaiyas. Its main purpose was to obtain land rights for all those who had been resettled. However, Sadamatsu and Shapla-neer's Tokyo officials decided to refuse this particular request. The reason was the 'political sensitivity of supporting a land-rights struggle of an indigenous people'. Shapla-neer officials felt that involvement in such 'political issue' could, in the worst case, result in their expulsion from Nepal. This angered the leader of the Kanara Committee, who, after all, had made a very reasonable request. As a result, the NGO's staff had to temporarily leave the community. The members of SPACE, for their part, *did* want to support local efforts at obtaining land-rights, and blamed the breakdown of relationship with community members squarely on Shapla-neer and Sadamatsu.

This debacle shows, in part, one of the classic symptoms of the rhetoric of foreign aid, namely its pretence of political neutrality. As James Ferguson argued, development presents itself as a neutral technical intervention to solve the problems of poverty, despite the deeply political nature of poverty itself. What Shapla-neer and Sadamatsu told the members of SPACE and the residents of Bardiya, in effect, was that they could give 'development assistance', but could not intervene in any kind of 'politics'. As I wrote at the beginning, development aid has always been an attempt to shape the material and cultural conditions within which the recipients of the aid live. In that sense, development aid has

always been political. Put in another way, if development has anything to do with the aim of reducing or eliminating structural poverty and suffering, it *necessarily* has to intervene and transform the relations of power and inequality. To state otherwise is to lie, in order to preserve the existing structures of exploitation. At both the levels of rhetoric and practice, then, the line between 'development aid' and 'political intervention' has always been artificially drawn. And the construction of that line itself has always been political – i.e. dominant ways of drawing the line tending to serve the interests of the powerful.

Yet, this is not a book that merely provides an example of the pitfalls of non-political pretence of development that many of us are already familiar with. This book gives much more. It provides an exceptionally honest account of how the asymmetrical relationship between the donor and the recipient hinders communication and produces mistrust and misunderstandings despite good intentions of the all parties involved. It also describes vividly, not only how the axioms of development (e.g. that it should be politically neutral) limit what can be done, but also how development agents may be able to learn to question those axioms and their tasks, and begin to do things differently. Before we go on to discuss what this learning involved, we need to look at another axiom that Sadamatsu was caught up with during his first tenure in Nepal.

From the beginning of the book, Sadamatsu states repeatedly that the ideal development project is the one in which the locals are the agent and the subject of the process. The locals should be the ones who define, design and carry out the development project; the outsiders simply provide assistance at the beginning of the process, which really belongs to the locals. In stating thus, Sadamatsu, not fully consciously, participates in the long and diverse traditions of the discourse on 'self-help'. Discourses on self-help, which we could trace back to many ancient religious traditions, were at the core of Gandhian and Deweyan community development projects. Among the first development programs in Nepal to be launched after the demise of the Rana regime was the Village Development Program (VDP). The program was conceived and supported by American official development aid workers, and a notion of community self-help constituted its core philosophy. As I have shown elsewhere (Fujikura 1996), community development projects in the 1950s were state sponsored and, among the most visible effects of those projects, despite their rhetorical focus on community autonomy, was the expansion of government bureaucracy. As I have also pointed out, community empowerment projects since the late 1980s employ rhetoric

and techniques strikingly similar to those of community development projects in the 1950s. Yet the community empowerment projects since the late 1980s are conducted in the world of neo-liberal ideologies and structural adjustment measures. In the latter case, then, the rhetoric of community empowerment often serves as alibi for the abandonment of the poor and the weak by neo-liberal state policies (Elyachar 2002).

I do not mean to argue that self-help projects are inherently flawed. On the contrary, I believe initiatives that help promote degrees of autonomy, control, and *swaraj* are welcome. What I do want to point out here is a tendency in the self-help discourses to obscure the nature of the larger structures and relations of power within which we all live. The case in point is the depoliticized and domesticated Freireian pedagogy described in *Sāmājīk abhiyān yā bikās sahāyatā*. The Freireian pedagogy is often reduced, in conventional development programs, to a manipulative tool -- simply exhorting the poor to be more frugal and sanitation-conscious while masking the more structural causes of their immiseration. Conversely, Paulo Freire's thought is firmly rooted in the tradition of critical ontology that emphasizes that every being (including human being) is constituted through its relation with other beings (see Keshav Gautam 2051 v.s. for a concise and cogent introduction to Freire's thought). Once you start treating individuals or small communities as if they can exist in isolation from the wider network of beings, you are in the realm of mystification.

What most so-called Freireian approach in conventional development programs lacks is precisely the reflexivity on the relational constitution of human subjects. This is also the case in this book, until the last chapter. There is a double blindness. One is the blindness towards local and regional history, which manifests itself in Shapla-neer's refusal to engage with the issues of land title. Of course, Shapla-neer asked SPACE staff to conduct historical research on the area, and the latter came up with an analysis of the history of struggle and dispossession. Yet, after receiving this first-rate report, Shapla-neer decides to ignore the main conclusion of the report, maintaining that they should stay clear from any intervention that appears to be political. It is indeed surprising that, after this refusal, Shapla-neer could still imagine that their project had anything to do with Freire. The other blindness has to do with the relationship between Shapla-neer and the community of landless Tharus. There is a total lack of reflexivity on the part of Sadamatsu on the reasons why they became involved in each other's lives in the first place. The members of Shapla-neer fail to reflect on and imagine how the relationship might appear from

the locals' side. This blindness is a function of the myopic and apolitical version of community self-help discourse. Sadamatsu discusses about this blindness and a subsequent realization in the last chapter of the book.

What prompted Sadamatsu to deeply reflect on the meaning and value of his enterprise in Nepal was the Kamaiya Freedom Movement of the year 2057 v.s. Sadamatsu, after five-years of trials and tribulations in Nepal, succeeded in helping create savings groups participated by about a hundred households of former agricultural laborers. The Kamaiya Freedom Movement resulted in the freedom of up to 200,000 bonded laborers. Sadamatsu also learned that international NGOs, such as ActionAid and Save the Children US, actively supported the movement – the movement that was plainly 'political'. As I discussed earlier, in the views of Sadamatsu and Shapla-neer, international NGO could not get involved in any activity that even remotely resembled 'politics' in the host country. It became clear that this sense of limit was not shared by other major international NGOs.

The Kamaiya Freedom Movement of 2057 v.s. was a special movement, which emerged at a unique moment in Nepali history. The movement still continues, and many thousands of freed bonded laborers are still forced to struggle to obtain minimum rehabilitation support from the government. Sadamatsu's book discusses the significance of Kamaiya Movement from the point of view of an international NGO worker. Let me briefly discuss its significance here from some other perspectives. By 2057 v.s., ten years had passed since the Jana Andolan of 2046 v.s. A sense of disillusionment with the parliamentary democracy was strong. Disillusionment had largely to do with how politicians and political parties behaved since the restoration of democracy. Many people were frustrated by the actually existing major political parties, and by extension, the actually existing parliamentary system in Nepal, which seemed incapable of representing the general interest of the people. By the year 2057 v.s., there had been three general elections. Defenders of the parliamentary democracy were claiming that both the people and the politicians were gradually learning how democracy functioned, and after a couple of more elections, things would begin to run more smoothly.

The Kamaiya Movement chose a different track. They were not going to wait for more general elections, for another 10 or 20 years, for the political parties to 'mature', and the government to finally implement the human rights provisions of the 2047 v.s. Constitution – all the while allowing government bureaucrats and development professionals to make their living writing reports and conducting workshops in the name of

kamaiyas. Instead, the 19 kamaiyas from Kailali, and their supporters including the mass-membership grassroots organization BASE and network of Nepali and international NGOs and citizens initiated mass mobilization for kamaia freedom. The movement was unique in that its participants and supporters transcended party divisions. It was participated by common people, women and men, landless and small farmers as well as professionals and intellectuals. It was decidedly non-violent, in the context of an intensifying civil war. Importantly, even though it was a protest against the government and development industry, the movement did not aim to replace the government or refute the project of development as such. Instead, it urged the existing government as well as development organizations to act in the right way.

Unlike many other protests, the movement tailored their demands so that the government could actually accept and act on them. For example, it was clear to many inside and outside the movement that one of the main causes of the Kamaia problem was the unequal land tenure system. However, even though radical and effective land reform was something to which most would agree as a worthy goal, the movement decided not to make it its main agenda in 2057 v.s. That was because land reform, it was clear to many in the movement, was not something that the government could act on quickly. Even though equitable redistribution of wealth, or the ‘creation of exploitation free society’ (which is the official ‘vision’ of BASE), was a shared hope of many participants, they did not imagine that it could be realized quickly, in one fell swoop. The movement adopted a step-by-step approach, and first of all, demanded freedom. The movement demanded the government to declare null the debts owed by Kamaiyas, and declare them free. These already had firm legal basis in Constitution and other statutes. Government had simply to restate those already existing guarantees – which it did by the authority of a cabinet decision and with the unanimous approval by the parliament on Shrawan 2, 2057 v.s.

After the kamaiyas gained freedom, they began the struggle for land rights and rehabilitation measures. Less than a year after the declaration of freedom, the parliament was dissolved by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and representative democracy in Nepal ceased to function. Yet the freed kamaiyas could not simply wait for the resumption of the ‘normal’ process of parliamentary elections to voice their urgent demands. In the increasingly polarizing western Nepal, freed kamaiyas negotiated delicate balance and continued to engage with the government administration to demand rehabilitation measures. In 2058 v.s., an interviewer from BBC

radio asked Dilli Bahadur Chaudhari, the president of BASE, why the Nepali government should be concerned with kamaiya rehabilitation when the country was in the state of civil war. Dilli Bahadur Chaudhari answered that major national crises arise from cumulative neglect of small things. In this regard, we could say that freed-kamaiyas, even under the condition of emergency, patiently continued to engage in the effort to teach the embattled government how to govern better. As I have written elsewhere, their politics is a politics of patience, which is not a politics that longs for 'total revolution', but work with patience to reform and improve the situation gradually even under the conditions of severe deprivation and difficulties (see Fujikura 2061 v.s., Fujikura 2007).

Having stated some of my own take on the significance of the Kamaiya Movement, let me return to Sadamatsu's reflection on it. For Sadamatsu, the Kamaiya Movement was an occasion to deeply reflect on his activities in Nepal, and on the boundaries between development aid and politics. This reflection leads him, in this book, to explore the criteria with which to judge the appropriateness of INGO interventions in domestic socio-political issues. Sadamatsu hopes that the notion of universal human rights would allow the international NGOs to engage with important issues that are simultaneously 'political'. *Universal* human rights, which by definition transcend national boundaries, he thinks, may provide ethical and legal bases for INGOs to do what they think are right in the host country. As readers can surely see, invocation of 'human rights' or 'rights-based approach' does not in any way free anyone from the problems of arbitrariness and the politics of definition. The previous problem was the distinction between development and politics. Now the problem is simply displaced on to the distinction between what constitutes human rights and humanitarian concerns, on the one hand, and exclusively domestic issues, on the other. (We have already seen the politicization of human rights and humanitarianism, for example, in the US 'humanitarian' bombings in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.)

Earlier, I said that there was not much point in trying to distinguish development from politics, since development is by nature political. Similar things could be said of the effort to distinguish human rights concerns from other concerns. Human rights (especially the ones that development organizations are concerned with, which include wide range of economic, social and cultural rights) cannot be guaranteed without detailed attention and constant struggle to arrange and rearrange social and material relations and modes of governance. In other words, even if we could speak of and define 'basic human rights' (or 'development') in

general and *a priori* terms, their actualization demands reflection and action on the historical context and linkages cutting across wide ranging domains. This is all too natural since the problem of human rights, like that of development, is about 'wellbeing' and the concrete efforts to bring about material, social and spiritual conditions that would foster it.

In this book, Sadamatsu begins with a definition of ideal development project – a project planned and implemented by the locals, for the locals. In the last chapter, Sadamatsu says he realized that that definition lacked any mention of the outsider development worker, who surely was part of the process of initiating and implementing the project. Consequently, he had failed, in thinking about Shapla-neer supported projects in Nepal, to consciously reflect on the *relationship* between the locals and himself. He realizes that the real question that concerned him, after he learned of the Kamaiya Movement, was not whether the program in Bardiya fit his definition of an ideal community empowerment project (which apparently did). It was whether other ways of relating with and collaborating with each other were possible, the collaboration that might even involve apparently 'political' actions. The question then becomes, in my view, not so much of formulating new, a priori, definition of good development aid (or good assisted social movement). Rather the question becomes construction and reconstruction of relationship between concrete actors, constantly searching and reflecting on what is possible and desirable within given complex situations.

We could restate the way the central question shifts through this book in the following way. First, it was about defining the ideal process of community development, and then trying to implement it on the ground. After the experiences and reflections over the years, the question has changed to a more open-ended exploration, of what kind of collaborations are possible within given concrete socio-political conditions. We can also say that the problem has shifted from one of aid to that of alliance. In the beginning, Sadamatsu defined himself as an invisible, context-free development agent, selecting from above, those most in need of awareness raising and assistance. Now the problem has shifted to one of alliance, the question focuses explicitly on the relationship between concrete actors. It is the question of exploring the limits and possibilities of establishing concrete socio-political relationship between actors (including Sadamatsu himself), who are themselves defined by the historical context within which they are placed. The picture has become more realistic, and also Freireian, in that Freire regarded human relations as one of interaction and mutual learning, and never in terms of the

unidirectional relation commonly imagined between the aid (or knowledge) giver and receiver.²

It is important to note that after leaving Nepal in 1999 and spending some time in Japan and Bangladesh, Sadamatsu has returned to Nepal as a representative of another INGO, and has been playing important role in coordinating INGOs in Nepal during this politically turbulent time. During this time, as I noted earlier, Sadamatsu enlisted a number of Nepali and Japanese collaborators in order to have this book translated and published in Nepali. As I suggested earlier, this effort is a reflection of Sadamatsu's personal change, which is described in this book. He now sees himself not as a free-floating development professional for whom there is not much difference between Ethiopia and Nepal, but a person deeply committed to establishing relation of collaboration with concrete individuals, groups and movements in Nepal – to entering into relation of mutual pedagogy. This book, in my view, is a reflection of that personal change and ongoing effort.

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2 One should also remember that Robert Chambers, whom Sadamatsu also cites, increasingly emphasize the need for 'reversal' of relation between the development professionals and the poor. Chambers also emphasizes that development is fundamentally about relationship – development calls for conscious reflection on the prevailing relationship between the haves and have-nots, and concrete actions to transform those relationship (see Chambers 2005).

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