

A Discussion Guide for:

***Empowering the Oppressed:
Grassroots Advocacy
Movements In India***

by John G. Sommer

With *Empowering the Oppressed*, John G. Sommer offers Unitarian Universalists a primer on the innovative people-powered justice movements that the UU Holdeen India Program has been partnering with for decades. Congregational justice programs can learn much from this approach and certainly take inspiration from the work being faithfully supported in their name.

This Discussion Guide is suitable for large groups, small groups, and even for individual use. It could provide the basis of a congregational multi-session social justice study of social change strategies, or material for short and tightly-focused reflection periods at the beginning or end of social action committee meetings.

However you choose to make use of the discussion guide, I hope that it will provide a useful entry into the inspirational and transformative work of the UU Holdeen India Program.

*Rev. Eric M. Cherry
Director of International Resources, UUA*

The Introduction:

“Where the traditional development approach has focused on ‘teaching the man to fish’ as distinct from the relief approach of giving a fish handout, these leaders are going a step further. To them, it is clear, that without free access to waters containing fish, and the absence of resources to obtain fishing nets and effectively market the fish caught, knowledge of fishing is not enough”. (p. 13)

- What is the distinction between a “development project” and the “process of empowerment”
- What is the “new colonialism” and why is addressing the sources of oppression in Modern India more challenging than Gandhiji’s task?
- In what sense is it true that in Modern India “the guards have changed, but the prison remains the same.”

Chapter 1 – Of Pigs and Goats and Human Bondage

“‘Why,’ asks Vivek, ‘are the voices of the people not heard?’ Because they lack power, of course. ‘Power can be derived from social status, wealth, political connections or muscle power. But the people we work with have none of these, therefore obviously their voices are not heard. The only potential of the masses lies in their vast numbers.’ Yet caste, religion, language, regional and party divisions often prevent them from coming together as a common force, even if they could find a way to put aside the hopelessness instilled in them by centuries of oppression. They are steeped in a ‘culture of silence’, having lost their confidence, their capacity to dream, to hope.” (p. 23)

- What is bonded labour, and how did Vivek Pandit learn about bonded labour and the dynamic of powerlessness?
- Why isn't "releasing bonded laborers" a "project"?
- What are Vivek's first two questions to ask before undertaking an activity? Why these two?
- What were key elements that made the Pandit's education initiative successful?
- Was there a victory in the case of Rajabhai Londhe's murder? What was it?
- How did Shramjeevi Sanghatna assist Keshav Nankar?

Chapter 2 – Reclaiming the Human Personality

“Whom do we hold responsible for the violation of rights? Do we believe that we have some rights or do we believe that there have to be favours? If we understand that there needs to be rejection of the system in order to reaffirm our self-respect, then are we ready to let go some comforts and individual privileges that the system has bestowed on us to keep us divided?” (p. 46)

- What is Navsarjan? What is its mobilization strategy?
- What are the barriers that Navsarjan faces in its work?
- What does John Sommer mean when he writes, “[Martin Macwan] sees the contradiction between advantageous affirmative action for Dalits, on the one hand, and the phenomenon whereby such preferences may vitiate a commitment to overturn the caste system, on the other.”

Chapter 3 - Trunks of the Banyan: In Support of Women

“Whether in the cities or in its expanding rural work areas, SEWA’s role is to empower women by means of the twin strategy of labour union struggle and development through income-generating activities.” (p. 58)

- What is SEWA, and what was its role in Garamdi?
- Why did SEWA respond to the failing eyesight of craftswomen?
- What is it that makes SEWA different from a typical NGO? What role do the 10 questions play in this regard? How about SEWA’s international outreach?

Chapter 4 - Struggle in the South: Land to the Landless

“Filing an advance caveat with the courts to prevent a landlord injunction order, the villagers proceeded to take the land, with support from 1000 poor Dalit farmers from nearby villages who helped as guards. In response, however, Chennaiah says, ‘the landlord came along with his henchmen and women carrying deadly weapons to attack the Dalits. On seeing the numerical strength they used their women to put chili powder in the eyes of the supporters and the tractor driver. The Dalits then filed a police complaint against the landlord and formed a vigilance committee to protect themselves from further attack.’”(p. 72)

- How does land reform in India compare to other countries?
- Aside from “chili powder”, what tactics does Chennaiah advocate using?
- What is CSRD? What tactics does it use?

Chapter 5 - Power of Knowledge, Power of the Purse

“DISHA’s efforts go well beyond those of most NGOs. It describes itself as ‘a mass-based and membership-based organization working toward improvement of economic and social conditions of marginalized classes like landless people, labourers, tribals, Dalits, women, etc. through their empowerment in order to influence control and use of natural and economic resources.’” (pp. 80-81)

- Was DISHA’s effort to increase the pay for bundles of tendu leaves more or less important than working with labourers to ensure that the government issued them ID cards? Or access to land titles? Why?
- Why did DISHA begin focusing on budget analysis? How effective has their budget analysis work been? In what ways has it been effective?

Chapter 6 - Variations on the Theme

The question, as always, is whether the power of the poor has simultaneously been built up to the extent that they can lobby for their own just needs on a self-sustaining basis in the future. (p. 93)

- What makes CECOEDECON different from an empowerment movement like DISHA or SEWA?
- What does Dr. Hanif Lakdawala mean when he writes, “For urban slum dwellers, abundant health services are available in forms of government and private hospitals and dispensaries, which paradoxically puts them in a disadvantaged position” (p. 94)
- What was unique about SEWA’s response to the massive earthquake in Gujarat in 2001?
- What is the empowerment approach to disaster response?

Chapter 7 - Lessons Learned

Pigs and goats, savings and credit, childcare centres, schools and health clinics are all necessary to improve the livelihoods and living conditions. But without the people's feelings of confidence and power to advocate for these on their own behalf, they risk amounting to little more than mere band-aids on an infected wound (p. 108)

- What are the key traits that empower leaders embody? Why are these traits so important?
- What is unique about SEWA's credit union? Why is the SEWA academy so important?
- Why are "exposure tours" helpful? What "shared knowledge" can they enhance?

Chapter 8 - Implications for Donors

What is critical is that the vulnerable must be able to protect themselves; the dependent must learn to be independent; the isolated must join in common struggle; and the fearful must gain confidence through joint action with others (p. 137)

- Why, according to Kathy Sreedhar, is 'community' – as it is practically understood - an inappropriate focus for UUHIP's organizing work in India?
- What makes UUHIP different from a typical donor "funding institution"?
- "How can a Western donor with a staff of one secretary and only \$750,000 to give away help fight gigantic human rights battles?" (p. 138)

Chapter 9 - Concluding Thoughts

All too often, well-meaning NGOs have believed that good deeds are by definition good, almost ignoring the question of whether they actually result in lasting self-reliance, human rights and a sense of human dignity for those assisted... Similarly, groups focusing on political change have too often given inadequate attention to ensuring that the desired human outcomes of individual and community levels accompany political changes. (p. 142)

- What are the five factors that make a combined “empowerment and development” approach uncommon?
- How important will the development of “innovative leaders” be over the long run for empowerment movements? Why?

About the Author:

(from *Empowering the Oppressed*)

John G. Sommer has been actively engaged in development circles in a variety of capacities. Now an independent consultant, he has previously been Dean of Academic Studies Abroad at the School for International Training/World Learning in Vermont, USA. He has worked at both grassroots and senior policy levels with agencies such as the US Agency for International Development, Peace Crops, and Overseas Development Council in Washington, DC, and with the Ford Foundation and International Voluntary services in South and Southeast Asia, respectively. Mr. Sommer has also been a consultant to numerous organizations such as InterAction (American Council for Voluntary International Action), the Refugee Policy Group, Oxfam-America, the US Senate Subcommittee on Refugees, and other NGOs and government departments, and is a board member of several NGOs, including the Unitarian Universalist Holdeen India Program.

Mr. Sommer has previously published *Hope Restored? Humanitarian Aid in Somalia, 1990-1994*, *Beyond Charity – U.S. Voluntary Aid for a Changing Third World*, and *Viet Nam – The Unheard Voice* (co-authored), in addition to numerous chapters and articles in various books, journals and newspapers.



The Faith Without Borders program is designed to assist congregations in creating and sustaining effective international engagement ministries through resources, consultation and celebration.

For more information, please contact [the International Resources Office](#) at the Unitarian Universalist Association or visit us on the web at uua.org/international.