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# Our Experiences with Wholistic PLA's: 

 Seeing the Spiritual and
## Whose Reality Counts

Ravi I. JAYAKARAN

" $A$nation forges deities in its imaginings, in its sacred literature, in wood and stone. The forms it gives them, the forces it has them embody, the virtues with which it endows them reflect the accumulated experience of the nation, the insights of its seers they answer to its needs." Thus wrote Arun Shourie in the introduction to his Worshiping False Gods. The gods a community worships and its spiritual beliefs demonstrate the way that community sees its world and perceives reality. What a sad reflection this is on Christians who have chosen to ignore these areas while striving to understand communities.

In recent years major paradigm shifts have been made in community development. It has been increasingly recognized that "Top Down" externally conceived solutions do not solve the problems of communities. Nor are they sustainable, since a major part of sustainability is community ownership. Understanding the community's reality is therefore an absolute must. This realization has now moved beyond non-government organizations to major development agencies like UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, and universities, as well as to major government agencies. Hence these agencies have started using PLA (Participatory Learning and

Action) on a wide scale. By contrast, Christian agencies have often failed to appreciate the need to understand the spiritual reality of communities as they see it before trying to witness to them.

In World Vision India we have started employing wholistic PLA in order to analyze the world view of various communities. This analysis takes the form of recognizing each of the dimensions that influence the survival strategies of communities and the lives of their inhabitants. It is mandatory to understand the specific influence these dimensions bear on their lives. For example, our research has shown that communities in one area see three main controlling influences.


These three influences affect each aspect of the survival strategy. For instance, a particular village community may depend on the following aspects for survival:

- Agriculture
- Animal husbandry
- Herbal medication
- Minor forest produce collection
- Electricity
- Local market
- Communication (Road)
- Etc.

The community sees god(s), outsiders, and themselves influencing each of these aspects to some extent or another. In
some cases, the influence may arise from only one source; in other cases, from two or all three. The extent which each of these influences affects an area of life will vary from community to community. For instance, the various influences on agriculture for three different villages may be as follows:

Influence of god
Influence of outsider

Influence of them selves


The areas of greatest uncertainty are those assigned to a god. A visit to these villages will show the centrality each ascribes to the god of rainfall. In Village 3, which depends entirely upon rain, the influence of the god will be perceived to be most important. Both Villages 1 and 2, which enjoy access to a water source more dependable than rain, depend more marginally on the rain deity, but he still can affect the village since rain can fall at the wrong time--say around harvest time-and completely damage the crop.

For each of the other aspects of the survival strategy, the degree of influence by gods, others, and themselves would similarly vary from one village to the other. Ethnographic studies of these villages may indicate the same people group or religious. background, but their wholistic world view when analyzed may present a totally different profile. The technique that can be used for carrying out a wholistic world view analysis (WWVA) has been detailed in Making Wholistic Disciples: World View Analysis: Measuring What Matters, produced by World Vision India.

The degree of influence of each influencer-namely god, outsiders and themselves-is discovered using a popular PLA technique called the " 10 Seed Technique" developed by the author and expanded to be used here wholistically.

The world view of a community can be more accurately ascertained on the basis of a capability and vulnerability profile of the community than by the stated religious belief of the group. For instance, in the village Dighori we assumed that the community-since it was predominantly neo-Buddhist-would have a Buddhist world view. On the contrary, we found that the gods and spirits that influenced the villagers' lives were those that controlled the areas of their vulnerability-the gods that controlled rainfall, disease, and the wild animals. Buddha, the god that they profess, only influenced the area of "peace of mind," and this was done by the regular recitation of "shlokas" (poetic praise songs) that they all knew very well. The overriding influences in their lives remain largely determined by the way they see reality-their world view. Thus even communities that claim to be Christian but have not had their world views influenced by the scriptures are likely to forge deities in their imaginings. They do this in order to address their vulnerabilities, or try to twist god to become appropriately usable (i.e., fulfill a utilitarian role). The first step in making wholistic disciples therefore is first to understand clearly the world view, and then begin the process of discipling.


Some discipling processes only change behavior, others change behavior and beliefs but leave the world view unaltered. By default the world view becomes the overriding, dominating influence.

In the diagram, which is an adapted modification from one used by Heibert and Dyrness, the outermost area is that of behavior. This is one that is most susceptible to change by external influence. Within behavior lies the deeper realm of belief, which needs stronger penetrative indoctrination before any change is adopted. However the controlling center is that of the world view. If one's world view is not properly understood, analyzed, and discipled, it will by default revert realities back to how it has traditionally seen them. Thus when the external influences for change are withdrawn, the undiscipled world view will take over and revert things back to the earlier status.

The survival strategy as a whole consists of various activities that a community undertakes in order to hold its world together. These will consist of the various aspects already mentioned. Those aspects in their direct control are seen as capabilities and those that are under indirect control are seen as vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, a seamless continuum runs between the directly controlled and indirectly controlled-between the empirical and supernatural.


Thus, whenever a development agency identifies what it considers an "area of vulnerability," it actually is in the eyes of the concerned community an area well within their control, albeit indirect control. Intentions by the development agencies to
intervene are thus seen as being at conflict with the existing ruling supernatural.


## Wholistic World View Analysis of a Community

In analyzing a community's survival strategy, one notices the peripheralization of god, wherein he is turned to only for assisting in areas of uncertainty. As the circle of influence of the community to control its environment widens with access to resources and building up of skills (enhanced capabilities), one might actually see god pushed out of that particular aspect. Thus a development agency that doesn't recognize reality as seen by the community may actually cause damage to the world view, making the community more and more godless. Perhaps this gives us greater insight into what has happened to western affluent communities which have developed survival strategies that have brought more of the uncertainties into their control, thus pushing god out of playing an active role in their lives.

Wholistic PLA also enables us to perceive how messages that we attempt to communicate are understood by the community. For example in the village of Gohekhurd we discovered that the community's perception on approaching god was different from that of the World Vision staff working in the project. The more powerful the god, the less frequently was he to be approached; and then never by individuals, but always by a whole village or several
villages together. In the face of this belief system the World Vision staff were talking about a God who interacted with individuals on a personal level and who actually "came to the door and knocked" (Rev 3:20). This obviously didn't make sense to them, for they thought that he was "too small" to be worthy for them to follow.

Another major weakness in our approach is that we do not come across to people as a community. We are more visible as a group of individuals who are vertically aligned (hierarchically). The strong sense of being a community with its vibrant supportive relational interaction is not seen in us. Thus community level interaction with World Vision is with different "individuals" with whom they meet, rather than with a Christian community. The profile of the individual they interact with plays a major role. Thus individuals can only play a role with the particular caste group that they are a part of. This is especially very strong in the rural areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka where caste plays a dominant role. Since the names of people bear the caste they are from, there is a strong overriding influence on efficiency in influencing the community. A totally changed name (anglicized or "Christian" name) is assumed to be a cover-up for a lower caste, because the features and the style of speaking betray the origin of a person.

A major barrier for communication is the strong caste system. Except in the tribal areas, major rural portions in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Karnataka states are strongly influenced by caste. For example in the Vidharba region of Maharashtra, there are villages where some of our staff cannot have any influence at all because of their origin and the family backgrounds from which they come.

It is said that culture is the patent that ensures the continuance of a practice. Caste then is the ground matrix that gives the practice its framework. Having to work within this framework restricts the efficiency of the transformational development process. Yet this is a reality that one has to be able to acknowledge that the community is a part of.


At the base of ethnocentricity is attitude, as can be seen in the diagram alongside. The community's attitude to a particular thing results in prejudice. A very strong attitude may have a history behind it and thus result in a strong prejudice against or for that particular stand. In due course of time this attitude is manifest in the form of ethnocentricity, and it shapes the cultural practices which lend the community the justifiable reasons for their particular stand.
Change therefore has to take place at the attitude level before we can overcome prejudice or change ethnocentricity. The background experiential history of a community plays a vital role in shaping its attitude. Hence it is important to listen to and explore their history as perceived by them if we want to even begin to understand what their attitude is.

Thus to summarize the discussions till now:

1. Understanding the reality of the community "as they see it" is mandatory for effective Christian witness. Stated differently, Their reality counts.
2. Our experience using wholistic PLA has shown us that when we start to listen to communities and try to understand their reality, we find their world views to be very different from what we expected. Often those with similar ethnographic profiles had divergent world views, and this was because of their experiential history.
3. Communities need to be empowered to share their world views-to tell their stories. This involves use of proactive processes like wholistic PLA.
4. Communities have definite perceptions of and effects related to their circumstances and the issues facing them. They must be facilitated to present their understanding of the cause and effect of matters that impact their survival strategies.
5. Last, but in no way the least, our effectiveness in understanding the community's reality depends on how well we are able to make a paradigm shift in our approach in order to be more open and understanding.

## A Short Note on Wholistic PLA

PLA has been successfully used in development circles for years. It has now started breaking ground even with the larger development agencies and government departments. It has found wide scale application for generating new insights into a wide range of subjects such as demographic profiles, education, health, agriculture, deforestation, rural and urban integrated community development, relief and development, children's programs, marriage counseling, AIDS awareness, BCC (Behavior Change Communication), etc.

More recently, earlier PLA methods have been modified and expanded to go beyond the empirical to facilitate a better understanding of the supernatural as well. Though PLA always had the potential to be so used, the method stayed largely confined to use in a secular way to understand only the empirical.

World Vision India has carried out some pioneering work in this regard and expanded its scope so that it could also be used in carrying out a Wholistic World View Analysis and for "measuring what matters in Christian witness." The precondition still remains as with other PLAs, i.e., the mandatory attitude change within the practitioner.

The scope for the use of wholistic PLAs in World Vision is broad and can find widespread use in our Area Development Programs (ADPs). At the end of the final exercise where the world view analysis diagram is completed, there is scope for us to discuss with the community in interactive dialogue what their assessment of the "perfect God" is-who would be able to deal with every aspect of their lives: (a) help them become better stewards of their capabilities and (b) enable them to be empowered to deal with their vulnerabilities effectively.

This would essentially work towards bringing god actively into the area of their capabilities-that part of their survival strategy which is within their control and also bring about an integration of several smaller "god needs" to be concentrated in one place (reconciled diversity). This would be the first step in discipling their world view. The second step would be to bring about further integration (centripetal infusion) to show that it is the same God who deals with their vulnerabilities and capabilities.

While all this sounds exciting and promises major breakthroughs, the reality remains that there is a lot of resistance to doing anything differently. Work like this, because it challenges all our earlier presuppositions, can be threatening. It calls on us to be willing for open-ended interactive dialogue for which we may not be ready. However, if we are willing to make that change, and follow what Jesus said about resembling a seed that falls and dies before it brings forth shoots, a stem, leaves, and finally fruit, then I believe we are at the threshold of a new beginning!
> "Preach the gospel all the time; if necessary use words." -St. Francis of Asissi
> "Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads. ' -Unknown

Adapted from a research article written by Dr. Ravi I. Jayakaran while he was working with World Vision of India.


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