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FROM VOLUNTARISM TO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTION: INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Dr. B. Lakshmi Narayana[1]

Dept. of Rural Development
Acharya Nagarjuna University
Guntur
Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

In Modern India, the State has assumed an increasingly important role for itself as promoter of development, as initiator of social change as well as the sole representative of all ideals and developments in the country. It is in this context, voluntary action has become an intriguing one to promote traditions, values, attitudes and practices necessary to support democratic processes throughout the country in its various forms -from the individual to the family, the neighborhood, to organizations and social groups, and society at large.

KEYWORDS: *Voluntarism, Traditions, Values, Attitudes, People, Family.*

INTRODUCTION

In Modern India, the State has assumed an increasingly important role for itself as promoter of development, as initiator of social change as well as the sole representative of all ideals and developments in the country. It is in this context, voluntary action has become an intriguing one to promote traditions, values, attitudes and practices necessary to support democratic processes throughout the country in its various forms -from the individual to the family, the neighborhood, to organizations and social groups, and society at large.

Voluntarism has a long tradition in India. The voluntary sector (also non-profit sector or "not-for-profit" sector) is the sphere of social activity undertaken by organizations that are not for profit and non-governmental. Voluntary initiatives have a long history in this country and the subcontinent. Social reform movements, political movements and movements for liberation of the country — all have derived assistance and strength from Voluntary initiative and Voluntary action. Historically, all types and forms of voluntary organizations and development promoting institutions have existed, and continue to exist, in India.

I. VOLUNTARISM AND VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

In Modern India, the State has assumed an increasingly important role for itself as promoter of development, as initiator of social change as well as the sole representative of all ideals and developments in the country. It is in this context, voluntary action has become an intriguing one to promote traditions, values, attitudes and practices necessary to support democratic processes throughout the country in its various forms -from the individual to the family, the neighborhood, to organizations and social groups, and society at large.

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organizations and development promoting institutions have existed, and continue to exist, in India. The overriding motivation and purpose for voluntary action is to bring about social transformation and change in the context of widespread poverty, unemployment, destruction of natural resources, socio-economic disparities, etc.

A variety of actors and forces (i.e., political parties, trade unions, students' movements, socio-political movements and individuals) operate to realize their social commitment towards a meaningful social change. Voluntary development initiatives must, therefore, be situated within this framework as one other form of expression of social commitment. In the contemporary context of India, voluntary Development initiatives are engaged in socio-economic and political transformation.

II. Voluntarism to Non-governmental action

Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, voluntary action during the freedom movement became constructive work in communities where problems of untouchability, illiteracy and economic livelihood were addressed. The inspirational base was Gandhi's philosophy led promotion of institutional forms of voluntarism by various Gandhian institutions in the country.

1970s and 1980s witnessed a rapid growth of NGOs seeking to make the cause of the poor, perhaps partly as consequence of the failing of political parties (Webster 1998). The 1970s and 80s threw up hundreds of social activists whose approach to development was partly inspired by Marxist philosophy. Many of these volunteers later set up organisations to harness and sustain voluntary action (Fernandez 2004). By any standards, 1980s and 1990s have seen explosion in the number of NGOs and grassroots orgnisations active in relief and development (Edwards and Hulme 1996). And 1990s has seen NGOs being increasingly incorporated into the developmental programmes of the national and federal states, mirroring the pro-NGO trends in the international policy and agenda. The NGO's registration for receipt of government and foreign funds, the growing number of international and national progrmmes with funds available for Indian NGOs, and similar developments has led to a formalization of their relationship to the state.

Paralleling this increase in overall numbers has been the growth of some individual NGOs to cover the provision of health, education and credit services to millions of people, especially in South Asia (AKF/Novib 1993). For example, BRAC in Bangladesh and SEWA in India have grown size and scale. The access of NGOs to decision makers is greater than ever before, as their advocacy role continues to expand and they are courted in debates over policy and practice. GROs have a lower profile are, but they have experienced considerable growth, and are beginning to organize themselves much more at international level (Korten 1990; CIVICUS 1994). The rise of NGOs on the world scene is an important phenomenon which has implications for development prospects for poor people.

The New Economic policy Agenda, followed in India since 1991, sees the markets and private sector as more efficient in producing goods and services and in achieving rapid economic growth. NGOs are seen as cost effective and efficient service providers, and successful in reaching those poor who may not be reached by the market process or the state (Bhat 1995: 48-99). NGOs are seen as an "integral component of a thriving civil society and an essential counter weight to the state power, opening up channels of communication and participation, providing training grounds for activists, and promoting pluralism" (Edawards and Hulme 1996:962). Because of these factors, , NGOs now have better space to collaborate with the government and influence the policy at different levels.

Politicians and retired civil servants contributed to the number of voluntary organisations especially in the latter half of the 20th century. In the 80s and 90s a few professionals, some from prestigious institutions and some who returned from abroad also set up voluntary organisations with the motive of "returning something to society"; they contributed to the "professionalising" of the voluntary sector. These led to introduction of systems that promote a culture of transparency and accountability in varying degrees.

The initiatives of ordinary citizens in the form of voluntary action, the initiatives of citizen groups, the activities of voluntary organizations and NGOs are aimed at having an influence in the vision of a desirable society. NGOs have been involved in relief and rehabilitation; they have delivered services like health and education; they promote economic programmes; they build people's organizations; they engage in conscientization. All these different activities have implications for their roles. Therefore, NGOs work with the poor, deprived, marginalised and oppressed as their primary constituency.

Despite this transition, we fail to distinguish non-governmental action from voluntarism. The National Policy for the Voluntary Sector from the Planning Commission defined the voluntary sector as follows: "Voluntary Action is strictly defined as an activity or function undertaken by

a person or persons for the benefit of others without any personal financial or material returns. The livelihood of persons so engaged is expected to be generated from elsewhere or from other activities". This definition seems to be based on the religious or ascetic approach where these volunteers are expected to be motivated by considerations other than their own material advancement. This surely does not fit the demands of the present day scenario. There is, thus, need to position non-governmental actions like other institutional formations but with voluntarism as its spirit and guiding principle. There is also need to address all the misleading policy prescriptions by government with regard NGOs.

3. NGO-TYPOLOGY

Based on the objectives, ideologies, nature of activities and location, NGOs can be classified under four broad categories: Operational or Grassroots NGOs, support NGOs, network NGOs and funding NGOs (Rajasekhar and Biradar 2004). Probably we may have to place organizations promoted by private sector under corporate social responsibility separately (i.e., corporate NGOs). Their functions are:

- *Operational or Grassroots* NGOs, may be small or big, are local based and directly work with the oppressed communities. The approach and orientation of grassroots NGOs also vary i.e., charity, welfare, relief and rehabilitation and development (i.e., providing/ facilitating developmental services).
- Social action groups focus on mobilizing marginalized sections around specific issues, which challenges distribution of power and resources in the society. NGOs combine development activities with issue based struggles.
- Support NGOs mainly provide services that would strengthen the capacities of grassroots NGOs, PRIs, cooperatives and others to function more effectively through training and research.
- The network NGOs are formal and informal associations of grassroots and/or support organizations which meet periodically to act a forum to share experiences, carry out joint development endeavours as well as in lobbying and advocacy. The NGOs of this type are growing in recent years.
- Funding NGOs provide financial support to grassroots NGOs , support organizations and peoples organizations. Most of the funding NGOs in India obtain resources from foreign sources through efforts to raise funds from within India have, of late, assumed importance.
- Corporate NGOs: There are several corporates which are actively involved in NGO operations; and involved in specialized and diversified work.

4. INTERFACE BETWEEN NGOS AND GOVERNMENT

Top-down bureaucratic approach has an inherent weakness and lays more emphasis on targets and quantitative achievements (tucker 2000). In scenario where the number of poor has gone up in the country, we must recognize the need for paradigm shift for and promote space for NGO participation. The interface between NGOs and Government can be seen in four phases: Cooperative relationship (1947 to late 1950s), antagonistic relationship (late 1960s to early 1970s), professional relationship (mid 1980s to early 1990s) and search for shadow state (late 1990s). The nature of interface largely depended on organizational complexities, identities, motivations, its social origin and histories, characteristics, and political, social and economic realities, local politics, the actions of local agents, local institutional behaviour with local governments, views of individuals and nature of NGOs own programmes (sen 1999).

5. NGO PERFORMANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

There is increasing evidence that NGOs are NGOs do not perform as effectively as had been assumed in terms of poverty reach, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, popular participation (including gender), flexibility and innovation. In terms of service provision, there is ceratinity of evidence that NGOs are able to provide some services most cost-effectively than government (Hasan 1993). Even where NGO service provision is 'low-cost', it usually fails to reach the poorest people, although it may still reach a wider cross-section of the population than government and commercial agencies (Farington and Lewis 1993; Hulme and Mosley 1995). Evidence of the performance of NGOs in democratization is more difficult to come by, except in the area of 'micro-policy reform' where a growing number of case studies demonstrate that NGOs can influence government and official agencies, especially where they come together as a united front (Edwards and Hulme 1992). As NGOs become more involved in large scale service delivery (or grow for other reasons), and/or become reliant on official funding, one might expect some fall-off in their flexibility, speed of response and ability to innovate . NGOs which depend official funding often perform poorly in the critical task of 'local institutionalDevelopment' (Esman and Uphoff 1984).

In terms of management, NGOs have multiple accountabilities - upwards and downwards. Upward accountability stands for the responsibilities to donors in terms of utilization of funds, creating value for money, and impact and effectiveness of work. On the other hand, downward accountability stands for responsibilities to the people. Both are equally important. There is also need for transparency among NGOs.

6. CONCLUSIONS

NGOs have greater responsibility in the development as they several positive attributes. Over the last few decades the volunteer organizations have been much more effective in Indian public space and more articulate in policy debates. There is collaboration between NGOs and the government, and the linkages between NGOs across national and international boundaries have begun to emerge.

- They have played an important role in influencing issues of health, water, forestry, human rights, women, tribals, education, literacy, sustainable development and appropriate technology based on their own analysis and experience in grassroots.
- The work of NGOs has influence on the policies and programmes of the government at the national, state and local levels. Some of the important examples of such policy influences have been in the area of education, health, family welfare, women welfare, etc. NGOs have also contributed to influence public opinion by taking positions on issues, by highlighting debates and concerns.
- Future of NGOs: Weak or distorted accountability, and an inability to demonstrate impact and effectiveness are likely to leave NGOs to more co-option into agendas of others, or simply lead them into areas where they are not doing very much that is useful. Therefore, improved performance and greater accountability is central their existence as independent organizations with mission and purpose.
- The NGOs have not devoted resources for critical aspects of organizational development, innovation, learning, research and dissemination.
- It will do lot of good for them to build further on their credibility, responsiveness, innovativeness and mobilization capacity.

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