

INITIATIVE, INNOVATION AND INSTITUTIONS:
THE STUDY OF EMERGING TRENDS IN VOLUNTARISM
IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

By

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WP847

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WP
1990
(847)

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Abstract

The individual urge to extend one's responsibility for social change beyond mandated or formal duties is far more pervasive than is generally assumed. However, not each individual with such an urge takes voluntary initiatives. In still fewer cases, are initiatives transformed into innovations. It is only rare that innovations are institutionalised in society.

What are the barriers which prevent initiatives becoming innovations in a society where conformity and compliance are considered part of normal courtesy while disagreements and deviance are often treated as disrespect? How does one distinguish the phenomenon of voluntarism from the actions of voluntary organization? Given the fact that problems of rural development in India are very complex and widespread, how far can isolated initiatives of voluntary organizations bring about large scale social change?

How does one nurture and sustain voluntarism among a minority of professionals working in mainstream organizations such that their need for creative extra-organizational space is met? Donor agencies have given lesser attention to voluntarism than NGOs in developing countries. Is it possible that public and private organizations can sustain support to voluntary organizations in the long run without nurturing voluntarism among a minority of employees within?

This paper traces the roots of voluntarism in Indian cultural ethos in part one. The trends in the growth of voluntary organizations vis-a-vis voluntarism in rural development / social change are reviewed in second part. Implications for research and action both at the global and national level are drawn in the third part.

The paper argues that the roots of voluntarism in Eastern societies are anchored in concept like 'aparigrah' rather than charity preceded by accumulation.

It is regretted that governments world over are far more keen to support voluntary organizations rather than nurture 'developmental volunteers' some of whom play the role of 'organizational insurgents'. It is thus submitted that international and national aid agencies might very deliberately thwart the pressure on state to respond to the urges of disadvantaged people making non-violent paths of social change more and more difficult.

This is a slightly modified version of the paper to be presented at an international conference on 'Nonprofit sectors (NGO's) in the United States and Abroad :cross cultural perspectives, Independent Sector, March 15-16, 1990, Boston, USA.

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INITIATIVE, INNOVATION AND INSTITUTIONS: THE STUDY OF EMERGING II TRENDS IN VOLUNTARISM IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

*Anil K Gupta**

The individual urge to extend one's responsibility for social change beyond mandated or formal duties is far more pervasive than is generally assumed. However, not each individual with such an urge takes voluntary initiatives. In still fewer cases, are initiatives transformed into innovations. It is only rare that innovations are institutionalised in society.

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The author has benefited a great deal from discussions with Ravi Acharya, Arun Agarwal, Jyoti Capoor, Sadhana Gupta, Pankaj Jain and Astad Pastakia. Responsibility for any inadequacies is the author's. Comments/Criticisms are invited.

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Part I : Voluntarism In Eastern Societies

It has not been appreciated widely that roots of voluntarism are quite different in Eastern, in particular Indian, and Western societies. The result has been the implanting of an alien culture in most Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), no matter of what ideologies.

`Aparigrah' - a Sanskrit word - implies values of non-accumulation or not keeping anything more than necessary for one's bare minimal needs. The concept of sacrifice and charity are also differently rooted in Indian mind. When one gives away the dearest object to a needy person the sacrifice could be considered a charity. If giving away is only for one's own self-purity and not aimed at some one else's well being, it is `Tyag' (sacrifice) but not a charity. Contrast this with the Western notion of giving away something one can do without, or one needs less or one has much more than one's sumptuous needs.

I am not implying that the motivations of voluntarism in India are in any significant way related to the notion of `Aparigrah'. But what I do suggest is that for strengthening voluntarism in Indian society, the support systems and organizations cannot ignore the cultural anchors of the spirit of voluntarism. Even if few people believe in `aparigrah' in urban upper and middle class society, there remains a large mass of rural people who do respect a volunteer who follows the principle of `aparigrah'.

The voluntarism based on `aparigrah' has another dimension. And this is the willingness to receive knowledge from whoever is knowledgeable. Thus, giving away (`pradan') is accompanied by `grahan' - the inculcation or assimilation of humility and duty towards others. The voluntary organizations emphasizing `giving' as the basis of relationship with the poor people are either seen as paternalistic by the people or as a source of external resources and skills. Hardly any voluntary organization tries to tap the historical reserve of knowledge (technical, institutional and social) of poor. The term `resource poor' masks the `richness' of the economically poor people. The `grahan' or `assimilation' of knowledge from poor does not constitute `richness' by many NGOs. Lest this `richness' of poor becomes a paradox, let me explain this in cultural terms.

In Western society, there are only a few words, say aunt or uncle, nephew or niece for characterizing a whole range of relationships from mother's or father's side.

In Indian languages, each class of relationship has a specific word. People thus have a web of relationship, many of which are operated at different planes. Richness of the ability to maintain subtle differences in protocol and mutuality provides a `safety net' of kinship linkages.

In developmental paradigms the neglect of the role of cultural roots, religious identities and philosophical basis of social responsibility has led to a crisis among many voluntary organizations. Recently in a meeting of voluntary organizations (mostly with Marxist-Leninist leanings), organized by Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, it was admitted that despite one and a half decade of mobilization of people around social and economic causes, there was a wall of silence between people and volunteers on the issues of cultural, religious and caste/ethnic identities. A question, "where do you come from? or to which village/region do you belong?" was considered unacceptable in developmental dialogues as a basis of relationship (Aruna Roy, 1990). Any effort to build on spatial or other ethnic identities was considered reinforcement of parochialism.

Another cultural element of voluntarism is reciprocity. Reciprocity includes both giving and receiving but not in the form of exchange. As Ellis (1989:1) puts it, "it is the giving and not the gift that is important". Eastern as well African societies have evolved ways of keeping track of reciprocities. Ellis adds that reciprocities are characterized further by (a) wealth being equated by one's esteem or prestige in society based on giving behaviour and (b) assurance of good return because lot of people owe it to the giver.

Two other dimensions of reciprocity are, (a) poor use longer time frame to settle reciprocities than rich and (b) in high risk environments like drought prone areas, generalised reciprocities dominate the specific ones (Gupta, 1981, 1984). The studies on voluntarism have not exploited the potential of reciprocal economics as against exchange economics for fostering collective action. The extent to which initiatives calling for deviance from accepted norms, even for social good are sanctioned by different societies also differs in West and the East. Cultures which provide the concept of 'Aparigrah' and 'Tyag' (selfless sacrifice) also contain codes of sanction against deviance from certain social order. The exploitation of the poor, may thus become possible not merely through 'selfishness' of dominant social classes but also through 'learned helplessness' (opposite of voluntarism) by the poor people.

To illustrate how cultural codification of compliant and conformist behaviour takes place, a story from Mahabharat - an Indian epic may help.

Dronacharya was a renowned teacher having an Ashram (a type of school based in forests) in which royal families considered it their privilege to send their children. He had taken a vow to make one of the five royal brothers (Pandavas) viz., Arjun as the best Archer in the world. One day a tribal boy - Eklavya approached Dronacharya to seek admission into the Ashram. He very hesitatingly took this initiative. Dronacharya refused admission saying that only the children of royal family could be admitted in his school. Eklavya returned dejected, built an idol of Dronacharya

(whom he had accepted as his teacher in his mind) and started practicing archery. One day Dronacharya was moving in the forest accompanied by Pandavas. A dog started barking and disturbing their conversation. Eklavya, practicing nearby, heard it. He filled the mouth of the dog by arrows. Dronacharya could not believe it. He told Pandavas that if somebody was such a good archer than he surely needed to be met. They soon found Eklavya and asked him, how he had learned such a good archery. Eklavya recognizing Dronacharya, attributed excellence of his skill to his teacher - Dronacharya himself. Dronacharya was flabbergasted because he had never taught Eklavya. But on hearing the story of Eklavya about how he worshiped Dronacharya's idol and practiced archery, Dronacharya asked for 'Dakshina' - a sort of fee for providing that knowledge. Eklavya immediately agreed. Dronacharya asked the thumb of his right hand which Eklavya immediately cut and gave away, becoming unable for ever afterwards to practice archery. This story has been heard by almost everybody in India no matter where he/she lived to essentially ingrain two values; (i) obedience and deference towards teacher and (ii) virtue of perseverance.

Whenever I asked students or professionals from developmental organizations to speculate upon the dilemma of Dronacharya and Eklavya, they admitted that their parents had never told them about these questions. With some effort, they could speculate upon Dronacharya's dilemma, e.g., fear of (i) not being able to make Arjun the best archer; (ii) not getting wards of royal families in future as students in his school because he might not be treated as the best teacher; (iii) possibility of Eklavya - a Bhil or tribal passing on this skill to other tribals who might challenge the given social order dominated by the 'higher' castes and royal families etc.

But nobody ever thought that Eklavya also might have had some dilemma. Almost everybody argued that it was 'natural' for Eklavya to accept the order because thus he is remembered; or he proved his excellence because cutting of his thumb was a sort of certificate of excellence given by the best teacher. He achieved his life's objective. But did he?

Whether Eklavya had any loyalty towards his kith and kin in the village who fed him and spared him from the normal chores of hunting and food gathering, did not occur to any student or professional. Aspirations of other tribals of training their children under Eklavya never seemed to matter. In other words, the professionals from voluntary agencies or commercial organizations and students from different disciplines completely failed to identify the dilemma in the mind of dalits (down trodden) for whom, compliance and conformity to a given social order seemed almost the only choice. Further, deference towards teacher was ingrained to such an extent that even an unethical behaviour or the part of teacher was not to be questioned.

Enculturation of compliance and conformity through such powerful metaphors does come in the way of people taking initiatives and questioning the given social order.

Initiatives are taken less often by those whose social conditions must change for the better most. But it does not imply that poor have no concrete alternatives for change. It is just that innovations needed for survival are quite different from innovations for accumulation.

Just emphasizing the 'giving' behaviour by many voluntary organizations without 'acknowledging' or 'assimilating' knowledge of people often weakened the self-help potential of people and curbed the growth of voluntarism among people themselves. The institution building process in the society suffers when outside volunteers do not plan for their redundancy through development of local leadership. In another meeting of voluntary organizations organized at the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, it was acknowledged that building people's own organizations without even needing outside professionals was a distant dream (Jain, 1990).

Our contention is that there are thousands of 'Eklavyas' dispersed in different mainstream organizations. They have a strong sense of taking initiatives and achieving excellence in skills that may be needed in society. However, middle class conservatism prevents them from becoming entrepreneurs. The voluntary organizations do not consider fostering/nurturing such initiatives as part of their major role. Tremendous reserve of potential human energy in the form of untapped voluntarism/initiative available in the mainstream organizations generates frustration on both the sides - the NGOs/volags which find bureaucracy stifling and generally unhelpful and the minority of deviants or 'compliant and conformist' Eklavyas who do not find organizational or societal space for merging pursuit of excellence with search for socially useful innovations. If the linkage between volunteers in public/private /commercial organizations and the enabling voluntary organizations can be forged, possibly the institutional capacities in society for self renewal can be increased considerably.

Part II : Trends In Voluntarism In Rural Development In India

My emphasis is much more on voluntarism than on voluntary organization as instruments of social change. I do not disregard the niches which market forces and state/public agencies leave unfilled. But I argue that these niches can be filled not necessarily only by the third sector or voluntary organizations but by the 'developmental deviants' or 'entrepreneurs' or 'volunteers'. These volunteers while remaining in mainstream public or market organizations, can create new alignments between social needs and institutional support. The excessive attention on voluntary organizations by aid agencies seems misplaced in so far as these agencies almost completely neglect the 'developmental volunteers' (DVs).

By reducing pressure for reform and self-renewal on the public and market agencies, the support to only NGOs may become dysfunctional not in distant future. NGOs led by managers or leaders from often urban context by their own creativity suppress or

fail to nurture creativity of local disadvantaged. The social change thus becomes slower because it becomes dependent more and more on external leaders.

Rural development as a part of social change is defined here as a process of (a) widening the decision making horizon and (b) extending the time frame for appraising investment and consumption choices by the rural disadvantaged people collectively and not necessarily at village but even at higher levels of aggregation.

Sustainable processes will require correspondence between people's access to resources; ability to convert access into investments (i.e. skills for using resources) and assurance of future returns from present investments (vertical assurance) and about others' behaviour vis-a-vis one's own (horizontal assurance or collective rationality). The changes in the network of access, ability and assurance for Developmental Volunteers and people have to be achieved simultaneously.

Voluntarism may affect any one or more subset of developmental triangle of access, assurance and ability of the people and thus many remain restricted in its impact. Propositions given next deal with the way voluntarism has been related to the process of social change in India. Given the range of experiences it is indeed a synoptic account.

Process of Voluntarism

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1. Voluntarism triggered by a natural crisis like flood, drought, cyclone etc. may legitimise entry of outsiders in a given region but depending upon the mobilization process NGOs emerging in response to such crisis often diversify into other areas of social development and remain community oriented rather than class oriented.

Several Church based NGOs came into existence when international aid agencies offered relief at the time of Bihar famine in Sixties. Most of the relief was in the form of consumables like foodgrains, clothes, medicines etc. The organizational structure for distribution of such aid was different from the structure for managing durable assets like rigs for drilling wells, transport, buildings etc. From relief to reconstruction attracted several young people. Instead of going back to pursue their professional career, they remained behind to organize people in some cases, manage food for work programme, drill wells or provide health and educational facilities in other cases.

Many aid agencies sought legitimacy through relief but indulged in other interventions subsequently. The reaction of state agencies was to incorporate such volunteers or voluntary organizations as appendage of public relief and development programmes. Such an incorporation also took place in case of many NGOs which came into picture much later. An interesting feature of these organizations was that having begun with community approach (relief was needed by all - big or small), they continued to use an eclectic approach to development.

Social conflicts were just noted by some and participated in by others. The institutionalization of voluntarism in intermediary support or funding organizations or grassroots organizations gave a techno-managerial start to the intervention strategies. A negative feature of such aid was that in regions prone to frequent natural calamities, people started losing their self-help initiative. State relief in the form of employment or food was not linked with mobilization of voluntarism among people. Dependency so created made the task of many radical NGOs even more difficult. People could not understand why mobilization around a radical ideology should be a reason for foregoing immediate material benefits.

2. Voluntarism triggered by man-made disasters such as Bhopal tragedy could get caught in the dilemma of legitimising state's indifference by becoming part of urgent relief and rehabilitation vis-a-vis questioning the basis of tragedy and complicity of state in its consequences.

Ravi Rajan (1988) while analysing rehabilitation and voluntarism observed four distinct styles, (i) intervening organization took upon provision of relief and rehabilitation as primary task, became dependent on government and with diminution in governments' own commitment to the cause, collapsed soon; (ii) Volunteers served as 'conscience keepers', pursuing change through systematic research reports; (iii) trade union activists demanding change of the industrial plant to provide employment through alternative use of plant and machinery; and (fourth) perhaps the most significant strategy by volunteers was rejecting the idea of voluntarism as propounded by the state. Sustained mobilization, struggle for better relief, access to medical data, questioning the secretiveness on the part of the government (seen as a sign of its complicity with MNC - Carbide), legal activism and questioning the right of government to value life of poor at low price. to price the life of poor so low. Voluntarism of this nature is difficult to mobilise in backward rural areas given the dispersed nature of settlements and weak social articulation, low media attention and poor networking among interventionists.

3. Voluntarism manifested in sixties in the form of (a) protest against agrarian disparities (in the form of naxalite left violent movement), and (b) for social reconstruction (initiatives by students, professionals in the mainstream organizations, or voluntary organizations) has undergone a sea change in the wake of recent economic liberalisation.

Radical groups using violent means of social change had sought support essentially from Maoist philosophy. After the Chinese aggression in 1962, the covert support to these groups had increased. The income disparities intensified after first phase of 'green revolution'. Technological change had provided the spur for a large number of young people particularly from West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh to plunge into the field of violent social change. The attempt was to annihilate rich

farmers and other symbols of perceived oppressive classes or considered class enemies.

Another stream of volunteers entering the field of rural development came with innovative ideas for providing relief during 1964-66 drought in different parts of the country. These volunteers became crucial instruments of social dynamics. War in 1965 with a neighbouring country had led to slowing down of U.S. aid to India. Search for indigenous alternatives became intense and legitimacy of voluntarism increased.

The 1966 to 1971-72 period was full of economic crises. Economic environment in the preceding decade had been aimed at closure of Indian economy through import substitution. Droughts, wars (1965, 1971), devaluation of currency and inflationary pressure created an environment of social unrest in organised and unorganised sector. The starvation deaths are supposed to have been eliminated (almost) after 1965-67 drought. Maharashtra started Employment Guarantee Scheme during drought of 1972. In the wake of large scale violence in 1966-67 by left radical groups, the report of a confidential enquiry committee by a committed civil servant (Appu) set up by Ministry of Home argued for immediate thrust towards target group oriented programmes of rural development suited to location/ecology and class specific needs.

The Small and Marginal Farmer and Agricultural Labourer Development Agencies, Drought Prone Area Programme, Tribal Development, Hill Area development plans etc. followed. The decentralised development in the policy was accompanied by greater political centralisation for a little while (1970-77). A movement based on Gandhian values calling for total social revolution was spearheaded by Jaya Prakash Narayan in 1973-74. It attracted a large number of young people particularly in Gujarat, Bihar and Maharashtra many of whom have continued with voluntary work.

Government declared emergency during 1975 till 1977 after prolonged railway strike and even urban people realised for the first time the implications of a non-democratic coercive state. Voluntarism, was also sought out as a sign of despicable deviance. People had option to be incorporated into the repressive state structure or be put in jail or victimised. Most chose softer options but many did not. The Post-1977 phase of change in the political continuity through single party rule brought many Gandhians committed to decentralised development into the mainstream. Tax concessions for voluntary initiatives by commercial companies were introduced first time by Janata government in 1978. Lot of innovative organizations came into being. Several developmental volunteers working in commercial organizations found this an opportunity for exploring new organizational space. Some misused this option but many did not.

For the first time, professionals and young activists were offered competitive salaries in addition to autonomy for work unheard of in the mainstream organization by and large. This was also accompanied by a change in the policy of international aid agencies which started shifting from funding better implementation of government programme bureaucratically to better implementation by NGOs. It was rather unfortunate that creative avenues in NGOs got generally fossilized due to the proximity to state and participation in implementing standardised programmes.

Change of government in 1980 and restoration of the rule by Congress party led to (a) expected withdrawal of tax concessions, (b) centralisation of voluntarism i.e. companies could contribute to Prime Minister's fund for rural development and seek fresh grants from it for action programmes, (c) direct transfer of funds from a commercial balance sheet to the social (less easy to account) balance sheet was stopped), (d) standardization of developmental programmes such as IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme), (e) withdrawal of higher allocations in IRDP for backward areas and putting them at par with the rest; (f) merger of earlier eco-adaptive or responsive programmes into uniform standardised IRDP with credit-linked subsidy as the dominant mode of relationship etc.

Another interesting development was the phenomena of the return of naxalite underground workers into the mainstream non-violent but articulate strategies of social change. For the first time, several ex-naxalites fought election in 1977 and some got elected also.

The social space for alternative development was filled by volunteers having varying backgrounds: (a) ex-radicals, (b) liberal or social democrats dissatisfied with the working of state and wanting to influence distribution of resources, (c) enthusiastic urban activists looking for a career, failing to get one, returning to mainstream professions rather quickly, (d) young professionals with technical or other disciplinary background launching action-research projects or supporting other professional groups (notable being PRADAN set up by Mahajan, an alumni of IIM-A), (e) retired civil servants, ex-Gandhians, lawyers etc. who formed independently or with the support of aid agencies large NGOs and (f) quasi-state organizations promoted to provide technical, financial, marketing or other support to NGOs, artisans and other beneficiaries of state sponsored developmental programmes.

At the time when social space for volunteers was widening, opportunities for career growth in mainstream organization also started increasing. First phase was the growth in Banking sector after nationalization in 1969. A large number of bright young men and women with background in science, humanities or engineering joined banks, insurance corporations and other such systems. 'Brain Drift' as against 'Brain Drain' took its heavy toll by depriving academic disciplines of bright students and luring some professional on the margin away from other direct social development systems.

Post 1980 boom in consumer goods industry and continued growth of banking and other public and private ventures further increased the flow of young people towards such careers. The opportunity cost of those who chose to work in NGOs did indeed increase.

The question we want to address next is, what are the processes by which voluntarism in the mainstream organizations can complement the efforts of NGOs in not merely bringing about social change at micro level but also influencing public policy in favour of disadvantaged?

Part III : Implications for Actions and Research

1. Generating extra-organizational space for developmental volunteers within mainstream organizations is a necessary condition for sustainable social development

A recent study on Bank and NGO Interface for poverty alleviation in backward regions, noted that (a) there was no NGO working in 50 most backward talukas (sub-regions) of Gujarat (S. Iyengar, 1988), (b) the state organizations like National Bank could not gain credibility in supporting NGOs if they did not provide opportunity for exploration and experimentation to volunteers within their system, (c) NGOs often did not recover even the operating costs of many services from people. In the process, such NGOs remained perpetually dependent upon aid agencies, (d) accountability of NGOs towards poor was rather low so much so that most NGOs did not aim at inducting poor people in their own management structures quite explicitly.

A nationalised bank invited the clerks to volunteer for two years village development work in an area of their choice without any loss of seniority in service on return. It triggered numerous innovative experiments by DVs.

The hands of DVs in technology generation, adaptation and diffusion system working on unpopular problems of larger social concern needed just as much attention? How to sustain professionals who disregard professional rewards and devote attention to such problems but can not put pressure for reform on their own organizations? Empowering them will require recognition of their voluntarism by a body of concerned scholars and activists. No national award has been given till date to any bank officer for initiating innovative scheme. So much so that about ten million rupees for new innovative schemes for rural development provided at national level remained unspent because no system existed for identifying and recognising DVs within the mainstream system (Khanna, 1990). o73

2. How to resolve the paradox of developing rural poor's ability to manage their affairs by urban volunteers having inherent cultural limitations?

Poor do not cooperate with developmental organizations because we do not even acknowledge richness of their cultural and moral fiber. Findings of our research are seldom shared with those from whom we collect data (Gupta, 1987). Involving rural poor as co-researchers of social phenomenon, building upon cultural roots of voluntarism, respect for common property institutions can be invoked. Acknowledgement of local initiatives can provide spur for their transformation into innovations.

3. Documentation of people's knowledge and identifying scientific merit of some of the sustainable resource management alternatives can rekindle their experimental ethic.

4. Institution building requires dispensability of external leadership, recognition of inverse relationship between status and skills and discrediting values generating helplessness. 'Lateral learning' among developmental volunteers as well as NGOs can be triggered to provide empirical basis of building theory-in/of action.

5. Search for culture specific metaphor and concept of voluntarism such as Zakat among Muslims, Gupt dan (anonymous charity) among Hindus, Kar Seva (voluntary labour for common good) among Sikhs etc. are some examples of positive basis of different religions for building organic institutions. Different languages have words like 'andi' (Haryanavi) and 'dhuni' (Hindi) implying a person obsessed with ideas generally for social good. Why has appreciation for this trait gone down? We submit that 'anonymous voluntarism' as an uniquely eastern concept has been subsumed under 'voluntary organizations'. The latter often believe that voluntarism can not exist in non-volunteer organizations. Should all innovations necessarily evolve into institutions? or should we aim at institutionalization of culture which permits DVs to explore the uncharted territories?

6. Finally, NGOs and developmental volunteers can not succeed unless encapsulating and inhibitory values ingrained in the mind of poor during feudal historical past are questioned boldly.

Voluntarism in rural development in India has not been accompanied by pressure for policy change except around environmental issues. Often action at local level has not been linked with lobbying at macro level. Recognizing that state and markets perform better if kept under constant check, developmental volunteers within the organizations will have to perform a sort of 'insurgent' function so as to align, anonymously, with grassroot activists, NGOs and professionals. International agencies can strengthen local social change by feeding not just the local ideas and innovations into global thinking but by providing global space for developmental volunteers to validate their hypothesis. If rural poor of India could communicate with homeless in America, surely the cultures of deprivation