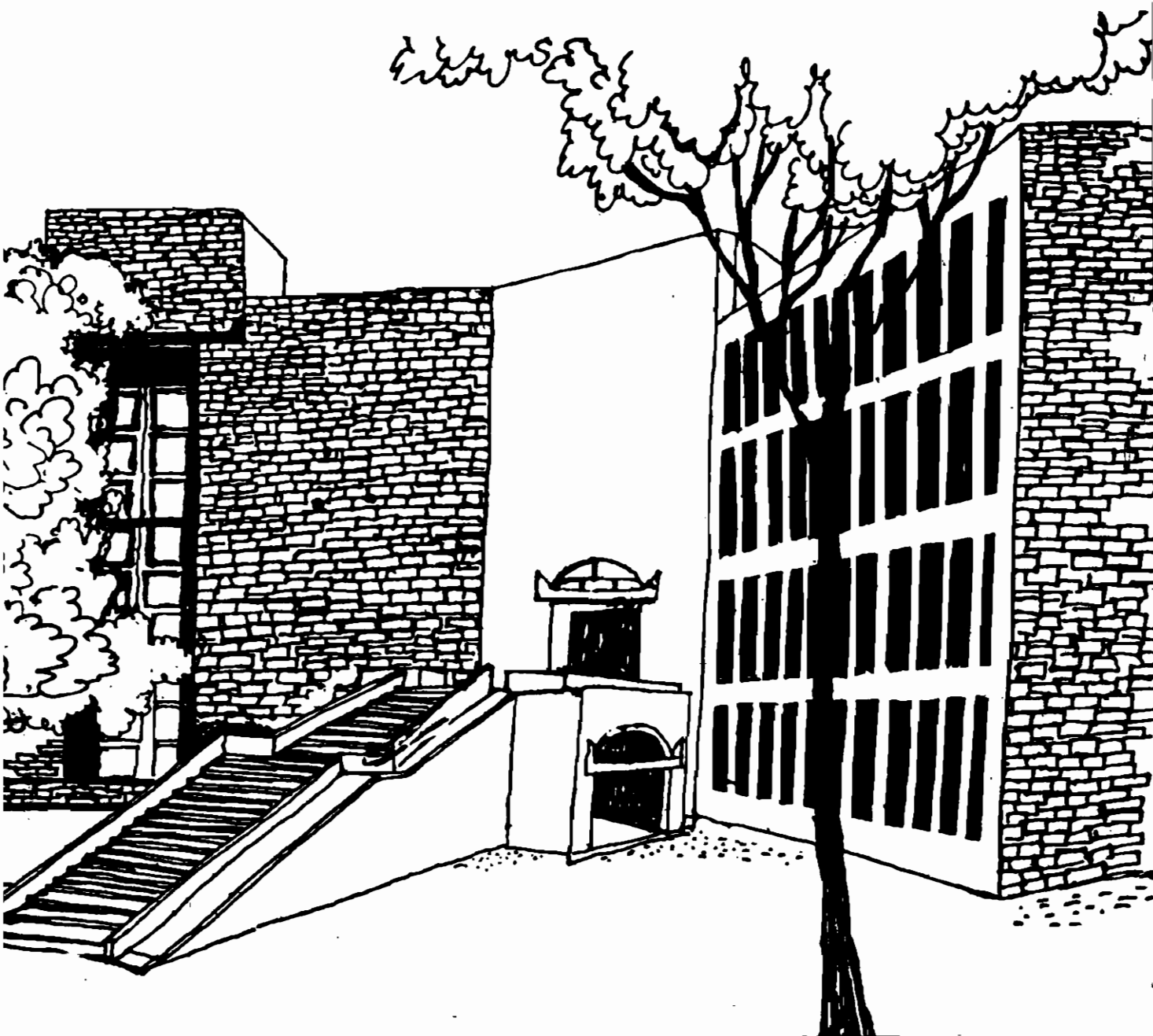




# Working Paper



# Voluntary Action in India: Role, Trends and Challenges

Anil Bhatt

W.P.No: 1202

July 1994

Page No. 1-10

The main objective of the working paper series of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test out their research findings at the pre-publication stage.

WP1202

WP

1994

(1202)



Indian Institute of Management  
Ahmedabad 380 015, India

**PURCHASED**

**APPROVAL**

**GRATIS/EXCHANGE**

**PRICE**

**ACC NO.**

**VIKRAM SARABHAI LIBRARY**

**I. I. M., AHMEDABAD.**

## **Voluntary Action in India: Role, Trends and Challenges**

**Anil Bhatt**

### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the role of modern voluntary organizations. The analytical categories of developmental, mobilizational and political roles have been formulated to understand the impact of voluntary organizations on government, people and politics. The paper argues that voluntarism has brought about many innovations in doing development and working for equality and justice but its overall impact in either improving the physical quality of life or achieve justice and equality for the weak and the oppressed is insignificant. VOs have not been able to transcend their micro and local concerns. At one level VOs' role is essentially political insofar as it wants to bring about social transformation by redistributing power, status and wealth; at another level VOs have always turned away from dealing with mainstream power politics.

Their micro level work inspite of its laudable achievements have reached a dead end in terms of social transformation. That is why distortions and decay have crept into the work of voluntary organizations in the last few years. It is suggested that if voluntary organizations want to bring about social transformation and avoid stagnation they must take on the task of changing and reforming political institutions, political processes and political behaviour.

## Voluntary Action in India:

### Role, Trends and Challenges

#### Introduction

The last two decades have seen an unprecedented growth of what are called voluntary or non-governmental organizations (NGO) in India. While voluntarism has been an age-old phenomenon, it is only in the last couple of decades that so much is being talked, written, debated and done about it. There is a good reason for this. Modern voluntarism is significantly different from the conventional voluntarism in form, content, intent and impact.

Conventional voluntarism, was primarily aimed at charity and relief or at best social welfare and social reform. It sprang out of religiosity, generosity and altruism. It was inspired by idealism rather than ideology.

Modern voluntarism<sup>1</sup>, while incorporating some of the elements of conventional voluntarism, is based on ideology rather than mere idealism. It aims at achieving development and social justice rather than relief and welfare. Therefore, the tools, techniques, approaches and objectives of modern voluntarism differ from that of the conventional. Modern voluntarism strives to change the social, economic and political position of the poor, the deprived, the oppressed and the weak. In the final analysis, therefore, it aims at redistribution of power, status and wealth.

Within this broad mission though, activities, approaches, ideologies, methods, forms of organizations, techniques and strategies differ widely. Some are large; others are small; some work directly with people at the grass roots level; others perform support functions of research, documentation and training. Some implement concrete development programmes; other mobilize people to demand their rights and justice. Some like to replicate and expand; others prefer to experiment and demonstrate. Some prefer to collaborate with government and industry; others scrupulously avoid doing so. The variety is so wide and overlapping that it defies any neat classification in terms of activities, functions, approaches and roles.<sup>2</sup> But underlying all this variety and divergence is the mission of social transformation.

There was a growing realization by the end of the sixties that the state and its political and public institutions had failed to do much about poverty, inequality and injustice. On the contrary the political processes and developmental policies had often led to the strengthening of the powerful and the rich

---

1 Upendra Baxi calls modern voluntarism as activism and distinguishes it from charity and relief type organizations which he considers as voluntarism proper. See Baxi, "Activism at Crossroads with Signposts," *Social Action*, Vol.36, Oct-Dec. 1986, pp.378-389.

2 There have been several attempts to classify and categorize voluntary organizations. See, for instance, Shashi Pandey "Role of Voluntary Action in Rural India," *South Asia Bulletin*, Vol.4, No.2, Fall, 1984; PRIA, *Voluntary Development Organizations in India*, (New Delhi: PRIA), 1991, pp.33-44.

and increased the strangle-hold of the dominant groups over the deprived. It was this realization and deep pessimism about politics and government that led middle class, highly educated, sensitized youth to go to villages and urban slums and start voluntary action separate and independent of existing political and governmental establishments.

More than two decades of work by these voluntary groups has now raised this question of exactly what role they have played, with what results and what challenges the voluntary sector is facing in nineties. There are several ways of looking at the role of modern voluntary organizations (VOs) depending upon one's framework of analysis. One can simply prepare a long list of roles that voluntary groups perform based on their activities and functions, a common format used in classifying VOs.

But viewed in terms of impact, modern voluntarism can be considered as performing basically three roles. They can be broadly, though not precisely labeled, as (1) developmental, (2) mobilizational, and (3) political.

These roles may make impact on three different sectors. The developmental role aims to impact the design and delivery systems of governments or those organizations like national and international funding agencies which concern themselves with programmes aimed at raising the physical quality of life. They may be done by trying to influence the existing development programmes and their delivery systems or by directly demonstrating alternative designs and delivery for development.

The mobilization role attempts to make an impact on the people for whom developmental programmes are designed. The approach is to mobilize the intended beneficiaries of development so that they can influence the government's delivery system or look after their own development.

In the political role, the approach is to influence the political system: either its policies, laws, and legislations or its processes and performance.

Neither these roles nor their impact are mutually exclusive. In the mobilizational role for instance, the expectation is that if people are well mobilized then they in turn, will make political and developmental impact. In one sense all roles can be considered political or developmental, insofar as its intended impact is to bring about social transformation. In fact, as we shall see later, some observers have viewed the entire phenomenon of modern voluntarism as a political process.

### **Developmental Role**

Developmental role as defined here aims to improve physical quality of life. This is one type of role that voluntary organizations have undertaken to the maximum extent. It is this role which has generally received legitimacy and support for voluntarism from governments and international donor agencies.

In this role, VOs usually take on one or more concrete developmental activities in selected areas or with selected groups and hope to improve the physical quality of life of this group through health,

education, agriculture, trades, housing etc. VOs performing this type of work are also known as service organizations.

Since voluntary organizations have to work with limited funds, manpower and physical resources and because development of the poor and the weak was an uncharted field till recently, conventional knowledge was found to be inadequate. VOs, therefore, had to experiment and innovate extensively. Their small size, limited resources, their open-mindedness, their flexibility of thought and action, their pro-people orientation all helped them to experiment and try out innovations for development.

VOs, therefore, have come up with amazingly creative and innovative ways of doing development. Many of the innovations in development such as community health approaches and its various components, indigenous medicines, techniques of delivery of services to the poor in remote, forest and hilly areas, cheap, culturally acceptable technologies of development, use of indigenous resources have been developed by the voluntary sector.

They have developed creative educational and communication materials and methods to enable the poor to develop their own skills and techniques for development activities. They have also developed innovative social techniques to generate participation of the poor and illiterate to overcome social and political barriers to development and cope with resistance and opposition from vested interests.

Innovations done by VOs are numerous and cover all aspects of development - technical, managerial and social. In fact it is in innovations in development that VOs have acquired a special place of their own.

It is evident that VOs in their limited areas of operation have been quite effective. Their achievement, particularly in those aspects of development, which are considered soft and complex and where large legalistic and bureaucratic organizations have not been able to make any break through, has been particularly noteworthy. Generating participation of the people, education and training, use of indigenous resources and skill, mobilization and organization of the poor, overcoming behavioural and cultural resistance of communities, reaching the poorest of the poor are some of the dimensions of development where VOs' contribution has been remarkable. It is because they are effective at the grass roots level that governments are now increasingly coming forth to support them and collaborate with them on schemes and projects of development.

In spite of these achievements, now after more than two decades of voluntary work in physical development, some more fundamental questions are being raised by VOs themselves about their role. Though a number of VOs and their activities have increased tremendously in the eighties, their overall contribution in terms of improving the physical quality of life of the people is only marginal.

This is primarily due to the fact that in spite of their rapid growth, their number and the size of their operations are still too small to make any significant impact. Macro systems and their processes too tend to undo the limited achievements of VOs.

In relation to the developmental role of VOs, questions of replication and sustainability are raised. It is not merely a question of a particular VO replicating itself in different areas or helping other VOs to replicate. The question is, can their work be replicated by governments on a national scale? Here and there, there are examples of governments having adopted VOs' designs approaches and techniques but such an adoption has gotten bureaucratized and almost always proved ineffective.

The question is how long can VOs continue to play the role of implementors of development? Governments, wherever they have been supportive of voluntary action, have always wanted them to play only the role of implementors. There has not been any support and encouragement to VOs to play political roles where they attempt to question, criticize or redefine development paradigms, government policies, politics and administration. International donor agencies because they are international and foreign are naturally circumspect in supporting such activities. Some international voluntary agencies do support the mobilizational and political work of voluntary agencies but only surreptitiously.

### **Mobilizational Role**

One of the important roles, and a role distinct from conventional VOs is what may be broadly called the mobilizational role. It is also variously referred to as capacity building, self-reliance, participation and empowerment. Here the VOs directly work with the poor and the weak. The basic principle behind this approach is that unless and until people themselves become capable, and active, development cannot take place. Here people are not perceived as a recipient system passively receiving whatever benefits and services are given to them but as active, participant and demanding system.

The mobilizational approach has three variations. The variations are due to different, and at times, opposed ideological underpinnings.

The three variations are as follows:

1. Development can take place quickly and cheaply if people come forward to participate in their own development. This is nearer to the official and conventional view of community participation. In concrete terms, people are mobilized to contribute in terms of cash, kind or their time and labour. In other words, people should be mobilized to share the burden of their own development.
2. Closely related to the above but more in tune with VOs thinking is mobilization for self-reliance. people should be helped to become capable for their own development after which the outside intervenors should withdraw. In fact, one of the common themes of debates and discussion during early eighties and one of the criterion of evaluation of the impact of VOs was the level of self reliance of the communities and the stage of the withdrawal of the outside intervenors. The main elements of mobilization are essentially knowledge and skills. People should be imparted technical, managerial and social skills so that they eventually become self-reliant and become capable of managing their own development.



3. A third variation and distinctly different, if not opposed to the above two variations, is the mobilizational role that VOs perform so that the people are conscientized, mobilized and organized to fight against corruption, oppression, injustice. This view is more radical, not sharing the conventional view of community participation. It explicitly or implicitly challenges the notion that VOs' role in development is to be a substitute to the government's delivery system and provide services. The rationale for this type of mobilization is as follows:

The poor are poor because of the exploitative social, economic and political systems. Because of the exploitative systems, the benefits of development do not reach the poor. Benefits of development are being siphoned off by the strong, and vested interests. The development bureaucracy at local levels succumbs or colludes with these vested interests. Governments' programmes and policies of development therefore, end up reinforcing the existing exploitative, inequalitarian socio-economic relationships. The role of the voluntary organization is not so much to get involved in taking up specific developmental activities but to mobilize and organize the poor and weak so that they can demand their rights and fight for equality and justice. If VOs get involved in concrete development, it is only as a strategy to mobilize the poor. VOs role is to help them become capable to fight for their rights and justice. And thus empower the poor and the weak.

Many VOs working with this ideology prefer to call themselves social action groups, struggle organizations or movements rather than NGOs or VOs and describe their leaders as activists rather than voluntary or social workers.

In the mobilizational role of any of the three varieties, the major activities are providing information, education and training, developing awareness and conscientization, imparting various skills and forming formal or informal organizations of the people themselves. In the third variation, direct action methods--protests, petitions and processions, rallies and meetings, sit-ins, courts and streets--are used more freely.

As to the first two variations of the mobilizational role, namely, that of eliciting the poor's participation and developing skills, VOs, have shown remarkable success. Everything about VOs, their organizational culture, their orientations and their methods of doing work is conducive to mobilization. Even governments concede that VOs are more effective in mobilization and participation. At times, when local development bureaucracies have not succeeded in eliciting response from the people in meeting their targets for family planning, immunization or adult education, they have approached VOs.

Because in India, there has been more political space for VOs than in some other developing countries organizations of tribals, landless and women have been formed. Such organizations have successfully fought for more wages from landlords and government; better rates for the produce they sell; against bonded labour, and against callous and corrupt bureaucrats; and oppression of vested interests and local level politicians and officials. Because of their conscientization, mobilizational and organizational

activities, forest dwellers, fisher folks, tribals and women have come out of their shells, interacted and organized with similar people from distant areas, acquired exposure and awareness and developed tremendous self-confidence and self-esteem.

Yet inspite of such spectacular and dramatic achievements, the impact of mobilizational role in overall terms is limited mainly because most of these efforts are localized. Such mobilization is confined to specific local communities and specific local issues. And no matter how many local issues are taken up in different places and different times, they rarely get aggregated to make any significant of lasting impact on the existing systems. In case of struggle based mobilization too, it is localized and based on local events and issues. One has to go on struggling against moneylender after moneylender, landlord after landlord and bureaucrat after bureaucrat.

Experience has shown that people may get mobilized and activised for a well-defined short-term objective but it is difficult to keep people in a perpetual state of participation, mobilization and action. Experience has also shown that if the overall ethos of the established systems are that of exploitation, oppression and corruption, then poor people particularly their leaders, once they become capable and powerful, often get co-opted and themselves become corrupt and exploitative.

### **Political Role**

As mentioned in the beginning, modern voluntarism, in the final analysis, aims at some kind of social transformation and in that sense, it can be considered as performing a political role however indirect or long term. In fact, some observers of the phenomenon of modern voluntarism have viewed it primarily as a political process though non-party, non-electoral, non-parliamentary.<sup>3</sup> They see this small, voluntary grassroots action as providing non-party political alternatives.

In face of the failure of the governments' bureaucracies and the macro political institutions such as legislatures, parties and their mass fronts like trade unions, young women or farmers' wings, voluntary action is seen as providing alternative political spaces. Work of the VOs is seen as "deep stirrings of consciousness that could be turned into catalyst of opportunity... it could be seen as an attempt to open alternative political spaces outside the usual arenas of party and government."<sup>4</sup>

These grassroots activities are seen as an attempt to redefine politics as something that goes beyond legislatures, parties and elections. They attempt to widen the scope of politics by politicizing developmental subjects such as health, education, science and technology, environment, forest, common property and natural resources.

VIKRAM SARABHAI LIBRARY  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT  
PASTRAPUR, AHMEDABAD-380015

---

3 Rajni Kothari, "The Non-Party Political Process," *The Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XIX, No. Feb.4, 1984. Harsh Sethi, *The Non-Party Political Process: Uncertain Alternatives*, (Geneva: UNRIST Mimeo, 1983.

*ibid.*

Paradoxically, though VOs scrupulously keep out of politics and also like to identify themselves as non-political. In fact, disgusted with politics and public administration, some "good" politicians and some "good" administrators have given up politics and administration to enter into voluntary work.

Governments have been jittery about VOs' political role. They smell in their activities, elements of insurgency and attempts towards destabilizing political and governmental authority.

Exactly opposite to this is a view held by leftist and radical political groups who see VOs as strengthening the status quo, counter revolutionary and aiding the conspiracy of the western world to halt social revolution in their countries.

There has been a heated debate between progressive intellectuals who see in VOs a very vital alternative political process and communist party theorists. The Communist Party theorists have attacked such intellectuals as well as VOs as falling a prey to the imperialist strategy with their "eclectic and pseudo-radical postures... for how else can one explain the strange spectacle of imperialist agencies and governments funding organizations to organize the rural and urban poor to fight for their rights and against exploitation."<sup>5</sup>

As to the direct political role of capturing political power, influencing political processes and performance of political and public institutions, the VOs have played practically no role. Barring stray cases of some VO leaders trying to enter into local government institutions through contesting elections or helping a party candidate behind the scene VOs have neither participated into the mainstream politics nor have they tried to influence it from outside. This is understandable because it was their disenchantment with politics and public administration that led them to voluntary action in the first place. They are also worried about losing their credibility if they get involved in formal politics. And they are worried that they would get caught in the whirlpool of power struggle and dirty politics which they have been scrupulously keeping away from.<sup>6</sup> There is thus considerable ambivalence in relation to VOs political role. On the one hand whatever VOs do is supposed to be political in so far as all developments may be considered as having some political bearing. On the other hand VOs get criticized and their credibility is questioned if they directly deal with any political issues or political personnel.

## Trends

Towards the end of the eighties, several trends have surfaced and now that voluntarism has become both extensive and established and come to be recognized as a distinct sector in the country these trends need to be examined carefully.

---

5 The strongest and most coherent public statement of this view is given by Prakash Karat of Communist Party of India (Marxist) in his, "Action-Groups/Voluntary Agencies: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy," *The Marxist*, April-June, 1984. For a retort to this view see Harsh Sethi, "Immoral Others: The Debate Between Party and Non-Party Groups" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vox.XX, No.02, March 1985.

6 For a more detailed discussion of various roles of VOs see my, *Development and Social Justice*, (New Delhi: Sage), 1989, Chapter 1.

Most important are the ones that concern voluntary organizations themselves. It primarily deals with how they conduct themselves. This cannot be ignored any more because voluntary work no more inspires the awe and respect that it used to in seventies and early eighties.

With proliferation of voluntary groups there has also ensued competition, conflicts, rivalry and factionalism among voluntary groups. The trend of competing and contending groups maligning and undercutting each other vis-a-vis government bureaucracy and funding agencies, has become clearly visible.

Towards the end of eighties, dissensions and conflicts between the activists and their organizations based on territorial imperatives, struggle for positions, fame and funds, had begun to surface.

The fraternity and solidarity among VOs which is advocated so strongly has on the whole been weak except at the time of crisis and more as interest group [e.g. when FCRA<sup>7</sup> implementation is tightened].

Internal management of VOs is another problem. Most organizations are one man organizations or one man dominance organizations. The initiator - founder, as Baxi puts it is Swayambhu.<sup>8</sup> He is neither appointed nor elected. Is he also self-perpetuating? The directors, managing trustees, coordinators have no fixed terms. They seem to be there for ever.

With all the clamour about participatory and democratic processes few voluntary organizations have been able to sustain or cope with such practices within their organizations leading to dissatisfaction among members, splits and disintegration.

Irregularity and even corruption in management of funds, book juggling of accounts, diversion of funds in the name of flexibility, use of organization's funds, facilities and infrastructure for personal purposes (something for which bureaucrats and politicians have been constantly and severely criticized by VO leaders) are becoming common practices.

In early eighties, one of the drawbacks of voluntarism frequently lamented was that they were not adopting professional approaches in their management. This was recommended for increasing the effectiveness. Considerable professionalism has now come into voluntary organizations. However, with professionalization voluntarism is also tending to become a profession and increasingly beginning to acquire the concomitant characteristics of a profession.

In some areas they have become opportunities for employment or as one document rather harshly puts it "shops for commerce."<sup>9</sup> Several outfits who are doing little more than consultancies, training and workshops on contract basis are set up with the legal and organizational forms of voluntary agencies.

---

7 FCRA - Foreign Contributions Regulation Act - every voluntary organization receiving foreign funds has to register with central government under the provision of FCRA. This permission can be revoked on several grounds.

8 Literally meaning self-born. Baxi, *Op.cit.*

9 PRIA, *Op.Cit.* p.92.

This enables them to receive foreign funds rather than to have to survive in a market place as private consultancy firms have to do.

The professionalism then tends to lead to a rather distorted pragmatism. This has become more evident since late eighties in VOs dealings with governmental systems. Instead of open and formal interaction or opposition and confrontation (which is what is expected in the value system and ethos of voluntarism) their modus operandi in dealing with government is to use personal contacts and influence, favouritism and nepotism--all the traits that the activists have otherwise so severely criticized among the public systems. With reference to the use of law by the activists Upendra Baxi observes that instead of turning around the institutions of law and justice they use the decadence of the legal system as resource. Baxi warns against this 'introjection,' a process by which one produces all the pathologies and deformities of the system which one tries to change.<sup>10</sup>

The leadership also tends to acquire the characteristic of a professional: sophisticated and smooth but smug, manipulating and rat-racing. Both organizations and leaders are tending to become ostentatious. Austerity, simplicity and economy which were once the hall mark of voluntarism and on which often voluntary leaders used to browbeat others are being increasingly discarded.

Altogether these trends do not augur well for the voluntary movement. It undermines their credibility not only with politicians and bureaucrats who continuously seek every opportunity to denigrate them but even independent citizens in other sectors who have respected and supported voluntary action because it has been different and ethically and morally better. There is also a growing disenchantment even within the honest elements among voluntary organizations about voluntarism itself.

Often in defence, it is argued that there are other sectors and professions like this - the doctors, lawyers, politicians, bureaucrats, even academics not to talk of businessmen. Sometimes it is also said that what is happening to voluntarism is a part of broader societal trends and VOs are no exception.<sup>11</sup> But VOs are an exception or should be. They came into being to counter certain societal and political trends and to set-off new ones, otherwise there is no justification for them to demand all the funds, freedom and support. Many problems that governments' support of voluntary organizations as well as international bodies and funding agencies' activities have created are also made possible due to the internal pathology of the voluntary sector itself.<sup>12</sup>

It can not be ignored that the very basis of voluntarism is moral and ethical, and therefore the defence that what they are doing is what everybody else is doing and they are only a reflection of what is going on in the society is not sustainable.

---

10 Upendra Baxi, *Op.Cit.*

11 PRIA, *Op.Cit.* p.93.

12 Rajni Kothari, "The Rise of People's Movement," *Social Action*, Vol.40, July-September, 1990.

## **Issues and Agenda for the Nineties**

Thus towards the end of eighties many weaknesses, limitations and what some have called "worrisome trends"<sup>13</sup> had begun to surface.

Having achieved so much at the grass-roots level the basic question of what next has begun to nag the VOs.

There contributions in specific development sectors, inspite of all the success stories have been limited because of the micro nature of their efforts. The basic conditions of the people have not improved in any significant way. After all as far as development sectors are concerned VOs cannot replace government's delivery system all over the country.

Their attempts at mobilization of the people for asserting their rights and getting social justice have remained localized and limited to specific issues. Moreover, people refuse to stay in perpetual state of participation, mobilization and organization and to go on fighting on issue after issue. Experience suggests that mobilization and participation are not necessarily incremental and aggregative processes. People once mobilized and made active may also get demobilized and inactive. The faith so strongly held in early eighties that these small grass-roots achievements would "blossom into a macro movement for alternative development"<sup>14</sup> seems to be shaking now. Within NGO scene itself, there are signs of aging. There seems to be an underlying current of exhaustion, stagnation and perhaps dejection.

About three years ago I attended a gathering of VOs in Rajasthan. The mood was one of dejection. Most experiences related there suggested that poor and deprived people with whom they had worked continuously for many years and tried to conscientize on issues of equality, justice, exploitation and oppression did not care much for things other than tangible benefits. Last year I attended a similar gathering in Gujarat. Again repeatedly speaker after speaker mentioned the limitations of micro effort and the frustration emanating from the fact that their ability to fight the forces of corruption, oppression and injustice was very very limited. While nobody explicitly mentioned it their faith in the people they were working for seemed to be shaken.

In the last couple of years, whenever I have talked to activists and asked the question what they think is the role of voluntary action and what direction it would take in the nineties there is considerable uneasiness. Though some doggedly continue to do more of the same the more reflective, more sensitive among the VO leaders are beginning to feel restless. This perhaps suggests that among those who view voluntarism with a larger mission of social transformation rather than achievement on specific development activities in a specific geographical area have a feeling of stagnation. There are even odd cases of drop-outs. It may be very revealing to carefully examine the drop-out phenomenon.

---

13 PRIA, pp.91-94.

14 D.L. Sheth, "Grass-roots Initiatives in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XIV, No.6, 11 Feb.1984.

The drop-outs from the voluntary sector may in fact be highly sensitive, reflective and genuinely concerned people. They may have dropped out because they may see voluntarism as stagnating inspite of increased numbers, better infrastructure, and availability of funds in huge amounts unheard of only five years ago. They also see voluntarism as not only decaying but also loosing its larger missions of social transformation.

Inspite of the many battles that VOs have won in fighting against corrupt and oppressive state machinery, politicians and vested interests it has become clear that their micro struggles cannot make any dent on the nature of politics and public administration even in their local areas. While in the last two decades voluntarism has increased and become extensive so have corruption, social violence, lumpenization and brutalization of politics and a comprehensive decay of public institutions. These two opposite developments have taken place side by side.

The question of the nineties is, how far can VOs ignore what is happening in mainstream politics and government? In the face of decaying politics and public institutions can social transformation be brought about without directly dealing with the question of changing and improving politics and government? Activists have talked about alternative development but do not seem to have given any thought to alternative public systems that would bring about the alternative development.

While everybody including the government wants voluntary groups to contribute to development, everybody including voluntary organizations themselves expect voluntarism to remain apolitical. Even highly reflective and broad based voluntary groups have, it seems, nothing to say about the existing political processes, selection of incompetent and corrupt people with criminal records on positions of power and significance, legislative and political behaviour, open violations of laws and rules by elected representatives of people and even changing them retrospectively if found inconvenient. Can social transformation-equality, social justice, dignity and self-esteem for the poor and the weak and a minimum basic physical quality of life-be brought about when these kinds of political processes continue unabated and unchallenged?

The challenge for the VOs if they want to bring about social transformation is to be able to transcend their micro and apolitical approaches, self-absorption with their own organizations and activities and take up more macro and directly political agenda, the agenda of reforming our political institutions and political processes. They will have to concern themselves with not only empowering the people but also depowering the politicians. It is not a matter of influencing a policy here or a legislation there. It is also not a matter of talking vaguely about decentralization, pluralism, or secularism (as developed countries and international institutions wanting to improve governance in developing countries do). It is a matter of bringing about concrete and specific improvements in the institutions and processes of governance - legislative institutions and legislative behaviour, elections, parties, political behaviour and political conduct of leaders, public administration and judiciary. This is a reformist agenda but then modern voluntarism inspite of all its radical and progressive stances is essentially reformist.<sup>15</sup>

If the VOs do not take up the agenda of improving governance and particularly political reforms then there is an imminent danger that like Gandhian voluntarism, modern voluntarism too would decay and get fossilized. But if they decide to deal directly and explicitly with improving the governance then they will have to do the following:

- a. **Clean their own house.** They will have to bring back what might seem old fashioned virtues of honesty, personal integrity, self-effacement and dedication. Both their accounts and accountability will have to be clean and open. They will have to gather the moral courage to weed out the charlatans among them. If they do not like the government administered code of conduct they will have to devise their own mechanism of self-discipline and regulation. **They cannot ignore the fact that the foundation of voluntarism no matter of which variety, is moral.** As Upendra Baxi writes, "by definition activism can have no territoriality, no hegemony, no competition for power, no lusting for eminence in the media market, no questing for recognition or rewards."<sup>16</sup>
- b. They will have to sit down, be concrete and specific in working out the improvements in our public institutions and political processes. It would involve devising a whole set of policies, laws, rules, regulations, criteria, even constitutional changes where needed and implementing systems.
- c. This would mean coming out of the self-absorption with one's own organization and activities and forge alliances not only with fellow VOs but concerned people from other sectors.
- d. They may have to reduce their dependence on foreign funding.
- e. To build on their grass-roots strength and develop public advocacy, not by personal contacts and personal influence with individual bureaucrats and politicians but of the more open, formal and collective type. Prepare to launch national movement for political reforms which would become necessary and to directly and explicitly link micro action with the macro movement as was done so effectively during the independence movement, by the freedom fighters.
- f. And all this the VOs will have to do without losing their non-partisan, non-power struggle oriented and people centered character.

This is indeed an onerous task but so is the mission of social transformation.

940706

