

## ROLE OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

Broadly speaking, more voluntary groups in all, they must run into thousands-especially those working in rural areas, can be divided into four major groups: Charity and relief groups, Envelopment groups, Action groups some more openly political than others and Support groups. The number of voluntary groups in India actively interested or involved in environmental issues today is larger than in any other Third World Country and probably matches the numbers found in Western Countries, where the environmental movement had its beginnings. To enable the achievement of this prime objective of a people's movement, a three-pronged approach in strategy is called for comprising three levels of achievement of power, viz. political, economic and social.

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## Introduction

Broadly speaking, more voluntary groups in all, they must run into thousands-especially those working in rural areas, can be divided into four major groups:

- (1) Charity and relief groups,
- (2) Envelopment groups,
- (3) Action groups some more openly political than others and
- (4) Support groups –lawyer’ collectives, alternative professional association, groups publishing journals, documentation centers, theatre groups.

Charity and relief organizations have been forced to ask themselves whether charity can deal with social problems, and this internal questioning is pushing them towards long-term development activity, like Oxfam on a global scale and the Ramakrishna Mission on the national level. Development groups, in turn, are being pushed towards action-oriented work. They often begin by taking up programmes to help the poor increase their social status, incomes and self-reliance in basic needs like energy food, shelter, clothing and health services. In many cases, these groups supplement official efforts for development. Often they consist of middle class professionals who have opted of lucrative careers to undertake rural development work.

But no matter how committed or innovative they may be, they face serious limitations. Most of them are small and operate in restricted areas. While this facilitative flexibility and a deeper knowledge of the local area and people, it also limits the range and type of activity. Moreover, local big-wigs, bureaucrats and politicians often frustrate attempts at honest work. Local vested interest becomes hostile as they sense that the organization will no longer “toe the line”. The more politicized of the group members see their activity as futile and become cynical and disheartened or leave for a more explicitly political group, or continue ineffectually where they are. The ‘technicians’ too, loose out in the process, and very often return to more conventional jobs. This loss of cadre finishes off most organizations. Some make fervent attempts to replace the external middle class professionals, with local cadres. But such cadres fail to attract funds from external sources to continue the programme, and programmes of this sort, with salaried personnel can rarely be funded out of local resources.

Action groups are part of a wider movement in search of new forms of social and political action through which the masses of the people would move from the periphery to the centre of development and political processes. An awakening to the reality of massive pauperization and systematic violation of human rights, in the midst of growing affluence of a minority, has taken hold of a sizeable section of the educational elite. Belonging to different age-groups, they refuse to be part of and supportive of exploitative structures, institution, and social systems. It is significant that social scientists have increasingly felt that need to associate themselves with action groups. There are widespread initiatives on the part of scientists to make scientific knowledge accessible to the masses. The concern for legal education and legal support in favour of the most exploited sections of society is spreading, and is found even in the top judicial institutions. These and many other attempts point to a need of linkages with youth involved among the poor, enabling them to gain organizational strength and political weight

### **Charitable Action**

The number of voluntary groups in India actively interested or involved in environmental issues today is larger than in any other Third World Country and probably matches the numbers found in Western Countries, where the environmental movement had its beginnings. Except for certain conservation-oriented groups and groups interested in protecting the urban environment, it would probably be accurate to say that most groups in India cannot strictly be called environmental groups in the Western sense. This is particularly true of grassroots voluntary groups in rural areas, whose existence and number lends a distinct character to the voluntary movement. Most rural grassroots groups have begun to take up environmental issues in addition to their long standing concerns for rural and urban poverty, social justice, inequality, civil liberties, rural development, appropriate technology and health. Their perspective embraces not merely an understanding of the human impact on nature, but sees this impact as arising out of the complex web of social and political relationships between human beings: what human beings do to nature is essentially born out of what humans do to each other.

Harsh Sethi says in an article published in Economic and Political Weekly that this increase in interest in micro-organizations has grown out of the failure of the established micro-organizations political parties, Kisan Sabhas, trade unions and the government to do anything about growing poverty, inequality, landlessness, unemployment and centralization of power, and

to bring about positive development and participative trends within society. On the other hand, the voluntary agencies often concentrate on these problems; they are where the action is, from remote villages to urban slums, dealing with local problems, with local populations. These organizations are definitely non-political in the sense that they do not participate in electoral processes. But most such groups do have a political perspective of the society and its growth, which is sometimes clearly articulated, but more often not.

### Catalysts of a People's Movement

Social action groups have by now become a widespread phenomenon that can no longer be taken for granted let alone overlooked. They have over the past one and a half decades taken deep roots in the social structure of rural India. That they have made some impact even on the political structure is clear from the controversies raised about them in the leftist party circles. Because of this impact, even the government has directed that voluntary agencies be involved in the implementation of anti-poverty and minimum needs programmes. Fundamentally, the primary function of action groups is to activate a people's movement not in any way dissimilar to the one that Mahatma Gandhi was instrumental in mobilizing. Their role primarily is to be catalysts in this movement. What is important is that the action groups have a revolutionary impact in the sense that they are more likely to bring about the necessary structural changes in the present socio-political system and bring about significant changes in the attitudes, values and life-style of the larger society. Short of this wider perspective, these changes cannot have repercussions of a revolutionary nature. This can be done only by mobilizing the masses to a much greater extent than has hitherto been done. As most writers in this work say, the emergence and the ongoing activity of action groups presuppose the following:

- (1) A disbelief in the larger as well as the local political structures (not because they are intrinsically incapacitating and inefficient but rather because they are existentially inoperative and empirically dysfunctional);
- (2) A belief in micro-level action and
- (3) A belief in people's power.

### Strategy

To enable the achievement of this prime objective of a people's movement, a three-pronged approach in strategy is called for comprising three levels of achievement of power, viz. political, economic and social. These three areas form a composite whole of the entire fabric of social equality. People possess political power when the decision-making power is vested in their hands. Similarly, economic power accrues from economic independence—a state that the small farmer and the daily wage labourers achieve when they no longer rely on the landlords as such for their daily sustenance but are able to earn their daily bread from the produce of the land, livestock and wage labour.

### **Social power**

Lastly, social power flows from breaking down social barriers that result from such social institutions as the caste system, bonded labour, sex discrimination, etc. All these three “powers” are essential for building up a just society. The one without the other is meaningless. Nor can they be chronologically subordinated, one to the other. Struggle for the three powers should go hand in hand. Although distinct, they are interrelated and inseparable. As catalysts of a people's movement social activities have an important leadership role to play. It is essentially a role of compassionate service. A social activist is neither a philanthropist nor a spiritualist or economist or capitalist, but an activist whose actions will revolutionize the minds of society to establish new social values and orders to lead a harmonious, peaceful, active life of joy and happiness for the masses, the common people at large. He is to act as a strong medium to make the common people aware of their own rights and duties and to prepare them for a joyful disciplined living full of light and luster. He is to act as a check on the social and administrative evils and common wells for every fifteen families, solar TV, and smokeless chulas. These facilities are for all, not just a privileged few. The village has solved the dowry problem by having common marriage ceremonies. The temple where the marriages take place was built by Baba's own money. When he retired, he got Rs.20, 000 and invested it all in building this temple. The temple welcomes all people irrespective of caste. The people themselves wishing to share their wealth with others have put up a hostel to benefit students from neighboring villages. Baba said the government programmes are like milestones showing the way, but they never reach their destiny. The students also saw the church efforts at development—many geared to handouts, food-for-work, grants and all the resulting problems of this approach. At the end of the camp they visited

Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth, Rahuri. They have 800 acres of land in a research project. The impact of this agricultural college on the villages around has been studied by CSRD and found to be detrimental because of the following.

1. High cost technology makes it out of the reach of the ordinary farmers.
2. Use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers is causing an imbalance in nature.
3. Use of hybrid seeds require pesticides and chemical fertilizers (spraying by helicopters) which are too costly and wipes out locally productive varieties of seeds.

Having established that there is much to do if we are to bring peace and justice to our world, and also seeing the role voluntary agencies can play, let us move on to the way in which this can be done. We can see throughout history, and especially today that violence breeds more violence, so we turn to nonviolent action (NVA) as the only means to achieve our goal -- of Utopia. It is in NVA that the deepest roots of Spirituality give birth, to hope that we can and will experience a world where people live in love. Again it is a returning to our roots, to relearn the message of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who taught the world a lesson—that today NVA does work.

Socio-economic exploitation of the common masses either by the vested interests or by the administration.

### **Development Work**

Voluntary agencies have made significant contributions in working with neglected sections of the population and neglected issues, in responding to problems faced by local populations in local situations, and in developing new and democratic methods of operation. The latter contribution is probably the most important. These groups have shown the way towards experimentation with alternate ways of doing things like organizing cheap and people-oriented health services. The successes of groups working in the field of health care, appropriate technology, water management and forestation have forced professionals in these fields to debate their own approaches and solutions. The Medico Friends Circle, a coalition of highly innovative groups, working in the field of health care, has tried to generate a major debate within the medical profession. In the field of environment, the forestation work of the Chipko movement is today noted at all levels of government.

## The innovative work of voluntary agencies

But even though the innovative work of voluntary agencies get widely noticed, the ensuing debate has not usually led to any major change in the ways of the government or of the majority of the professionals. The WHO, for instance picked up the concept of primary health care from the work of some excellent grass-roots health groups, but its programmes modeled on the concept of primary health care, remain riddled with inefficiency, contradictions, and inadequacies.

### Conclusion

This Article deals with the Role of Voluntary Agencies and Social Change in India. Broadly speaking, more voluntary groups in all, they must run into thousands-especially those working in rural areas, can be divided into four major groups: Charity and relief groups, Envelopment groups, Action groups some more openly political than others and Support groups. In which the number of voluntary groups in India actively interested or involved in environmental issues today is larger than in any other Third World Country and probably matches the numbers found in Western Countries, where the environmental movement had its beginnings. To enable the achievement of this prime objective of a people's movement, a three-pronged approach in strategy is called for comprising three levels of achievement of power, viz. political, economic and social. But even though the innovative work of voluntary agencies get widely noticed, the ensuing debate has not usually led to any major change in the ways of the government or of the majority of the professionals.

Further it also concentrated on the Voluntary agencies have made significant contributions in working with neglected sections of the population and neglected issues, in responding to problems faced by local populations in local situations, and in developing new and democratic methods of operation... It also emphasized the social power flows from breaking down social barriers that result from such social institutions as the caste system, bonded labour, sex discrimination, etc.

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