Voluntary Organisations in India

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Abstract
Voluntary organisations are based on the spirit of volunteerism, are autonomous and non profit organisations established to address various issues and problems in the society and play an important role in the development process as it promotes need based, area specific, innovative, integrated, environmental friendly and people friendly interventions. They have the capacity and capability to feel the pulse of the masses as they work at the grassroots level and are aware of the ground realities of the social problems. They work directly with the people. Their focus is on self sustained development. The present paper is theoretical in nature and talks about history of VOs, advantages, disadvantages, and types of voluntary organisations along with the challenges faced by them.

Keywords: Volunteers Spirit, Development Process, Ground Realities Awareness, Understanding Social Problems, Voluntary Organisations, Advantages, Disadvantages, Types

1 Introduction
Social work and voluntary organisations go hand in hand. Social work aims at promoting people’s welfare. Based on humanitarian philosophy, scientific knowledge and skills to deal with human behaviour, it helps individuals, groups and communities to help themselves at the micro level. The profession is dedicated to the pursuit of social justice and the well-being of oppressed and marginalized individuals and communities. It also intervenes at macro level in the form of suggesting governments to shape people friendly policies so that development process could be promoted. Research and the practice of social work focuses on areas such as: mental health, assessment and diagnosis, human development, socio legal, psychosocial, issues related to diversity, marginalization and oppression; psychotherapy, counselling, social policy public administration, social program evaluation, child welfare and community development. To fulfil the objectives of social work, social workers are organized into local, national, continental, and international organizations. They also work through government and voluntary organizations to address grassroots issues.

Voluntary organisations also play an important role in the development process as it promotes need based, area specific, innovative, integrated, environmental friendly and people friendly interventions. Voluntary organisations have the capacity and capability to feel the pulse of the masses as they work at the grassroots level and are aware of the ground realities of the social problems. Voluntary organisations work directly with the people in the areas such as environment, natural
resource education, health, rural development, water and sanitation. Their focus is on self sustained development. Voluntary organisations have been generally defined as voluntary, autonomous, non profit organisations or groups of citizens established to address various issues and problems in the society (Singh, 2001). To create an enabling environment for the voluntary sector to collaborate with the government for development, a number of steps have been taken by the government of India during the year 2000. The most significant step in this direction was declaration of the Planning Commission as nodal agency for GO-VO interface. As nodal agency, the first task assigned to the Planning Commission was to create a data base on voluntary organisations and this data base is continuously being updated. As per the estimates of the World Bank, there are about two million voluntary organisations working in India.

Voluntary organisations have their own advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of voluntary organisations are:

- Voluntary organisations are much closer to the poorer and disadvantaged section of the society.
- Staff of the voluntary organisations is normally highly motivated and altruistic in their behaviour.
- Voluntary organisations can easily stimulate and mobilise community resources and have access to volunteers.
- They are more effective in bringing people’s participation.
- Voluntary organisations are less rule bound and are non bureaucratic, non formal and flexible in their structure and operations.
- Voluntary sector has greater potential for innovations.
- Voluntary organisations prefer to work in multi-sectoral framework.
- Voluntary organisations are catalyst for creating social cohesion (Kumar, 1998).

Like all other organisations, voluntary organisations do have certain disadvantages. Some of the shortcomings of the voluntary sector are well known namely their inability to co-operate with each other in a way which would allow for coherent policy making, their accountability and transparency is not perfect and their area of operation is smaller in scale. Therefore there is need to improvise the working of voluntary organisations by scaling up their operations and by making them more transparent and accountable.

As the word voluntary organisation indicates, it is based on volunteerism. Volunteerism refers to the spirit of action carried on by an individual or a group or community on his/her own free will for welfare and development of the people and society (Mukherjee, 2002). It is defined as a voluntary spirit of individuals and communities to make interventions for community good. Volunteerism is an evolved social process institutionalised over a period of time through various religious, ethical and political traditions (Singh, 2001). Keeping in mind the significance of the voluntary sector, UN general assembly declared the year 2001 as international year of Volunteers and this declaration was to mark the vital contribution of the volunteers to recognize their achievement in the past to facilitate them for outstanding work done in the field of volunteerism.

2. History Of Voluntary Organisations

The tradition of volunteerism in India is age old. It was prevalent even in ancient and medieval period and its roots were lying in religion. Religion emphasized the value of charity, philanthropy, and mutual help. Giving the alms and feeding and caring for the destitute and the old and handicapped were religious acts. Even in modern India, charitable and welfare oriented
organisations were working for the welfare of the needy and down trodden people but with religious bias. The Christian missionaries worked in remote and backward places for the betterment of the tribal people and under privileged masses through promotion of education and health services. On the other hand, Hindu organisations contributed a lot for social change in the country through various social movements. Persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chander Vidya Sagar, Keshab Chander Sen, M.G.Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, and many others took up various social reform issues and formed groups and associations in an attempt to make their efforts effective. Some of these were Brahmo Samaj (1828), Paramhans Sabha (1849), Widow Marriage Association (1850), Sarvjanik Sabha (1871), Arya Samaj (1875), Arya Mahila Samaj (1875), the Theosophical Society, Indian National Congress (1885), Indian Social Conference (1887) and Ramkrishan Mission (1897). These were mainly working for social reforms in the society. Due to various socio economic issues emerged out of urbanisation and industrialisation towards the end of nineteenth century, various new voluntary organisations were formed. As a result, the then government enacted the Literary, Scientific, and Charitable Society Registration Act in 1850. This act was later reformulated as the Societies Registration Act in 1860. The enactment of the Societies Registration Act of 1860 was a landmark in the history of the development of voluntary organisations.

After independence, there was awareness that development to be meaningful requires mobilisation of resources, public cooperation and creation of social capital. During 1980’s, voluntary organisations are going through an era of transition in the social service sector by changing the voluntary culture in to a more professional NGO culture and volunteerism turning into development monitoring and management. In this transitional phase, NGOs became more professional and voluntary shape took shape of social change and development movement with a professional touch. As a result, professionals from various fields joined voluntary organisations to undertake multi-sectorial development work. It was recognised that no development strategy can be successful unless a shared vision of public sector, private sector and voluntary sector is created. It was also realised that the process of social mobilisation and development of people’s initiative cannot be achieved without the active support and involvement of voluntary organisations. That is why voluntary organisations have been given due recognition in the planning process of the country right from the first five year plan.

3. Voluntary Sector during Plan Period

During the first plan period, it was highlighted that the public co-operation and public opinion constitute the principle force and sanction behind India’s approach to planning. During second plan period, it was said again that public cooperation and public opinion constitute the principal force behind India’s approach to planning. The third five year plan emphasized that the concept of public cooperation is related to much larger sphere of voluntary action in which the initiative and organisational responsibility rest completely with people and their leaders, and does not rely on legal sanctions or the power of the state for achieving its aim. It was also realized that properly organised voluntary effort may move towards boosting the facilities to the community for helping the downtrodden to somewhat better life. During fourth and fifth plan period, the thrust on public cooperation and voluntary organisations was lost, but in the sixth plan again, the idea of participation of people’s organisations was recognised. Success stories of voluntary organisations like Bharat Agro Industries in animal husbandry and social forestry and Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) were also quoted. Role of voluntary organisations in development got a further impetus during seventh plan when it was declared that serious efforts would be made to involve voluntary
organisations in various development programmes to supplement the governmental efforts to give rural people choices and alternatives. A criterion was fixed for voluntary organisations to enlist them for rural development programmes. In eighth plan, due emphasis was given on building up people’s organisations. Similarly one of the objectives of ninth plan was promoting and developing people’s participatory bodies like Panchyati Raj Institutions, co-operatives and self help groups. The mid-term review of ninth plan also quoted some successful and sustainable projects undertaken by voluntary organisations and other people’s organisations. Under the directions for reforms of mid-term review, it has been suggested that initiatives by local bodies, voluntary organisations and women need to be encouraged. During tenth plan also, need to promote voluntary sector has been recognised.

4. Types of Voluntary Organisations

In India, societies, associations, organisations, trusts or companies registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860; the Indian Trusts Act, 1882; the Charitable and Religious Trusts Act, 1920 or as a charitable company under section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956 are considered voluntary organisations or nongovernmental organisations. In addition to this, there are various informal groups working at the grassroots level without being registered under any legislation but may also be considered as part of voluntary sector. Voluntary organisations are working in various areas ranging from welfare of the disadvantaged sections of the society, environment, human rights, Right to Information to the issues like impact of WTO or global warming. In order to map the diversity of voluntary organisation, Rajesh Tandon (2001) has provided the following typology of voluntary organisations:

A. Traditional Associations: These associations exist around a social unit defined by a tribe, ethnicity, or caste and undertake a wide range of functions. Besides mediating the inter-family relations, such associations develop elaborate systems, norms and procedures for governing the use and protection of natural resources. Several important struggles to protect and advance customary rights of tribals over natural resources in different parts of the country are led by such associations.

B. Religious Associations: These associations were formed by different sects and religions as charity, help to the needy, service to the poor and daan (giving) have been uniformly recommended by all the religions and sects in India. Education, health care, drinking water, afforestation, social welfare, etc. are numerous arenas of human action where fairly organized forms of civil society activity are carried out by religiously inspired VOs.

C. Social Movements: These associations emerged as a result of social movement. VOs / NGOs through these social movements try to reform society, institutions and governance and act as harbingers of social change. These movements are of several types:
- Focusing on the interest and aspirations of particular groups such as: SCs, STs and women.
- Protests against social evils like: liquor, dowry, inheritance rights etc.
- Protests against displacement due to big development projects.
- Campaigns against environmental degradation, corruption and for right to information, education and livelihood.

D. Membership Associations: Membership organisations may be representational – set up to represent the opinions and interest of a particular category of citizens e.g. unions of rural labour, farm workers, women workers, consumer associations etc., professional – formed around a particular occupation or profession e.g. association of lawyers, teachers, engineers,
managers, journalists etc., social-cultural – organised around a social or cultural purposes e.g. *Nehru Yuvak Kendras*, clubs for sports, *Natak Mandalis* etc. and self-help groups – a growing category of membership organisations e.g. savings and credit groups etc.

**E. Intermediary Associations:** These associations function between individual citizens and macro state institutions like the bureaucracy, judiciary and police etc. These could be of several types, e.g. service delivery, mobilization, support, philanthropic, advocacy and network.

### 5. Challenges for Voluntary Organisations

To provide the enabling environment for promoting and facilitating the work of emerging voluntary sector, the following challenges need to be taken care of.

- There is a lot of variation in the procedures / guidelines of the departments of the Central and State Governments, and other organisations, for involving VOs in different programmes / schemes. Therefore, simplification of guidelines for voluntary organisations is needed.
- Most of the departments / ministries have not played a pro-active role in establishing partnership with committed VOs and have generally confined their attention to only those who apply for funds to their offices. They have, on their own, not requested good VOs to come to their fold and begin a relationship.
- Departments / Ministries have a uniform appraisal procedure inhibiting sensitive or well-established VOs or those engaged in social activism from approaching the government departments.
- There is a need now to find ways to strengthen the capacity of these organisations. Capacity building means development of both individual workers and the organisation.
- There is lack of common purpose among voluntary organisations and there is unsustainable development pattern. As a result VOs are not able to mark dent in the development process. There is need to fortify the collaborative relationship between government and VOs to increase their partnership. Therefore, it is necessary to explore possible ways to nurture genuine partnerships and dialogue, while recognizing the independent roles responsibilities and special capacities of each sector.
- Due to rising materialism, voluntary spirit among the people has declined. There is need to revive the spirit of volunteerism. Declaration of International year of Volunteers in 2001 by United Nations was one of the steps to revive volunteerism.
- Another challenge faced by VOs is that there is no uniformity among methodologies of monitoring and evaluation. There is need to improve methodologies for monitoring and evaluation of the work undertaken by the voluntary sector.

### References
