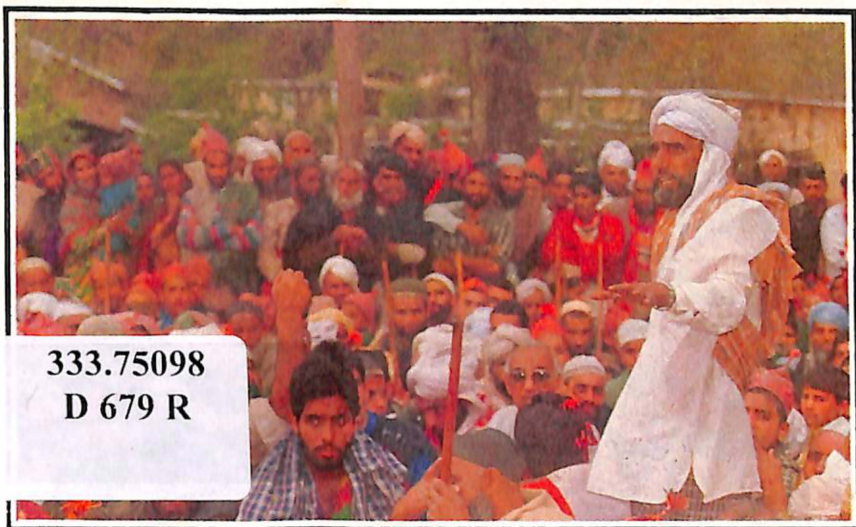


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# VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

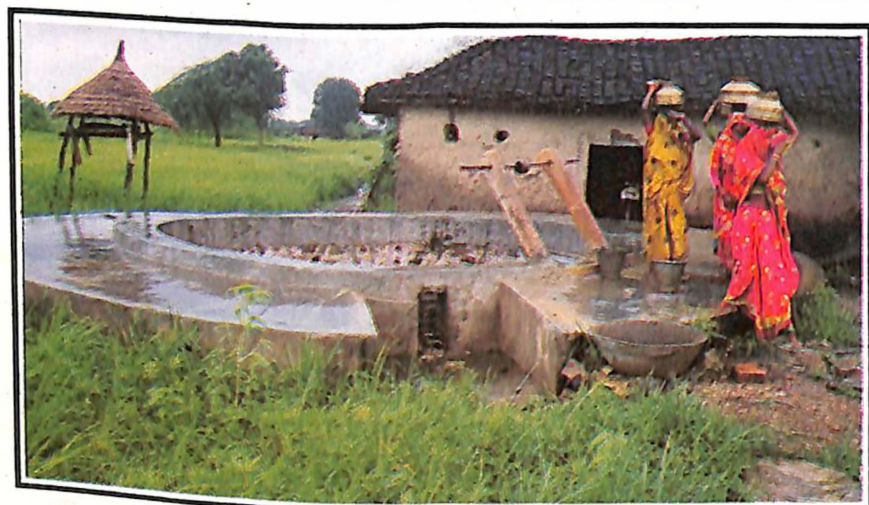
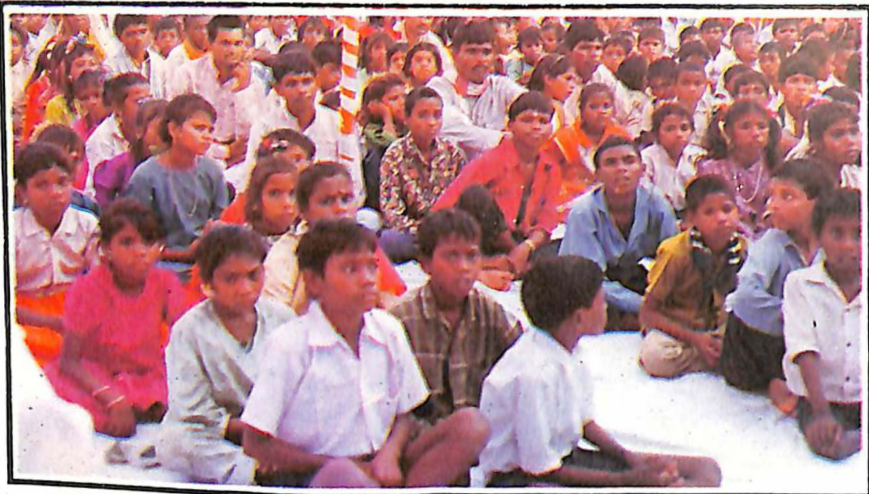
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# VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

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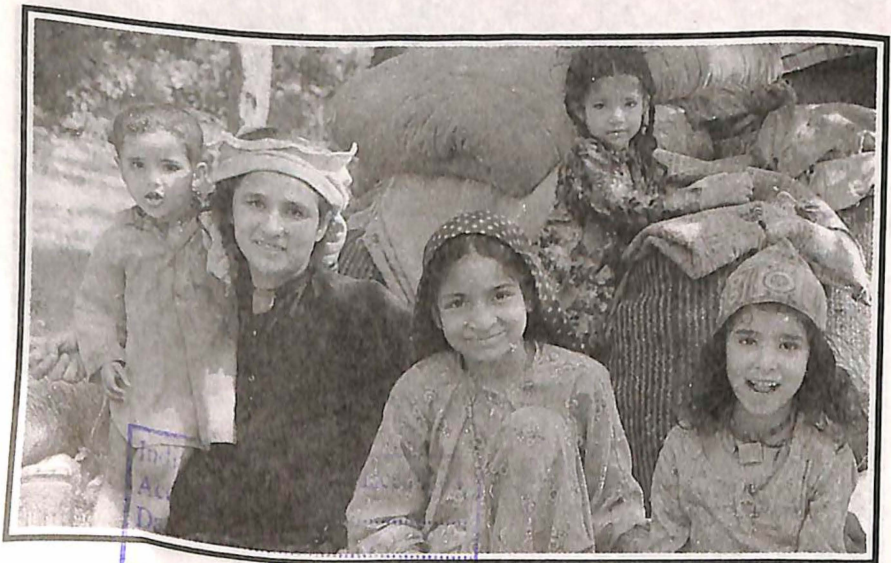


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# **Whither Voluntary Organisations?**

The number of voluntary organisations has been increasing very rapidly in India. Their budget is also increasing at a rapid pace. Yet many people within the voluntary sector agree that the spirit of voluntarism is on the decline.

This should be a major concern - perhaps the most important concern - of the voluntary sector. The year 2001 has been declared 'The Year of Voluntarism' by the United Nations. This is a good time to consider seriously how the decline in the spirit of voluntarism can be checked.

But first we must try to define - what exactly do we mean by the spirit of voluntarism? Most people spend most of their time and effort in earning their livelihood, pursuing their careers, improving their economic prospects and attending to the many-sided well-being of their family or sorting out their problems. However several of them are willing to save some of their time and effort from these pursuits and instead devote these to reduce the distress and suffering of others. This can be a direct effort to help very poor or seriously ill/disabled people, or help animals who have suffered from cruelty. This can also be an indirect effort to create or strengthen an organisation or forum which will later help to reduce this distress. For several people this voluntary work has been a significant part of their life and the hard work they have put in for this, frequently in adverse conditions, has given them a very special kind of satisfaction and happiness which could not be available in the monotonous pursuit of their narrow career interests

For a smaller number of people, this voluntary work becomes so important that they want to devote themselves entirely to this work. Instead of saving a small portion of their

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time and effort for this work, they make this their main work and devote only a small part of their time and effort to earn the minimum income that is needed for their survival. Alternatively someone else - a friend, a group of friends or an institution can take up the responsibility of providing their basic needs. Although the number of these full-time voluntary workers is smaller compared to part-time volunteers, their contribution can be extremely important due to their total dedication of their cause.

Now the crucial question is what are the conditions under which this spirit of voluntarism is likely to prosper and conversely what are the conditions under which this spirit of voluntarism is likely to decline. Clearly, one key issue is the extent to which members of a society are sensitive to the sufferings of others. Family values can play an important role in this, as also education in school and collage. Media can also play an important role. The overall national ethos, the sense of purposefulness which a nation or society has, of course plays a very important role in deciding how sensitive people are to the distress of others.

In India imparting philanthropic values has been a part of family traditions for a long time. To this the freedom movement added a strong sense of personal sacrifice for the sake of a larger cause. Even if we confine ourselves to just the last three decades of the British rule, hundreds of thousands of people went to jail and bravely faced serious injuries, illness and death as participants in various phases of the freedom movement. Many of them gave up promising careers as lawyers, teachers and officials while a larger number of students gave up their studies to join the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi in particular should be given the credit for making the freedom movement so broad based that a large number of people could contribute to it in diverse ways. He and his colleagues added a number of constructive activities such as cottage scale industries,

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social hygiene, anti-liquor movement and campaign against social discrimination to the main freedom movement, hence encouraging many kinds of voluntary workers. This constructive work continued after independence and evoked the participation of volunteers in several campaigns such as bhoodan (gift of land movement) and khadi (hand-spun hand-woven cloth as a symbol of cottage scale, self-reliant industries in villages).

However on the whole, after freedom India failed to build on the strength of the very strong and pure spirit of voluntarism that it had inherited from the freedom movement. There was no clear effort to preserve and nurture this strength. The early departure of Gandhi created a big gap which was not filled. Once the strong motivation imparted by the freedom struggle was gone, the spirit of voluntarism lost its broader appeal and a substantial part of the willingness for personal sacrifice was gone. Hence to a large extent voluntarism went back to the old family values of philanthropy which were not adequate motivation for social justice and economic equality so badly needed in India.

Traditional Indian philanthropy has been identified (not entirely but to a large extent) with alms giving, building shelters (dharamshalas) and drinking water stalls (piaos) particularly in pilgrimage places, building and improving places of worship. To a lesser extent traditional philanthropy included the care of sick and disabled people, orphans and other deprived sections, but it did not include the support for organised struggle against social injustice and economic inequality. On the contrary, the family based value system generally supported the traditional social discrimination on the basis of caste and gender.

The 54 years since independence have seen a gradual erosion of values which promoted working for broader/social objectives, and particularly during the last decade of

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economic liberalisation, there has been a strong upsurge of individualism learning and a no-holds barred, fiercely competitive race for career advancement and accumulation of material wealth. In this situation the prospects for purely voluntary work, whether part-time or full-time, have diminished further.

Schools and colleges have failed to check this decline. Infact educational institutions also reflect the society's decreasing concern with social welfare issues, particularly with the weaker sections. There is an upsurge of narrow careerist orientation in schools, to the exclusion of social issues. A senior teacher at a prestigious school in Delhi says, "Till about two decades back when we asked students to write on their 'aim in life' or subjects like this, over 80% of them included at least something about what I'll like to do for my country or for society. Now hardly 5% do so."

While reporting a decline in the voluntary spirit in India, however, it needs to be emphasised that the potential for a big upsurge in voluntarism clearly exists. This potential was realised very well early during the freedom movement and to a lesser extent it has been evident at the time of some disasters in more recent times.

It is ironical that while a decline of voluntary spirit has been noticed within Indian society, institutional support for voluntary activities has witnessed a big increase particularly in the last two decades. This institutional support has come from foreign sources and Indian government and corporate sources.

As income and wealth are largely concentrated in developed countries while most of the world's poor live in developing countries, it is not surprising that a large part of the funds collected for helping the poor and deprived sections is collected in developed countries and is meant to be used for developing countries. Within developing



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countries, the single country where the largest number of poor people live is India. The largest number of hungry and malnourished people also live in India. This vast, densely populated country with its many geographical variations and many agro-ecological zones is also affected by different types of natural disasters from time to time. Keeping in view all this it is not surprising that a significant section of budgets meant to help the poor and provide disaster relief finds its way to India. This process is helped by the fact that despite the poverty and disasters for which India is known, its cities and towns provide relatively favorable (compared to many other developing countries) conditions for setting up and operating offices of funding agencies. Skilled personnel are also easily available in India. Thus it is not surprising that many foreign funding agencies which can provide funds to voluntary organisations have a substantial presence in India. The obvious importance which the world's largest democracy, India, has in the geo-political considerations of the world's major powers is yet another reason for maintaining a significant presence in Indian development activities. Some senior officials also promote this higher foreign presence hoping to get personal benefits.

The Government of India as well as various provincial governments of India have discovered recently that salaries, pensions and other administrative expenses take away a very substantial part of their total income. Hence they have good economic reasons to get some of the government's work done through voluntary organisations. In addition the government is burdened by corruption which is even more difficult to control in remote rural areas. This provides another reason to use reputed voluntary organisations. It is also believed, of course, that government staff with their mechanistic, routine approach fails to involve people, particularly the weaker sections, in innovative ways and several voluntary organisations rooted among people are in a much better capacity to do so. An additional motivating

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force for the increase of government funding is the desire of some senior ministers and officials to provide funds to their relatives, friends and supporters.

As for corporate interests, contributions made for supporting voluntary work not only brings them a good name, in many cases these also brings substantial income tax benefits. In addition some corporate houses like to support particular types of development and social work which can bring indirect benefits for their main economic activity. In addition we can not forget that a selfless desire to promote public good can also motivate a few among them.

Due to a combination of these factors substantial funds from foreign, government and corporate sources are available to promote voluntary work in India. However the priorities of these funding agencies may not match the priorities of the bulk of Indian villagers, notably the weaker sections. At present reducing economic inequalities is not a priority with the government, nor with the corporate interests. However this is certainly the top priority for the weaker sections. Some foreign funding organisations do not at all prioritise the reduction of inequalities. Some other foreign funding organisations do give priority to the reduction of economic inequalities, but their activity too is constrained by certain limits imposed on the functioning of foreign funded organisations.

Some foreign funding organisations reflect the bias of the developed countries where they are based. For example the major health issue being prioritised by them may be AIDS, whereas the villages where the foreign funded voluntary organisations are working may be suffering most from malaria. If there is an international campaign for self-help groups then funded voluntary organisations will also emphasise this, whereas the biggest local demand maybe for land redistribution. If foreign agencies emphasise hand

pumps and tubewells then this work spreads rapidly even though it may cause a decline in water table and the real need may be for water conservation practices.

Thus while substantial funds for voluntary work are available today, the kind of voluntarism promoted by them in most cases is not closely linked to the priorities and real needs of people, particularly those from the weaker sections.

Thus the availability of substantial funds has some in-built limitations due to which the process of relevant social change cannot go beyond a point and in most cases can evoke only limited enthusiasm and participation of people. It is true that despite these limitations some voluntary organisations have been able to do truly outstanding work. But as a more general rule, these limitations remain a significant factor.

Therefore independent efforts to raise the true spirit of voluntary work among Indian people should be emphasised. To meet the livelihood needs of full-time voluntary workers, local people should be mobilised to make small donations. Hence the base for self-reliant voluntary work should be created in more and more parts of India.

## **Voluntary Organisations - Ensuring Honesty and Accountability**

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the institutional support for voluntary organisations. The number of voluntary organisations has gone up and their annual budgets have increased. Financial support is available from foreign funding organisations, the central and state governments, the corporate sector and other sources.

However the increase in the availability of funds has also brought in its wake several complaints of misuse of funds.

Some government donor agencies have blacklisted a large number of voluntary organisations for allegedly swindling their funds. Some representatives of voluntary organisations while welcoming action against corrupt voluntary organisations have questioned why no action was taken against the officials who took a fixed percentage of money before making any grant. Some officials are accused of showing undue favors to their relatives and friends who have set up voluntary organisations. Corrupt practices have also been reported from some foreign funding agencies. Once a voluntary organisation has to pay a percentage of money to receive a grant, irregularities in accounts start from the outset and are likely to continue.

Some voluntary organisations which preach justice to the entire world have been accused of victimising their own members and employees. Even cases of sexual exploitation and harassment have been reported from some organisations. High levels of inequalities exist in the salaries and perks of some voluntary organisations and funding agencies even as they preach equality to others. Some leading names have emerged as virtual 'empire builders'. Their life-style and earnings are not much different from those of the executives of multinational companies. There are also petty squabbles and rivalries which stand in the way of working jointly for common causes.

All this should not distract attention from the outstanding work done by several voluntary organisations. The complete dedication and integrity of several leading social activists has provided a role model to several people, particularly youth, and it'll be no exaggeration to say that some of these activists have become a legend in their lifetime. The work done by them has brought relief to a large number of people and thrown up possibilities of development which local people did not even imagine till recently. People from far-away areas come to see the work of these voluntary organisations and to learn from it.

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But a few outstanding examples cannot by themselves provide solace if complaints of irregularities and less than responsible behaviour continue to pour in from many other organisations. Even if the organisations where serious irregularities take place are in a minority but the irregularities remain unaltered and unchecked for a long time, it is a cause for serious concern as the rot can spread to a wider area. Therefore in its own long-term interest the voluntary sector should work out some sort of a code of conduct. Several associations of voluntary organisations already exist. These generally take up issues such as registration laws, procedures for permission to obtain foreign donations, tax laws etc. Any injustice or repression faced by member NGOs are also taken up by these associations. All these are legitimate concerns for such associations, but in addition should they not be concerned about the performance of their own member organisations? If any complains are made about the unethical activities of any such organisation, then these should be investigated and if this investigation reveals that serious mistakes have been made, then this should be exposed.

But even if no such complaints are received, voluntary organisations should set up certain guidelines for the conduct of their work. These guidelines should be such that any organisation which follows these guidelines can generally be seen to be honest in spending its funds and careful to fulfil its responsibilities.

In this context one basic issue is that of accountability to the community in which the voluntary organisation works. If for example a voluntary organisation is working in a cluster of ten villages, then it should hold regular meetings with these villagers to ask them about their needs, to discuss its own aims and to ensure that its work is in conformity with the needs of the people. At these meetings the people of the village, particularly the weaker sections and women, should be encouraged to speak freely. If the voluntary organisation

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learns from such meetings that its existing work or work plan is not in conformity with the real needs of people then its should be willing to make suitable changes in its work plan.

However in some villages (or village-clusters) a problem can arise if these villages are dominated by a few big landlords, contractors etc. who baldly exploit the weaker sections. If, as is most likely, the voluntary organisation is working for the rights of weaker sections, then it becomes very difficult for it to have a continuing dialogue with the exploiters and to discuss all its programmes with them. Therefore in such conditions the voluntary organisation should be accountable mainly to the weaker sections and ordinary villagers for whose welfare it is supposed to work, and not to the exploiters living in those villages or nearby.

It must be appreciated that voluntary organisations which confront the exploiters in remote areas have to work in very difficult conditions. The life of some of their activists is at risk. Therefore the accountability criteria should not be used in such a way as to increase the risk of these activists and/or provide an opportunity to vested interests to harass voluntary organisations.

An essential part of accountability is transparency. As far as financial aspects are concerned it is very important that a voluntary organisation should make available all records of how much money it gets, from where it gets these funds, for what stated purpose and how the funds are actually spent. It must be appreciated, however, that a voluntary organisation needs some flexibility to change funds from one head to another particularly in emergency situations. To give an example, let's assume that it has been provided funds to hold a workshop but meanwhile, some of its activists working against the biggest exploiters of the area are attacked by goons. So they have to be admitted to a hospital or nursing home and all the medical bills have to be paid. In

such a condition a voluntary organisation should have the flexibility to withdraw funds from holding workshops to use these for an issue of immediate urgency such as medicare. Both the funding agency and the community should appreciate that any organisation working in difficult conditions of great uncertainty and facing many unforeseen situations should have the flexibility to divert some funds for these urgent expenditures which may not have been provided for earlier. However what is important is that every rupee spent should be accounted for properly and any diversion of expenditure should be explained to people.

At a practical level, how can a voluntary organisation ensure transparent functioning? One way is to hold a public meeting once every year where all its accounts and other documents are displayed every year. Anyone can examine these and obtain copies of the same after paying the copying expenses. In addition at the same meeting functionaries of the voluntary organisation can give information about its work and programmes. Local people should be encouraged to raise questions and suggest improvements. What is happening at the implementation stages? Any complaints that people may have should be considered carefully.

If the voluntary organisation published a bulletin, It can publish its detailed annual receipts and spending once every year. If it organises an annual fair, the same information can be displayed there prominently. At all construction works and projects taken up by the voluntary organisation, essential information relating to this project (such as its total budget, expenses incurred on various materials and labour etc.) should be displayed prominently.

In addition a voluntary organisation can specify a day every month or so when any citizen affected by its work can obtain any information about its work.

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Similarly funding agencies should be completely transparent in their functioning.

It is expected of voluntary organisations that they will live by the principles of equality and simplicity. Most voluntary organisation emphasise the objectives of equality and environmental protection and therefore, in keeping with these objectives, their own functioning and life style should be based on equality and simplicity. The difference between the salary drawn by the most highly paid person and the least paid person should not be too high.

Funding agencies are also expected to follow these principles. It will be useful to compare the salary down by the top 10% employes of a funding agency with the bottom 10%. If the funding agencies and voluntary agencies helped by them are considered as a big family, as is sometimes said, then it will be useful to compare the salaries of the top 10% persons of this family with bottom 10%. Is this difference less than or more than the income inequality at the national level. If the difference is higher then how can we reconcile the fact that the organisation which speak so much for equality are themselves based on an unequal structure. I am saying this because I have myself seen highly paid officials of funding agencies refusing to pay even Rs. 1000 (equivalent of twenty three American Dollars) per month to teachers working for voluntary organisations supported by them.

It is expected that members of voluntary organisations, will lead a life of simplicity, self-restraint and discipline.

It is expected that while satisfactorily meeting their basic needs, they will not run after the accumulation of material wealth or the uninhibited pursuit of sensual pleasures. They are expected to set an example of 'simple living and high thinking' before other people.



Voluntary organisations should not be used as a front for seeking fame and wealth by a few select people. The personal lives of senior functionaires of voluntary organisations (or NGOs) should also be transparent.

A voluntary organisation should not be closely tied to any business interests, and its work should not be used to promote any business interests. Thus while it is good for a voluntary organisation to campaign against air pollution, it should stop short of specifying exactly what technology should be used, because this brings it precariously close to promoting the cause of some specific business interests.

Voluntary organisations talk all the time of social harmony and cooperative work. So voluntary organisations should work together with harmony for achieving common objectives instead of entering into endless squabbling with rival organisation over matters such as which organisation should get more funds and projects.

Thus certain ethical norms can be drawn up for the conduct of voluntary organisations. Associations of voluntary organisations can take an initiative regarding this. When complaints of corruption and other unethical behaviour are received, then these associations should themselves investigate these complaints and bring out the truth.

It must be appreciated that not all criticism of voluntary organisations can be accepted in a hurry. Several vested interests who are harmed by the work of some voluntary organisations try to give a bad name even to some of the best voluntary organisations. They are willing to spend a lot of money just to spoil the hard earned reputation of a dedicated voluntary organisation. Therefore such criticism can be accepted only if it has been properly investigated and widely respected representatives of voluntary organisations must also come forward for impartial investigations to place the facts before people.

## **Voluntary Organisations - Getting Closer To People**

In recent years truly outstanding work of innovative development, social awakening and environment protection has been taken up by several voluntary organisations. This pioneering work has inspired a large number of people not only in India but also in several other countries. Despite such remarkable achievements to their credit, members of several voluntary organisations feel that they have not been able to realise their full potential.

It is increasingly felt that while the availability of increasing foreign, government and corporate sources have provided the basis for a lot of innovative and useful work, yet these funds have also, not always but in many cases, created some distance between voluntary organisations and the people they are supposed to serve.

One reason for this is that the priorities of these funding agencies may not match the priorities of the people. Another constraint is that sudden changes within the funding agencies can result in the voluntary agencies' inability to fulfill their commitments to people. For instance a funding agency may decide suddenly, entirely for its internal reasons, not to work in a state but this can seriously disrupt the painstakingly built up work of a voluntary organisation and its commitments to the local community.

When a voluntary organisation is working for the poor It may get involved in a confrontation with their exploiters. Some local officials may side with these resourceful exploiters. These officials and politicians are likely to send false complaints against these voluntary organisations. On the basis of these complaints some funding agencies stop the funding of this voluntary agency. Hence the voluntary

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agency and its activists are without support at a time when they need it the most. For example, the resources of Disha, a voluntary organisation active in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh, were exhausted and many of its dedicated activists were injured in a struggle against a liquor contractor. It was at this critical juncture that one of the main funding agencies stopped supporting them, leading to a worsening of the already severe problems faced by Disha.

Sometimes when a voluntary organisation is unable to fulfil its commitments due to a sudden stoppage of its funds, it can even face completely unjustified criticism that it has diverted the funds elsewhere. Such criticism causes a lot of distress and discouragement to those who are already working in difficult conditions.

Therefore while it is true that substantial funds are already available for voluntary organisations from foreign, government and corporate sources and it is quite possible that this support may increase further in the near future, nevertheless many people in the voluntary sector feel the need to develop a more independent and reliable support base for voluntary organisations which is to a large extent based on local effort and which will bring voluntary organisations closer to the people and their own priorities.

Let's start with a situation in say, Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh in which six youths decide that they will devote themselves to improving the condition of the rural poor in a cluster of about 50 villages who are badly exploited by mining contractors and big landlords. Rs. 15,000 per month is needed for economic support of these six youths and almost the same amount is needed for organising meetings, meeting the expenses of village volunteers, meeting legal expenses and travel bills, so these youths need about Rs. 4 lakh per year. There is a possibility that this work continuing with dedication for 3 years will give mining and land rights to five thousand poor people in fifty

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villages, bringing them an additional income of ( at the rate of Rs. 10,000 per annum per person) Rs. 5 crore per year for several decades.

The first three years are the most difficult. The local community at present is so poor and exploited that it is difficult to raise any donations from within this community. So the young volunteers should initially approach as many leading citizens of Allahabad city and district who are know for their concern for the poor. The target is to find about 100 persons who will donate about Rs. 300 per person (on an average) per month.

In addition their will be some lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. who will be willing to donate their part-time services. These services should be made full use of to start some constructive activities in villages. The youths should contact socially concerned media persons who will happily cover the constructive activities and in addition they will report about the exploitation of workers and peasants, creating public opinion in their favour. The youths should also find sympathetic officials, particularly in the concerned departments. They can also write to some senior, national-level persons and organisations who have been involved in similar work and try to obtain their advice and help.

The first two or three years will be very difficult because powerful exploiters will strongly resist these efforts to help peasants and workers. However if two or three years of dedicated work can even bring partial benefits to this community of workers and small peasants then support for future work can be mobilised within this community. If for example about 5,000 villagers gain an additional income of Rs. 500 per month (on as average) then they should be willing to donate Rs. 50 per month to continue this work further. This means the availability of Rs. 2,50,000 per month. About half of this can be used to support the struggle related activities (legal expenses, economic support of full-

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time and part-time volunteers etc.) while half can be used for various constructive activities like education, health, cultural groups and so on. Once these volunteer youths have won the full trust of the community, it should not be too difficult to implement a largely successful anti-liquor campaign. This in turn can lead to the saving of Rs 200 per month for several families and a part of this saving can also be used for constructive work.

Thus gradually a self-reliant resource base can be built up. None of this is going to be easy, but efforts should certainly be made in this direction. The middle and upper class should be tapped and encouraged to make regular donations for voluntary work which will help the poor and oppressed people.

In early seventies a youth named Shanker Guha Niyogi roamed in the villages of Chattisgarh mobilising people to fight exploitation. By 1977 his efforts (helped by others) had led to a situation where about ten thousand miners came together to form a union committed to fighting exploitation of miners. When the union's efforts brought them higher wages, a part of these earnings were used to initiate a wide range of constructive activities. Most of the miners and their family members have become voluntary workers and/or supporters of voluntary work. They made a regular donation for constructive activities.

In addition after completing their mining work, many of them diverted their energy to construct a people's hospital and to maintain it. Several of them volunteered to become health workers. Some of them volunteered to work in schools and some of them in tree plantation work. Donations of food and money collected by them were regularly sent to support other struggles as well as people in distress. These people who were themselves poor became volunteers and also donated money to support voluntary work and struggles in other areas.

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A small group of three or four persons went to live in a village of Rajasthan to start a small organisation (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan - MKSS) which eventually became one of the most well known voluntary organisations of India. By keeping their needs very limited and also taking up occasional research and writing work this small group managed to survive without taking any institutional support. Later they started a few fair price shops. Even though these shops sold goods of daily use at cheaper rates, their rising turnover enabled the organisers to support four or five full time activists. When MKSS got some awards, it made a fixed deposit of these awards and used the interest to support other activists. When special funds were needed for dharnas and other bigger meetings, MKSS raised donations for these. Thus without any regular funding from any institutional sources MKSS continued to grow and become perhaps the most well known name in the country for fighting corruption in villages by making very effective use of people's right to information for this and other purposes.

A core group of almost five or six Gandhian activists in Henvlghati of Uttarakhand continued to carry on small scale farming activity for the support of their families but devoted most of their time for voluntary work. Within the span of the last thirty years this core group mobilised people for an anti-liquor campaign and to chase away contractors bent on destructive mining practices. Their efforts to save forests by hugging trees attracted attention all over the country. They not only saved local forests from being cut but also inspired similar efforts in other areas. Once the government agreed to stop felling of trees, they mobilised villagers for the regeneration of a depleted forest over a wide area. This also proved very successful. Then they started a campaign to promote organic farming and to collect fast vanishing seeds of traditional varieties which are best suited for organic farming. They have succeeded in saving the seeds of many invaluable varieties which may have been lost forever. All

this work has involved the enthusiastic part time voluntary work of a large number of villagers, apart from the core group.

These are a few examples of voluntary work which could survive and grow without depending on institutional sources for any regular funding. Similarly there are several such examples in India. Still this path is quite difficult at present because of the small number of donors among India's substantial middle and upper classes. Once the number of these donors increases, this task will become easier. But this is not to say that the existing foreign, government and corporate sources are not important. These sources should continue to support a lot of useful work that they are already supporting. As voluntary organisations and funding agencies both become more transparent in their dealings and more accountable to the people they are trying to help, their performance will improve further.

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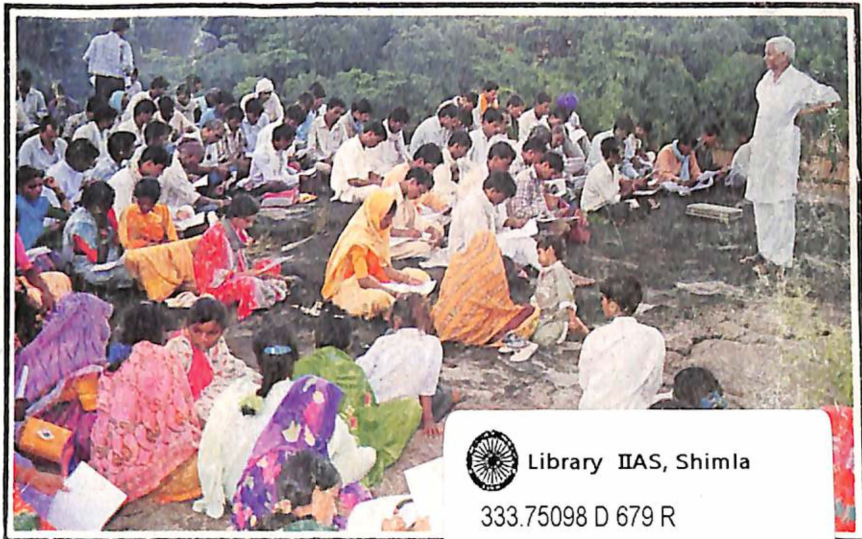
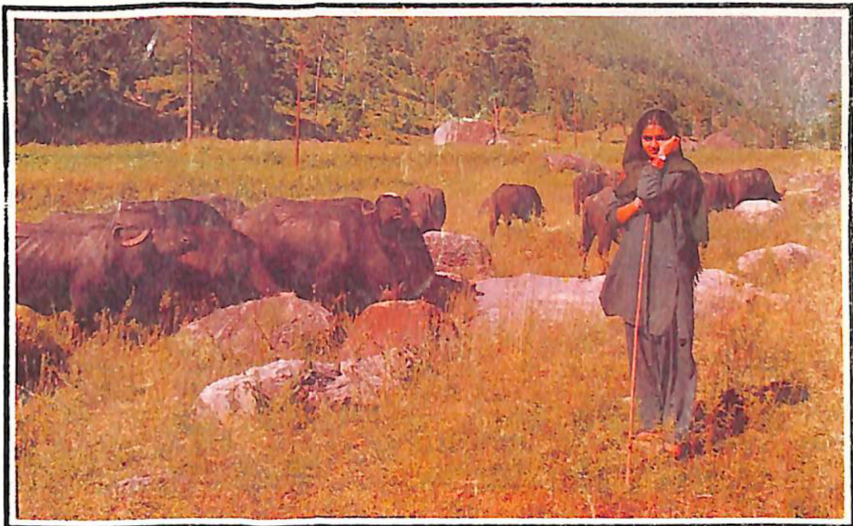
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