

ENROL AS A MEMBER

International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)

Indian Association for Volunteer Effort (Iave)

In consultative status with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Civil Participation

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EDITORIAL

Dear reader,

Hiding poverty under the carpet has been a long-standing occupation of powers that be. This game is played so skillfully that the poor start being proud of the rich. Exploitation by money lending has been a long-term occupation of the rich. In India, they are often called 'Mahajan' literal meaning of the word is 'great men'. In a remote area, people often discussed why they are called 'Mahajan' when they have no greatness in them. They decided that poor who borrow are greater than the so-called 'Mahajan' as they feed the 'Mahajan' by their underpaid labor. On that day they started greeting each other as 'Mahajan'.

The great countries are defined by their GDP in which share of the poor is negligible. Therefore, they are side-tracked in any discussion. The wealthy countries are defined as 'developed countries' and the poor countries are defined as 'under-developed' ones. But this is not a recent phenomenon. Buddha left home to liberate people from this ill. Jesus also became revolutionary in the cause of the poor. In fact, both Buddha and Jesus have been sugar-coated to make them palatable to the better-off. The message of Buddha and of Jesus has been defeated by sugar-coating to lull people in to conform to the norms of the poor. Christian theosophy by Pablo Friere and his followers have redefined Christianity in a humanitarian manner. They have preferred to call them oppressed.

Today those who put poverty under the carpet are denying human rights. The denial of poverty is denial of action to remove it. To remove poverty we must also define what constitutes poverty and what are it's effects. There are case studies of poverty. These studies show how and what the sufferers can do for themselves or others like themselves to come above the so-called poverty line.

National poverty is something very different from what poor experience. Poverty is always a personal experience. We put forward in this issue a number of case studies that define poverty and it's effects. We are not drainage inspectors, but aggressive advocates of forward-looking ideas. In this age of over production of food and other commodities there is no reason why any one should starve or be without shelter or education.

Whatever the station in life you can surely help.

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FRONT PIECE

Mercury and the woodman

A woodman lost his axe into the river when it glanced off a tree he was felling. Mercury (the God) appeared while the man was lamenting his loss and on hearing his tale dived into the river and recovered a golden axe.

'That is not mine', said the woodman.

So, the Mercury returned it to the river resurfacing this time with a silver axe.

'That is not mine', again said the woodman.

And again Mercury returned it to the river resurfacing this time woodman's own axe.

'That is mine', said the grateful woodman.

Mercury promptly rewarded the man for his honesty by giving him the golden and silver axes as well.

Moral of the story – Honesty is the best policy.



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POEMS

Hard times, come again no more

While we all sup sorrow with the poor.
 There's a song that will linger forever in our ears,
 Oh, hard times, come again no more.
 'Tis the song, the sigh of the weary.
 Hard times, hard times, come again no more.
 Many days you have lingered all around my cabin door.
 Oh, hard times, come again no more.

– *Bob Dylan*

O poverty, thou hast made me great.
 Thou hast made me honoured like Christ
 With his crown of thorns. Thou hast given me
 Courage to reveal all. To thee I owe
 My insolent, naked eyes and sharp tongue.
 Thy curse has turned my violin to a sword

– *Kazi Nazrul Islam*

When you are in doubt think of the poorest man, how
 your action will affect him.

– *Mahatma Gandhi*

FEATURE ARTICLE

A daily income of twenty-one Paise

The daily income of twenty-seven crore people of this country is a meagre twenty-one paise, declared Dr. Lohia¹ in the Lok Sabha², a forgotten hero of yesteryears, to the utter astonishment of Government spokesmen.

In May 1963 there was a by-election from Farrukhabad constituency in Uttar Pradesh. Dr. Lohia contested and won, and entered the Lok Sabha. It was his desire that the Lok Sabha should mirror public opinion. His maiden speech itself was historic. 'The daily income of twenty-seven crore people of this country is a meagre twenty-one Paise,' declared Ram Monohar Lohia in the Lok Sabha, to the utter astonishment of Government spokesmen. He argued that top priority should be given to the improvement of the condition of such poor people. Every one was astonished when Lohia disclosed that this poor country spent as much as twenty-five thousand rupees a day on the security of the Prime Minister. He wrote a book

1. *Dr. Ram Monohar Lohia a revolutionary and politician.*

2. *Lower House of Indian Parliament. The members are elected by the people. Those who are nominated through indirect election seat in the Upper House thereby reducing the status of people's voice.*

elaborating his statements. He argued that popular leaders should not alienate themselves from the common man.

Nehru was the first Prime Minister to whom Dr. Ram Monohar Lohia addressed his advice. Nehru was infuriated by such a dramatic statement of state of poverty in India. Years later, Nehru's grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, echoed not Nehru, but Dr. Rammonohar Lohia when he said that only ten Paise of a rupee of development expenditure reaches the poor. However, expenditure on security of galaxy of leaders who are elected representatives of people in State Governments and at the Center has increased manyfolds. Should we be waiting for Rajiv's grandson to do something about it?

Why is it so?

It is the question answer to which people are trying to give all the time. Non-listeners can not hear. Ignoring people's voices is leading the country towards dichotomies and disintegration. With infinite number of protest groups some of which also carry guns and receive people's support in opposition to National or State Governments are expressing a craving for participation. Lack of forums for participation is leading the country to fragmentation of the Nation State.

The mechanical approach of the Government to bring in economic development has obviously failed. They do not know where to put the finger and mechanically go on to one program after another. All of them are bound to fail until a 'U' turn is taken for finding the road to freedom. There is no reason for enviously looking at the living styles of high and mighty. Let us find alternative ways to share our crumbs by all in the country.

Too often, services fail poor people. These failures may be less spectacular than financial crises, but their effects are continuing and deep nonetheless', says World Bank President, James D. Wolfensohn. 'Services work when they include all people, when girls are encouraged to go to school, when pupils and parents participate in the schooling process, when communities take charge of their own sanitation. They work when we take a comprehensive view of development - recognizing that a mother's education will help her baby's health, that building a road or a bridge will enable children to go to school'.

People's needs and participation in decision-making process can not be kept out of the view of the Government's purview. Medha Patkar, the Narmada Dam Bachao

Andolan's (NBA's) activist says, 'when these populations, who live simple and harmless lives, are told one fine morning that 'the plan' is ready; that there is a map of Narmada Valley on the drawing board which has lines drawn on it; and that the forest occupied for generations by their ancestors (the names of whom can be given by each tribal elder in the villages of the Narmada Valley within a minute of asking) will no longer be livable', simple questions arise in their minds.

The people were not consulted about decisions to avoid any opposition. Elections provide license to utterly disregard the opinion of the affected people. This arrogant attitude of the legislators does not make for a viable democracy. It only helps to disintegrate the country.

It has not occurred to the galaxy of planners and finance ministers that after the long wait of more than half a century India ranks amongst the poorest countries of the world. India also has the largest illiterate population. The situation is not much better than that prevailed before independence. Year after year the budgets and plans echo the earlier one with crocodile tears in the eyes of the elected representatives of the Nation forgetting that hungry people are also angry people.

After more than fifty years of 'development' and a million committees and commissions and great deal of money spent on projects and plans there are ever more Indians who are poor today than they were ever before. We have larger numbers of illiterates than ever before no matter what the dressed up statistics say. Just as the Governments have failed to deliver so has rural development initiatives. The management of the country has fallen by the wayside. Echoing Rajiv Gandhi's admission we can say that only ten per cent of finance is necessary for all that has been achieved.

Hard times have been with us for long in this cruel world. Buddha was inspired by poverty and suffering of the people to give up his kingdom, to do something about it. Jesus was also inspired by suffering of the poor. The poets, prophets and politicians have all been inspired by it to aspire to establish kingdoms free of sorrow. But it has remained an elusive dream.

French revolution soon frittered away to give rise to poverty and oppression again. Liberty Equality Fraternity remains as elusive to the French society as it has remained all over the world. The women who fought for the revolution were given rights on papers and charters that were never fulfilled.

Russian revolution lead on to oppression and massacre of masses of people. Mahatma Gandhi was killed soon after the Indian 'freedom', because Gandhiji believed it was not a freedom of the poor and his death provided relief to both that were in the Government and the anti-Gandhi activists. In later years, his vision has been obliterated. So has been the image of Mao-tse-Tung, who was really considered to be the friend of the poor and had transformed the people.

Since, no political party, nor any Government has succeeded in making a dent on the lives of the people, a huge number of volunteers alone or with their tiny organizations are doing their bit in as best a way as they can. They have nothing with them, but their resolve.

In India today we see a vibrant movement of volunteers, some of whom are working away all alone in their niches, while some others with their miniscule organizations are making their presence felt. They are tiny, but without collectivization are working away in an anarchic manner. With each individual's resolve without bondage of party or politics affiliation, they are an effective opposition. Let us not forget that the bombs have power to destroy, but a flower has power to evoke emotions.

Development has come to be conceived as the key instrument of human progress, happiness and survival. However, 'development' has been defined as generation of wealth. This has been achieved to sufficient extent, yet people are denied share of it. Rich are becoming richer and some are happy they are rich enough to be equal to the Europeans. More accumulation of wealth will destroy the country.

The salvation lies in the direction of the development of the people's awareness. In earlier years of community development, Block Development Officers (BDOs) were given most priority. The country was divided into 5,200 development blocks. The BDO was the coordinator of a team of specialists at the block level which included several Assistant Development Officers (ADOs) in diverse fields like agriculture, cooperation, panchayat, minor irrigation, veterinary doctor and others. Mr. S.K. Dey, the Community Development Minister and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had a dream. They dreamt of changing India in ten years' time. They set up block office buildings to last only ten years. Reservation policies were also for ten years. It was the most significant effort that the Indian Government has ever implemented. Every ministry had an officer for 'public

cooperation', but today governance is the main theme instead of cooperation and development. Destruction draws more money than development.

Importance of being a volunteer

The volunteers today working with the poor in city slums or villages, remote from the centers of power, are slogging away to strengthen the main theme of human development and taking them away from centuries of powerlessness, ignorance, injustice, superstition. The political parties or gun-totting revolutionaries basically are no different from each other. They do not believe in transformation of people. They induce corruption just as the oppressors do everywhere. Deliverance from this has to come from the people's awareness of their pride, their knowledge and social skills not from foreign direct investment, but from their own efforts. Their effort will not go in vain. They will do their job, however much it is trampled and they feel crumpled.

Awareness, Consciousness, Inspiration and Encounter are the basic ingredients of progress. Neither coal nor steel can build a Nation. It is the human wealth that makes a Nation, a society. We will discuss briefly tasks that are before volunteers who are building the Nation and the society brick by brick.

Awareness and consciousness

In conceiving human progress, one has to consider what are the basic fuels of human endeavor. *In case of social change, we must know what kind of change we aspire for. What is sustainable and useful for all. We have little clue to these questions that is why development paradigms are so irrelevant to the people. People's imagination and action within a value frame has to be taken not by Government, but by every individual. There are laws to protect women from various conditions, but each individual woman must also assert her right.*

Awareness and consciousness are two words often used by social workers, yet they remain out of the psyche of the people. Awareness used in context of issues say human rights, AIDs, feminine rights and various other issues limits the horizon of the word. It is a valid proposition to use only a part of the inherent potential. In most cases, it may be dysfunctional as well. The single issue-wise awareness may not be able to develop capacity to use the learning behavior about issues other than those have been discussed.

We all, even in functioning of our daily life, collect data, however mundane they are essential to our daily routine work. Awareness of our environment is essential to our life, yet we may not be aware of many things that surround our life. A man may have his food everyday without knowing what goes in to make his food palatable. Yet a woman who cooks may be able to say what has gone into the dish cooked by some one else. We are aware of what we like and what we do not. By taste and flavour we may not be able to tell why.

We do not develop sense of flavour and palate well enough to be able to pass the test. Most of us compartmentalize our lives into narrow compartments. Thus, if the awareness efforts get limited channels we may not be able to understand many things that are not seen to be of relevance.

In a society, every family is a society, activities and power structures are also defined. Where the power is defined it is guarded as treasure. A landlord or a policeman, a man and wife define their territories equally. Following up our previous example, the woman may guard her kitchen and cooking as base of power over the man. As a consequence, the man does not interfere in cooking so the woman keeps away from the power base of her husband. The division of labor is also division of work and division of power. Awareness about division of power produces extra strength, hence power.

Inspiration

Volunteers have the responsibility to transfer their own inspiration to the people they are working with. The inspiration derives from a dream. In our case, it is the dream of a just and happy society. Inspiration of the volunteer is shared by the people when volunteers express their enthusiasm and concern for the people and building up of a image of a just society that they have never seen.

Source of power to encounter

An activist was trying to organize a strike and was discussing with the elders of the village. The elders said, the power to strike is with the women. Because at the time for ploughing it is the men that go looking for jobs, but at the time of sowing and harvesting the landlords come to the women to do the work. Both the activities are severely time bound, hence the landlords will have to relent to the demand.

But on the basis of the concern that landlords may bring in labor from nearby areas greater power will be required. In the situation, the community for the first time saw the necessity of men and women working together and generating a power that is community power. It is neither reserved for men nor women.

When such power generates people can dream of a better life or justice whatever is necessary. In cases like this gain comes from the unity on the one hand and consciousness that power can be enhanced by cooperation between male and female on the other. Awareness generates dreams. Dreams are substance of hope and dignity, but dreams are passive to external world. They have to be activated through consciousness. The dreams are not only related to a better life, but are substances that can give prolonged strength to awareness.

Awareness is related to environment that is ever changing and capacity to deal with comes from consciousness. The depth of consciousness we are discussing relates to the environment of the society, not only about self, but encompasses others. It must not give rise to self-centered consciousness that isolates people from the society. Tagore had said, 'I do not want freedom in renunciation, but want my freedom in being involved in the world around me and taste freedom within it'.

Government policies and volunteers

Government policies often enough are not conducive to development. The policy of reservation and now food for work are degrading to people. The spread of education is an essential condition for keeping pace in the fast changing world, which has been denied to people. There has been no appreciable expansion of primary education whether a Dalit is in power or a Brahmin is. The populist schemes that have little effect on redeeming the dignity of the people are on for which money is allocated. Planners know very well that most of the money that is allocated will not reach the people.

At the time of writing, the Government has come up with a policy of Food for Work scheme to help the poor. They had the other option that is the Employment Guarantee Scheme, but have not preferred it. Class character of the Central Government and the State Governments would like to maintain the poor at the same position as they have been for eons.

Unknown to the power structures, people are doing things

for solving their own problems. This issue gives a few examples of such actions.

**-Prof. Subhachari Dasgupta
Chairman, PIDT**

NEWS

Aged, but active

Miriam Lee, 71 never comes empty-handed. Either she carries some cartboard or a stack of old newspapers. Today, she is bringing a bagful of tin cans. Mohammad Ali, even though walking with a crutch, is dragging a bag full of plastic behind him.

The old people, both members of Jack and Jill Senior Citizens' Club in South Africa are serious about recently-introduced recycling campaign. 'Someone has to do something' says Miriam breathlessly and delivers her freight to volunteer Caroline Hess. 'Right you are' agrees Auntie Ria, 75 and a few others thoughtfully nod their heads.

In the kitchen of the United Reformed Church, next to senior's clubroom, the recycling material is all piled up. Once a month, Willem Van Rooi, 72, and his friends pull up the sleeves to transport the paper and cartboard to a contractor. They get 8 cents for a kg of cartboard and 30 cents for a kg. of plastic. That is about R 10 to 15 per busload. Not much, but the club members take it gratefully.

The seniors, some 20 men and women between 55 and 88, meet twice a week. They are cared by four volunteers – Caroline Hess, Mona Egypt, Cathy Marcus and Cheryl Crowie. During their gatherings, they paint greeting cards, weave mats and handbags. Presently, they are producing a club banner from cloth. They enjoy singing, praying together and discussion. They talk politics or discuss environmental issues.

The club, founded 13 years ago by Cheryl, means a lot to its members. Tony Brazas, bound to a wheelchair after a car accident, spends most of his time all by himself in his kitchen. He comes to the club 'to talk to my friends'. 'Yeah man', Samuel Mdikane agrees, 'one is not so lonely here'. Florence Joshua and Hennie Delo are blind. Here they always find someone to get them a chair or pour them coffee. 'Everybody is so kindly looking after us', acknowledges Florence. Miriam Lee, a Muslim, wearing a scarf, appreciates the joint prayers with the Christian

seniors and Doris Holloway, 65, loves crafts and needlework. There is always something new to learn. To Willem Van Rooi the other aged have not only become good friends, but witnesses to his marriage with Lydia.

Caring and sharing each other's joys and sorrows keeps the members of the club happy and active.

Volunteer's role in pulse polio vaccination

Volunteers play a key role in promoting public health and providing health care, including prevention of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. From participating in community sanitation campaigns to donating time and resources for building hospitals, voluntary efforts can be seen in myriad forms.

In 2000, ten million people volunteered to support the immunization of 550 million children as part of the global polio eradication initiative. Most of them were concerned citizens, volunteering in their own communities. They gave their time to ensure that children reported to immunization stations, were properly documented and received the oral vaccine. The total value of the support provided by volunteers was estimated at US \$ 10 billion well beyond the reach of Governments or international organizations. The example illustrates well how the solidarity and creativity of volunteers is key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations.

Life-giving blood

According to a news, published in the Hindu, Bangalore dated 25th August, 2004, Kiran and Savitha who were marrying that day organized a blood donation camp at the venue of the marriage and desired that instead of any gift for their wedding, the invitees donate their blood at the camp.

The bridegroom and the bride were the first donors who donated blood just after their wedding in their wedding attire itself. Till noon, about 25 guests also donated blood. Kiran's demand for the lady who was to be his life partner was that she too should be a regular blood donor. Kiran had donated blood 38 times and Savitha one time.

Let us all join and wish this couple a long and happy married life and hope many will be inspired by their deed.

Small loans do wonders

Sometimes, small loans can do wonders for the loanees. When one is down and out due to sickness or man-created

problems, these loans often make a difference between life and death, survival and standing up. Here are two instances:

Noorjahan Begum and her three children lived alone after her husband left them a decade ago. She used to sell vegetables until she fell ill and had to stop work. Her savings were used for medicines and daily needs. When she was strong enough to work again, she was unable to reestablish herself in the vegetable sellers' niche and so had to resort to rag-picking.

Due to labor-intensive nature of work and low monetary remuneration in rag picking, which requires sorting through garbage piles for scrap of usable items, her children had to help her as well so as to earn enough to sustain a basic subsistence living standard.

Noorjahan learned about a small grants scheme from her neighbors and borrowed Rs. 1,600. With this money, she was able to restart her vegetable selling business by buying and selling better vegetables. She prefers vegetable selling to rag-picking since the hours are shorter and the work is better. Her two younger children attend school. She has more time to spend with her children and now they can come to market and get food instead of waiting until very late in the evening. She can even save some money and could better celebrate the festival of Eid.

Faisal Ali Mollah was evicted from his jhonpadi (makeshift house) home near bridge No. 4 on in Kolkatta slums with his wife and two infant daughters. He received a conditional grant only a week prior to his eviction with which he purchased a cycle van or a bicycle with a wooden platform attached to it to be used to transport goods. He would transport rubber tyres for a fee. However, the business was extremely volatile because there was nothing to transport on some days. His daughter was ill with diarrhoea and he had to spend hundreds of rupees on medication. After the eviction, he and his family had to live on pavement in front of a nearby hospital until he got together with other evictees and built jhonpadis about five km. away from his previous home. However, with grant, Mollah could acquire a moveable asset which he can use to earn an income to sustain his family.

Rights of the child week

A week of fun and entertainment for street and working children was celebrated in Rabindra Sadan, Kolkatta. 1,062 children participated in it. Entitled Right of the Child, the

AGNI : Lighting fire from within for betterment of civic life

AGNI means fire of the self. It is the flame within us on which we must dwell in order that we may kindle the fire of self-inquiry and recognize the universal self within us. This immortal inner flame within us transcends time and place and rules our speech, breath and intelligence. It is this path of fire that AGNI, a noteworthy NGO rendering yeoman service in all walks of life has taken up. AGNI means Action for Good Governance and Networking in India.

AGNI has played a commendable role in fighting corruption, bringing about citizen enlightenment and facilitating interaction between citizens and authorities in all areas of public life where scope for betterment is present. The brain behind it is Mr. D.M. Sukthankar, former Municipal Commissioner, Mumbai who along with his Deputy, T.D. Khairnar took on powerful building mafia in the last decade and fought for citizens's rights.

In a short span, AGNI has chalked out significant successes. Recently, it won a landmark decision in Mumbai High Court against those calling and executing bandhs. Such parties will now be held responsible for economic loss and damage caused and may no longer violate the citizens' fundamental right to work. Moreover, the Hon'ble Bench awarded damages to be paid into a Government fund which will be used to benefit the city.

Another feather in AGNI's cap is the Citizens' Charter presented by it to representatives of major political parties on the eve of recent elections and receiving on record their views on the same. The Charter demanded, among other things, the necessity for scrapping the urban land ceiling, the importance of asking shanty dwellers capable of paying to pay a reasonable sum for houses given free to them under the slum rehabilitation scheme and the immediate attention to be paid to make suburban rail travel in Mumbai more humane.

Among the issues currently being tackled by AGNI is the need to sterilize stray dogs and to control their population in time before they become a menace, control and minimize vehicular and industrial pollution, create avenues for vehicular movement and reduce vehicular congestion and traffic bottlenecks, stringent and effective garbage collection and disposal in an eco-friendly manner, conserving environment and ecology and curbing terrorism and terrorist activities at the base level.

Through effective networking, AGNI tackled the issue of space at Vakola in Santacruz which was earmarked for a car park and a park when the Vakola flyover was constructed, but was instead allotted to marble shops. AGNI JAAG of the area garnered citizens together and took up the issue with Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC). After dialogue and unrelenting efforts, the MSRDC revoked the licenses of the marble shops and the removal of the shops was left to the Mumbai Municipal Corporation (MMC).

AGNI's Alert Citizen Program extends a helping hand to any citizen who has to report anything vital, suspicious or necessitating immediate attention, including tipping off the police anonymously. It is working with the State Anti-corruption Bureau and other agencies fighting corruption. It analyses assets of officials and elected representatives disproportionate to their known sources of income and works on trapping dishonest public servants. It acts as a watchdog, both to resist and expose corruption.

AGNI is in the process of forming vigilance cells in all the municipal zones of Mumbai. The cells will consist of at least three knowledgeable and credible persons who can be approached by the citizens for counsel with confidence. They will screen cases for forwarding to the VAC.

The right to information, the manner of procuring it and making proper use of it is an important ground plan prepared by AGNI on which it seeks to educate citizens and equip them to effectively use and assert their rights.

-Sudha Subramaniam from Mumbai

Week began with a cultural program. The dark auditorium came alive with enthusiastic clapping and chatter of children in the audience. Accompanied by their escorts, these children watched their friends and siblings perform dances, songs and plays. Some of the children in the audience even hummed along with the performers, while others tried to imitate the dance movements while seated on their seats.

These children were brought to the program by 39 NGOs representing each of the six zones into which Civil Level Program of Action for the Street and Working Children of Kolkatta (CLOPA) is divided. Each zone presented a song, dance and either a short play or a mime. After the program, prizes were distributed by the judges.

In addition to the program put up by the children themselves, there was another treat awaiting them. The renowned dancer, Amita Dutta and her troupe performed a dance recital for the children. Suresh Dutta's educational puppet show followed the dance and children were enthralled by 'talking dolls'. Each child received a lunch packet before farewell.

The week-long program was designed to spread awareness among Kolkattans on the survival, protection, development and participation rights of children and take stock of what was being done by NGOs to fulfil these rights. While spreading awareness, the campaign hoped to mobilize social action on the rights of the children in Kolkatta.

A new approach to civic engagement

Civic is a voluntary association whose goal is to empower the citizens of Bangalore to achieve a better quality of life by taking a more active interest in civic affairs. Civic recognizes that it is possible by changing attitudes, structures and processes within the city administration that currently either exclude or are remote from the general public. To achieve its goal, Civic has tried to:

- Establish a people's movement,
- Increase awareness and break existing information barriers and
- Create greater public accountability among Government institutions.

Some of Civic activities have succeeded in developing a partnership between the Government and the people. Its current activities include public debates on 74th

Constitutional Amendment which provides local governments with greater autonomy and the preparation of a booklet Who is Responsible for Bangalore: A Citizens' Handbook for Urban Survival. The booklet will outline the structure, functions and responsibilities of cities' governing bodies as well as citizens' rights and options for action. In addition, Civic has prepared a citizens' report on the status of Bangalore.

Civic is set up as a trusteeship, but has been careful to maintain its character as a coalition of individuals and organizations. It has also built linkages with other such forums in Karnataka.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Citizen's leadership in disaster mitigation

The earthquake in Bhuj in Gujarat on 26th January, 2001 was one of the most devastating in the history of earthquakes in India. It shook not only Bhuj, but the whole country. In the earthquake, more than 15,000 people, men, women, children, old and infirm lost their lives. Property worth many hundreds of crores of rupees was destroyed. Along with the life that flickered out, the property that may have represented generations of accumulation was destroyed making many a person destitute.

Soon after the earthquake, I visited the area to work among the affected people and do something for them. As an activist and a volunteer for about last 30 years, I have developed a social bent of mind and cannot stop myself from caring and sharing in the suffering of the people and am always ready to do whatever I can to mitigate suffering. Therefore, soon after hearing of earthquake, I went to Bhuj district to be of whatever help that I could render. I found that though I had nothing to help with, I could do many a thing that needed to be done.

During my visit to Bhuj district, which was one of the worst affected area of Gujarat, I found that the middle class families were the worst sufferers of the tragedy because they had all their belongings where they lived and all their property had been destroyed completely whereas poorer people living in towns had some property to fall back upon in their villages from where they had migrated.

Relief from the Government, national and international NGOs and other sources was not enough to fully meet the losses or the immediate requirements. Since the

well-to-do had their properties at several places and they also had well-to-do relatives, they had something to fall back upon, while the middle class people had none. On the other hand, people belonging to the poorer sections of the society received quite substantial financial and material help as compared to their losses.

Although more than 500 national and international NGOs were engaged in help, the role of local people in disaster mitigation was of paramount importance. Some anti-social elements among them active in the area were trying to take most inhuman advantages. However, local citizens at some risk to themselves, prevented them from doing so. Most of the local citizens played a very positive role in the hour of need and they were the first to reach the site of disaster with relief and many lives were saved by their quick action. Had they not reached the site of disaster for help in time, loss of life and property would have been much bigger.

The affected people

Disasters can be divided into two categories – man-made and natural. While, earthquakes, cyclones and floods are natural disasters, war, fire and epidemics are man-made disasters. Even in natural disasters, human role cannot be discounted and human selfishness and shortcomings play a decisive role in compounding misery and suffering. When we take into consideration disaster mitigation, we can divide people into three categories – those who suffer as a consequence of disaster, those who are engaged in relief and rehabilitation and potential looters. Similarly, disaster-affected people can be divided into three categories – well-to-do, middle class and poor. Disasters affect people belonging to three categories differently. This is clear from the following:

Well-to-do — Those who lose life due to disasters are the worst sufferers. To whichever class they belong – rich, middle class or poor – life cannot be regained. Life is precious and no amount of relief money can compensate for it, but at the same time, money provides some help in bringing shattered lives on the rails again. Since the well-to-do have properties at different places and their relatives too are well-off and live at other places, they can be expected to come at the scene of disaster and help their near and dear ones at the time of their need. As they have resources, they can take their injured relatives for medical treatment away from the theatre of disaster quickly and effectively. Timely medical and financial assistance not only saves lives, but also saves mental tension which sometimes

proves disastrous. The relatives in Bhuj earthquake also proved helpful in reclaiming costly cash, jewellery and other items from the debris.

Middle classes – The condition of middle class families is different from that of well-to-do families. They have all their belongings – house, shop, agricultural land, milch animals etc. – at one place. When disaster strikes, they lose everything. Relief money and material only work as a stop gap arrangement. The injured become fully dependent on external help. Some of them lose their life and limb in the absence of timely medical treatment. As most of their family members and relatives also live at the same or nearby place, they do not have an alternative to go to other places and are compelled to bear the consequences of financial and mental stress. As a result, they suffer from many serious psychological problems arising out of trauma and physical sickness. Dead live forever as a scar in the minds of dear ones. In order to save whatever is left of their property, they think it better to stay put at the spot of the disaster than leave. Even if help is forthcoming, they do not leave. As they are full of self-respect, they do not like to get relief material which is being distributed by relief agencies and do not go to relief camps to claim food, clothing etc.

Poor – The poor do not have much property. Mostly they have make-shift dwellings in the outskirts of villages or towns. Even if these structures fall apart, very few people lose their lives in the debris. Due to financial constraints, they are not in a position to go out of the area and mostly depend on the help provided by relief agencies. As they are not sure about future, they try to collect as much relief material as they can. The Government help and assistance proves handy and in more cases than not it makes up their losses.

As I have stated earlier, any amount of relief money or material cannot compensate for the life lost in a disaster. It is precious and beyond money and material.

Relief providers

The people engaged in relief and rehabilitation work can be divided into five categories – local people, volunteers or people working for NGOs from other parts of the country, Government functionaries from other parts of the country, army and foreigners.

Local people – During the times of disasters, local people play a significant role. In fact, there is no alternative to the help provided by the local people. In the first few hours

and days that relief agencies take to reach out to the affected areas, much work had already been done by the local people. It was only after sometime had elapsed that relief from agencies reached Bhuj. Some areas affected by earthquake were far-flung without adequate communication facilities. In this situation, it were the local people who came with whatever help they could garner. It was due to their efforts that precious lives could be saved. They were also instrumental in disposing of the bodies of the dead and prevent epidemics. With whatever limited means they had at their command, they took the injured to the nearest hospitals and relief centers and saved their lives. They cooperated with the outside relief parties. They helped them reach the sites of disaster as they were unaware of the exact location of the villages where help was needed. Among the disaster-affected people there were many belonging to certain strata of society who were reluctant to go to relief centers and take relief material. The outside agencies took the help of locals in taking relief material to reluctant, but needy affected people.

Often police and security agencies take some time to reach the site of disaster. During this period, some people try to take advantage of the situation and loot the belongings of the affected people. Concerned local citizens prevented this from happening through their vigilance. As a result, the looters did not have a free hand.

In the Rapur taluk, Gram Swaraj Sangh runs an ashram at Nilpar. The ashram has been working among the villagers of the area for a number of years. After earthquake, the ashram worked as coordination center for the outside agencies and guided volunteers coming from different parts of the country and abroad with relief material to destinations where help was most urgently needed. It ensured better and systematic use of relief material.

NGOs – According to an estimate, more than 500 NGOs from all over the country and abroad took part in relief work. They included even the NGOs associated with political and religious groups like RSS, Congress Sewa Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena etc. Due to the help of local people, their efficiency increased substantially and relief material could be distributed well. They did not need local administration's direction for work. Generally, people belonging to NGOs have voluntary bent of mind and can work without any consideration of age, status, religious or social standing of the beneficiaries. They may lack material, yet they have willingness to work and reach among the people which enables them to collect relief

material without any loss of time as the people are aware that they will not misuse the material and it will reach the needy.

Government functionaries — Government functionaries coming from other parts of the country at first contact the local administration and work under the direction of local administration. Their commitment to work and ability is beyond question, yet they were seen to lag somewhat as compared to volunteers or people belonging to NGOs as they had to complete some formalities.

Army – As at the time of war, the role of army is no less significant in disaster mitigation. Its personnel are trained and act swiftly and decisively. It was seen during the Bhuj disaster that most of the work, including saving life and property of citizens, was done by the army. The army reached shortly after the local people at the site of disaster. It could extricate people lying under layers of debris and could save thousands of precious lives and coordinated relief work most efficiently. It can be said with certainty that there is no alternative to army in the matter of disciplined efficient work. Its efficiency is an eye opener and lesson for other relief agencies as to how such work should be conducted. It must be mentioned that the local army units that reached the spot early were themselves affected by the earthquake.

Foreigners – Most of the foreign agencies worked among the affected people through local administration. Some foreigners took the help of NGOs in taking relief material and help to the affected people. Their work proved to be more effective.

Looters – There are some people who forget their duty in such difficult times and indulge in looting the belongings of affected people who are in no position to resist. Fortunately, the number of such people was small in Bhuj. These anti-social elements were effectively controlled and dealt with by the local responsible people because they knew these anti-socials and also knew how to control them.

Conclusions

I learned a great deal from my visit and participation in relief work. Providing relief has many dimensions that I have tried to show. It is not simply a matter of money and goods and shelters. Developing faith in the people and providing relief without hurting their inherent dignity calls for great deal of empathy and understanding for people in grief some of whom may have lost all and have nothing to live for.

Disaster creates all-encompassing drama that etches scars that live for ever. Local people are the fulcrum of relief and rehabilitation during times of disasters. Citizen participation is very important not only for relief work, but also for continued work for rehabilitation and development. While relief is immediate, rehabilitation is long term and requires bigger commitment. One saves life and the other involves making people stand on their own two feet again and start life all over again which is the difficult part. It is, therefore, necessary that rehabilitation aspect of disaster mitigation and management is given equal importance which is not the case as present.

In Bhuj one thing was evident. In spite of a disaster of such a magnitude, the incidence of rootlessness was not there. People left their hearth and home for some time due to pressure of adverse circumstances or to get treated for their injury, but as soon as some semblance of normalcy returned, they came back to their villages and towns to start life afresh. This is the most positive sign for future.

People from all walks of life from all over the country came forward to help in this hour of trial. Relief material from all parts of the country and from all strata of society reached Bhuj. People belonging to all religions, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Muslim came forward to help. The rich provided money and material from the resources at their command and the poor worked extra hours to contribute their mite to the noble cause. NGOs and Government organizations, public and private sector gave a helping hand. There was hardly a soul which did not feel for the victims and gave whatever they could manage. NGOs like Saccha Sauda from Haryana showed the way which came with 700 big truck-loads of relief material. It shows that at the time of national calamity we become united. As soon as calamity passes, we return to our normal ways. Imagine, how much we can achieve, if we show this spirit of fellow feeling in normal times.

- Dr. Ratna Prakash, Researcher, PIDT

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—Editor