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Voluntarism is an age-old institution emphasizing the upper hand of ‘Altruism’ as opposed to ‘Self-preservation’, the two basic instincts thought to guide humankind in its survival. How old? That’s debatable, with Adam, Eve and the Serpent being contenders, and god, the clear winner being kept out to keep the argument alive.

Humans as individuals go about their voluntary activities quietly, while as social animals get together to pool in little needed and also bask in the glory of the larger effort. Their initiatives are guided by their ideologies, commitment, capabilities and enthusiasm. However, idealism gets waylaid by practical considerations during implementation. In simple terms, they try to better peoples’ lot in the fastest, simplest and most effective way they can.

Voluntarism also stems from a disillusionment with the lack of improvement in the quality of life of the common man, despite massive governmental and other efforts, and the inevitable rhetoric accompanying these. The encumberances of bureaucracy, inefficiency and political imperatives makes the thinking person disgruntled. Not that the non-thinking one is gruntled either – as Wodehouse would say. The common man, and here I refer to the vast majority below the poverty line simply does not have the understanding, initiative and means to rectify matters.

Voluntary agencies of the ‘Sunday-social work’ type, with elite membership do seem to have the qualities the common man lacks. Yet, their work of ‘Charity’ and ‘Welfare’ revolves around ‘Do’s, Banners, Group-photographs and Credit points, more for themselves than for others. These are seen as exercises for tax-deductions, cleaning of consciences and polishing up of self awarded haloes. Also, the pressures of keeping up with the joneses makes any effort less than five-star, a waste of social energy, be it in mobilizing resources, or utilizing them.

Where do the resources go? After the five star generation and deduction of ‘expenses’, that is. To the fiftieth latrine at the local school. In our country, where more than 80% continue to use open field or railway tracks (God bless this second largest network in the world) for the daily needs, and most have trudge a couple of kms to get at potable water, priorities do seen to be misplaced.

Okay! Okay! The point’s driven home, and where it hurts. What can one do in such circumstances? Hand out the hard earned green-backs to the Hoipolloi, or, stick to Utopian day-dreaming?

None of it. We need to learn from all the other voluntary efforts and get down to being more relevant in our limited way. In all humility let us understand that no external agency will be able to ‘develop’ people unless they can do so themselves. An understanding facilitatory role and a well directed helping hand will be the role we can play. Some voluntary agencies who have been working with people for long adopt this ‘enabling’ approach to development with peoples participation. Now a caution in using ‘participation’, which has a different connotation for the elite. Kishore Sint of the Ashoka foundation hits the nail on the head.
when he says that ‘Participation of the masses in development is akin to the participation of
the bullocks in ploughing done by the farmer. There is never any doubt as to whose design
and decision is involved in the work! We are to be clear that participation entails involvement
of people in planning, decision making, implementing and evaluating all programs meant for
them.

“All people essentially strive for development and a better quality of life. There are no villains
or stupid people in this game. It is only that they operate within the limits of their knowledge
and understanding as we do too! If socially useful decisions are to be made, we need to work
to expand these frontiers. Here, education, not just literacy, is the key to raising levels of
awareness.

In education, focusing on children has obvious merits, while it has been amply demonstrated
that education of females pays rich dividends, as in Kerala, Sri Lanka and China; not rich
places at all, but reaching world standards in quality of life for the people! Give a man
education, and that’s all you do. Educate a woman/adolescent girl and you develop the family
and a generation!

There is a surfeit of available governmental funds meant to tackle socio-economic problems.
They are not working due to various reasons, primarily due to rigidity, and possibly, rigor
mortis. Just operationalising them and making them flexible enough to suit local needs have
earned conscientious District Collectors kudos. This resource definitely needs exploration
and tapping.

Short – term and one- time activities as well as those that foster dependence are not suitable
for long term self-sustenance by the people. We need to look into low-cost local resources,
appropriate technology based on traditional wisdom to make any impact in development.

We need to appreciate the cultural, socio-economic and tradition bound milieu of the poor,
where services open for all are usually monopolized by the more vocal among them. An
exclusive focus on the marginalized points to the need to evolve methods that do not leave
out those who cannot participate.

There is a definite need to focus activities on children and Women in this context.

A major revolution taking place across the world is the Gender revolution, with the
patriarchal dominance in all matters being replaced with an understanding that woman play a
crucial role in society’s development. A positive bias towards women in our efforts will bring
in this vital resource into the mainstream. It is common knowledge that women are less prone
to corruption and more dedicated to work. In the context of the poor, it is seen that a major
portion of a woman’s earnings goes into the home in contrast to the man’s.
‘Synergy’ was a term first used in sociology to explain the functioning of a tribal society, where each member contributed to the common good of society by taking up common duties and responsibilities. This is traditionally prevalent in our society too. It is now being fostered by voluntary agencies as they help people work for themselves by organizing through Women and Youth clubs where not only education and awareness building occurs, but it also forms the hub of developmental activities in that community. People not only learn of their rights, but also of their duties and responsibilities as citizens. Here two plus two seems to exceed four, and that is what development is all about.

All these require a lot of time and energy (not only money) which is the voluntary contribution every human needs to make to another to grow personally. Empathy, a commitment, developing of communication skills and learning enough to be able to put in preventive and promotive measures in our activities are all ways of not only helping others, but also developing ourselves too.

Finally, if we would really like to know if what we are doing is relevant, Mahatma Gandhi has given us the mirror of truth to look into –

“Whenever you are in doubt
Recall the face of the poorest
and most helpless man
whom you may have seen
And ask yourself
If the step you contemplate
Is going to be of any use of him?
Will it restore him a control
over his own destiny?”