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## **VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT**

The dimensions of the problems in India, like the country itself, are mind boggling. The situation becomes all the more critical for a nation caught-up between the growth, buoyancy and the rising expectations on the one hand, and the relative deprivation of the majority, wide spread despondency on the other. The span of 55 years of our Independence has proved most inadequate for us in tackling the problems of India i.e. fulfilling, the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and basic amenities of life; quality growth in education, health and other such human resource related infrastructure. In absolute numbers poverty has compounded manifolds, a large section of our population, over 65 to 70% still below or at bare subsistence levels, whatever be the measurement or considerations to ascertain the 260 million people being below the poverty line in the last count. For them, each day being a fresh struggle for existence, the enormous and unparalleled human potential of India mostly remains untapped. The government 'for the people, by the people and of the people' has not really lived up to their expectations. The gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots' has been widening exponentially, the have-nots numerically increasing in geometrical proportions. In the wake of the much publicized and widely acclaimed globalization, privatization and liberalization, there is a strong, a well orchestrated demand for the Government to withdraw even from some of the constitutional obligations of a welfare state. The much talked about Corporate (Business) social responsibilities is yet to take any real shape in the larger context of the voluntary sector in India. Consequently, the NGOs, the most commonly accepted expressions for the voluntary sector, have no option but to grow and come to the forefront to shoulder direct responsibilities and play their historic role.

Talking of development, it has not been commensurate with the aspirations, expectations and, more pertinently, with the planned allocations and the expenditure. So much so that some problems inflicting the country at the time of Independence persists in a more compounded manner, thanks to our ever increasing population. Besides our recent achievements in IT and some other sectors of growth directly or indirectly touching upon 10-20% of our population, ironically, we seem to occupy the global centre stage in population, but given the present status of our human development in terms of the basic necessities of life, we do not really cover ourselves with glory. With over 1020 million people inhabiting the country, the issues relating to illiteracy, out-of-school-children, child labour, infant and child mortality, physically and mentally challenged population, the growing number of uncared elders, our problems are ever exceeding our resources. In case the diminishing employment opportunities are any pointer, we are far from converting our population into really useful human resources for the national development.

The allocations, schemes, policies and programmes for women, children, elders, disabled, socially defenseless, and in the crucial sectors of health and education, have though been rising and multiplying in the annual and 5 years plans, their tangible impact is yet to be seen in raising the standards to a respectable level to justify their real effectiveness. It needs to be examined why plethora of legislations meant to safeguard the interests of the weak and vulnerable have, by and large, remained unsuccessful in fulfilling their cherished objectives. Status of women and children causes particular concern. Article 45, for example, meant to ensure compulsory education upto 14 years of age could not achieve the desired results, and now the 93<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution casting a legal obligation, less upon the state and more on the incapable or impoverished families and the undefined Community, is to be tested on the ground.

A close look at the crucial sectors of social development gives an idea about the mammoth task in hand. The problems relating to poverty and deprivation, hunger, homelessness and the absence of the basic life sustaining conditions, are most real. We have the largest number of people affected by poverty and destitution in the world. Our own estimation indicate over 72 million families being in situation of absolute poverty and millions dying every year due to

hunger, mal-nutrition and ill health. Nearly 13 million 'houseless households' found in census-2001, multiplied by 5 each, meaning 6.5 crores homeless people happened to be in the country<sup>1</sup>. With nearly 30% of the population now inhabiting in the last enumerated 5161 urban centers in the country, there were 100 million people among them living in urban slums without or with little access to water, sanitation, health care and with sparse education facilities for the neglected, street and working children. Such unhappy development profiles are further crossed by numerous situations of socio-economic conflicts and crisis in myriad forms that pose major challenge to the governance.

In the given situation, there is a need to ascertain the role of voluntary sector which stands transfixed somewhere between an insensitive civil society, a doubly insensitive Govt. machinery and socially indifferent political leadership right from the levels of Panchayati Raj institutions and Municipal Bodies to the states and national leadership. Although, many in the voluntary sector and even outside, prefer to be called Voluntary Action Group (VOLAGS) or voluntary organization etc, the most common term used even now happens to be Non-Governmental Organizations. The emergence of such NGOs representing the most visible participation of the civil society on common issues of public concern is a global phenomenon. However, the significance of such non-governmental efforts to achieve the same goals as that of a welfare State through community or non-governmental efforts, finds a new meaning in the developing countries of South-East Asia and Africa. The NGOs are in existence in American and European countries as well, but in these individualistic and the capitalistic societies, the private endeavours to achieve similar goals are far more pervasive and institutionalized for altruistic and personal gains. The voluntary organizations in these countries serve a limited purpose, particularly to look after the disadvantaged and disabled sections of society, more in the nature of specialized activities where the government does not take major responsibilities and the business and the profit making organizations operate to merely express the social concerns. Contrary to them, in the developing countries, the NGOs or the voluntary organizations are often seen as the main driving force in the process of socio-economic mobilization and change. For instance, in Bangladesh, the powerful NGOs like Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) have almost substituted the Govt. in the areas of women's empowerment and micro-credit and primary education, respectively, reaching out to several millions.

In the changing times, in India as well, the NGOs are slated, though not yet substantially poised to play the pivotal role in the field of education and child development. They have emerged as an important feature on the Indian social landscape and, for appropriate reasons, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is being described as the decade of NGOs. Whereas, the growth of voluntary sector is becoming pronounced worldwide, in India it attains far more significance on account of the need for massive participation of the people. With the State parceling out a number of its responsibilities to the voluntary sector, and many non-profit organizations undertaking entrepreneurial activities to subsidize their charitable operations, the line between the various sectors of activities, like the State voluntary groups and the corporates, is getting blurred. What then will be the distinctive contribution of the voluntary sector, and where lies its comparative advantage?

During its long journey, volunteerism as the precursor and the constant driving force behind the voluntary efforts has changed not only in form but also in spirit. In the past, religion, western liberal and humanist thought, leftist ideologies, and Gandhian philosophy served as the inspiration for volunteerism. Those drawn to voluntary action believed in simple, almost austere, living and total commitment, but this is not necessarily so now. Today, the dominant motive may be said to be enlightened self-interest. Unless poverty and inequalities are reduced, violence and discrimination controlled, and the environment protected, the future for everyone will be blank. The voluntary efforts now witness a paradigm shift to meet up these high expectations and to tackle the issues of common concern, some relating to the very survival of mankind. Still, the demands being made from the voluntary sector is somewhat unrealistic, indeed unreasonable. The volunteers or social workers, in the common parlance, are supposed to perform without being paid and act mostly in the spirit of charity. We have to understand that volunteers are not a class of people who are supposed to be driven by emotions and sense of social service alone, as if they have no needs of day-to-day existence, livelihood or any demands towards themselves and their families. Over the years, fortunately, when the activists

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<sup>1</sup> Census of India 2001

and managers in the voluntary sector are attempting to institutionalize the efforts, their attempts are now being at least recognized as a necessary complement, even an alternative to the governmental efforts. In the policies and programmes of the government, particularly in the social sector, in most of the schemes being implemented by the national and the State Governments, there is at least ritualistic mention of voluntary efforts. It is besides the point that the voluntary efforts are still not being taken to be a serious alternative except in case of some known NGOs who have created capacities that can't be overlooked and acclaimed models.

From our point of view, the volunteerism is now synonymous with multiple variety of voluntary efforts, described as volunteers, social workers, NGOs, voluntary organizations, voluntary action groups, or community based organizations. Besides these the numerous Trusts, Foundations, Cooperatives, Trade Unions, societies are also playing a significant role. In fact, considering the status of the Panchayati Raj institutions despite the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution and other grass-root democratic organizations, like other local self-governments, even they may also fall somewhere between the Govt. and the voluntary sector. Although, such democratic institutions are constitutionally supposed to be apolitical, in practice and due to the electoral process involved, they have become highly politicized. They have to carry the conviction of voluntary sector for a fair democratic participation at the grass-root level touching upon all aspects of the people's live of the 70% of the Indians. When we discuss about the volunteerism and the role of this sector in tackling the national issues, such as, universal education, health & family planning and poverty alleviation, we cannot permit the grass-root democratic institutions to abdicate their primary responsibility.

Needless to mention that the voluntary efforts, albeit, in a more organized and institutionalized manner having the sanction and support of the Govt. and the larger society, holds the key to the basic transformation of the country. It is also being realized that the massive programmes like, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education For All) or the Universal Education still remains a far cry with about 70-80 million out-of-school children, dropouts in the absence of the entire being is given the shape of a nationwide movement. Since all previous efforts, like National Literacy (Mission) Programme could not truly take off in a mission mode, as pronounced; the latest and the most ambitious, Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan also may not succeed without a nation-wide voluntary participation. Out of nearly 400 million children who are found below 18 years of age in the sizeable numbers being out-of-school system<sup>1</sup>. Half of them being dropouts on account of either due to adverse socio-economic conditions or for the reason that the formal school system in most of the villages, towns, even in bigger cities like Delhi, are not able to create any interest or occupational or entrepreneurs opportunities leading to decent placements in life. As a result, there appears to be a major divide in the society in the name of education and, ultimately, a miniscule of the population, a very small segment, receives meaningful education. One basic reason for this gap between what is needed and what is available in the name of service delivery, appears to be the lack of participation by the civil society and the absence of options from the informed choices. It is only with the support and participation of the voluntary sector that the national policies can be correctly formulated and appropriate infrastructure, curricula and systems can be created to deliver the requisite services to the masses.

Similarly is the situation with all other major programmes of the government in the social sector projects and schemes, which are now being taken to the local self government. What is missing at the cutting edge level is meaningful partnership between the government, local self functionaries and most importantly people's participation that is possible only through associating and organizing the voluntary efforts.

### **Voluntary Sector in India**

In pre-independent India, the voluntary sector was perceived as a charity and, at times, as a vehicle to promote national integration and Independence movement. During post independence period, the voluntary sector has emerged as a new force contributing to social development while also plugging gaps in the Government run programs. Flexibility and informal systems of functioning has brought VOs closer to the beneficiaries allowing them to take speedier and well targeted action, invariably at a lower cost. VOs have brought into focus issues like health, education, rural and urban development, environment protection, women and child welfare and they have become an inalienable part of the contemporary development scene. No doubt, they have carved out a definitive place for themselves, as being reported, but they

have yet to emerge as a viable alternative. The total number in the country officially stands nearly 2 million, most of them happen to be very small in size and impact, rural-based, and majority unregistered.

Unfortunately, the term 'voluntary sector', same as the other much-maligned expressions like bureaucracy and the government, has acquired somewhat dubious connotation. People, even those well placed in the government and in other responsible positions talk about the voluntary sector as being 'rackets' or agencies that try to corner and misuse the government and non-governmental funds. The voluntary sector's credibility is at a low level during a period of our times when they should be poised to play a historic role in the social development. This is unfortunate because it is the sector of our organized civil society that can assist the nation liberate from the morass of utter hopelessness, poverty and the sub-human existence in which 60-70% of the Indians are still living.

The role of the voluntary sector also needs to be understood in the context of our sovereign, democratic, republic which under the Constitution, social legislations and plethora of policy and international documents is expected to create an egalitarian, healthy, happy and a just society. In the given context, the role of the voluntary sector is crucial and needs to be defined in the overall scenario, particularly with reference to the government which operates like a giant, striding over all sectors of our activities. Its interventions must not remain limited to a supplementary role or only in being opposition to the government. Social and economic development programmes and activities of the national and provincial government that aimed at empowerment have reduced the ordinary people into 'beneficiaries'

In fact, the government can play a very important role in terms of facilitating the VOs throughout the country ensuring their even growth. Now, the efforts towards the enhancement of the voluntary sector need to be strengthened and synergized. This sector is an asset because being community-based, it is capable of delivering inexpensive services at the level and alongwith the people it is supposed to serve at a lesser cost. More significantly, the VOs are able to develop innovative projects based on the locally felt-needs and the available resources as against the governmental stereotypes. The present situations significantly highlight the importance of the GO-VO interface which may act as focal points from where integrated and holistic view could be taken on the voluntary sector.

The participation of VOs in sustainable social development who may act as partners in the process of socio-economic changes and in the nation-building is critical. Expansion of activities and growth of macro-level leadership in the voluntary sector is possible through the networks of local leadership within the sector. There is a need to enhance the capacity of the community-based VOs, SHGs and women's groups through the mobilization of the existing resources, which is possible only through the partnerships in government and, private sectors which may subsume corporate sector, industrial houses, charitable trusts set-up by NRIs, individual donors and business houses even the international support.

Hence, there is a need to focus on the replicable models of the voluntary sector led development and deliver services that do not depend on the governmental intervention alone for its growth. The voluntary sector or VOs can indeed play a substantial role in the welfare and development of children, women, and capacity-building of others in the same field. Creating a federating body of VOs at the state and district levels could further facilitate the work of the voluntary sector. One visualizes a triangular partnership between the government, business entities, both as individuals and organizations – who were called the Trustees for People's wealth by Mahatma Gandhi, and the voluntary organisations at all levels concentrated upon the areas of real and urgent socio-economic needs, particularly education, child protection and health in order to bring about real changes.

There are also numerous public spirited individuals, both in India and abroad, who volunteer for the social cause while making their bits of contributions towards the larger goal of social development. In the present scenario, we really need to acknowledge their contributions and motivate them not only to continue their work but also to set them as role models for many others who have the spirit but they need some support and direction. The immense contributions made by the social workers, both in India and abroad, also needs to be acknowledged.

One needs to understand that none of these political and administrative systems can truly ensure any effective grass-root participation unless carried out as a people's movement. Perceived in the backdrop of the national realities, as they confront us, the voluntary sector must ultimately wake up to its potentials and play the crucial role which joining hands with the grassroots democratic institutions and the government at all levels to create a truly participative and inclusive governance.

### **Volume and Scale of the Voluntary Sector**

In the absence of any centralized databank or nationally coordinated system of information on the voluntary sector today, it is impossible to provide accurate and precise estimates of the scale and size of the voluntary sector. However, there are an estimated 2 million voluntary initiatives and organizations in the country which include a wide diversity of local youth clubs, Mahilla Mandals, private schools, hospitals, even some government constituted voluntary organizations like CAPART, Jan Shikshan Sansthan, etc. How many of these smaller organizations are still alive and functional is hard to estimate. Estimating the scale of resources being used by the voluntary sector is even more difficult. Nearly 25000 organizations are reportedly now registered under FCRA and they receive nearly Rs. 4000 crores in the year 1999-2000<sup>1</sup>. Different Ministries and Departments of the national and state governments have formulated a vast number of schemes<sup>2</sup>. We may hazard a guess that nearly the same amount, as the foreign contribution, comes from the government departments and agencies, including large development projects funded by bilateral and multilateral agencies. In addition, India has had a long tradition of volunteering and giving and thus contributions from ordinary people and community continue to be received by the voluntary sector.

The preliminary findings of PRIA present a detailed and interesting account of the volume and scale of the VOs operating in India. The identity of the VOs in India remains largely invisible, despite that the sector in India is widespread. Its scale is huge and significant on several accounts, employment, revenue and the types of activities. And this scale of VOs demands serious attention and strong support from policy-makers, government officials and political leaders. More than half the VOs in the country are based in rural areas, while even those based in urban area mostly serve the rural communities. The Indian NPOs are essentially small and, nearly three-fourth of all VOs are reported to have only volunteers or at the most one or two paid staff. Only one in 12 VOs employs more than 10 paid staff. Nation wide nearly 20 million persons work on a paid or volunteer basis in VOs out of which only 27 lakh (2.7 million) are full-time equivalent paid employees. The findings outlined that the VOs were mainly engaged in five dominant activities, Sports/Culture, Religious (engaged in social development), Community /social service, Education and Health.

The research further estimated to show that the total receipts by VOs for 1999-2000 were Rs 17,922 crores, which were primarily generated through loans, grants, donations or were self generated. More than half of all receipts of VOs in India are self-generated through fees or charges for services, etc. 75 million households (40.7%) gave for charitable causes. A percentage as high as 68 % of all givers (2/3 rd) were rural based. 2/5 th of all givers were poor households with an annual income below Rs, 25,000.

### **The GO-VO Interface**

The relation between the State (or the Government) and the NGOs in India has been mostly viewed in somewhat myopic perspective, particularly social action groups emphasizing rights based approach, who often find themselves in situations of conflict while giving voice to or organizing the poor and the deprived. In this context, one of the classifications done<sup>1</sup> as Corporate NGOs, Development Oriented NGOs and NGOs professing Development with Social Justice, deserves a mention. Together, or distinguished from the social action groups, the community development voluntary organizations have a significant role to play, whether in partnership with the Government or along with the grass-root democratic institutions with corporate sector, through international or national funding, through institutions, NRIs or otherwise. No doubt, the voluntary organizations have special role to play in advocating, networking and articulating the struggle from the local to the global levels, they have to mobilize the people and work towards for justice, to fulfill socio-economic, legal and potential rights which are intertwined with the day to day realities of life and individual needs. However, the direct role of

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Steering Committee on Voluntary Sector for the 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan January, 2002

voluntary organization to tackle the multiple and gigantic problems besetting us perhaps attains special significance.

A look at the government as the largest service delivery sector reflects disquieting gaps, even between what the government plans to spend and the benefits society gains out of it. This can be addressed in a strategic manner by roping in various segments of population to achieve a common national mission. In the same context, it is felt that the success of any government, more so of the democratic institutions, entirely rests on the people's participation. Our functional democracy, like most other indirect democratic systems end up becoming electoral representative institutions with major consideration in the reality of power politics. The government, at its policy formulation level, functions through the Parliament, State Assemblies and other such bodies, and at the execution level, it is the bureaucracy, which runs the system. In India, the Nehruvian vision of three-tier democratic participation, including the PRIs has not yet taken shape in true even the proper constitutional sense.

For argument's sake, even if the PRIs and the municipal bodies come to occupy their rightful positions in terms of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments (1993), the system essentially remains political power-centric. Their role in the process of socio-economic transformation and in imparting justice legal or otherwise, is yet to find a form. One needs to understand that none of these political and administrative systems can truly ensure the real grass-root participation unless carried out as a people's movement. From the national realities, as they confront us, it is difficult to identify such a leadership or a cadre of workers which is going to create a movement of the requisite dimension. The only sector which must ultimately wake up to its real potentials and play its role would be the voluntary sector joining hands with the grass-root democratic institutions and the government at all levels to create a truly participative and inclusive governance. Hence, at this point of time, the role of the VOs needs to be strengthened and synergized.

### **Innovations**

Yet another implication of the above mentioned models of collaborations is to identify and agree on areas for joint action by NGOs and government. We feel that issues of poverty, education, health and population are some of the key-areas. May it be noted that partnership means joint action at all the levels of policy and programme planning and implementation. This does not preclude independent action on the part of either government or NGOs.

Voluntary organisations have been experimenting with new ways of promoting more sustainable, people-centred development. Through flexible, at times even risk-taking experimentation, they have been able to develop methods, models and equipments that have been widely adopted by the state and national governments as well as by the international agencies. Many national development programmes of Government of India, based on such innovations promoted by voluntary organisations, include areas like non-formal education; innovative methods of literacy, primary healthcare, biogas, community-forestry; and in recent years, self-help groups, micro-credit and income generation programmes.

In undertaking such projects, voluntary organizations require flexible resources and a process-oriented approach not bogged down by bureaucratic rules and procedures. Scaling-up such innovations by voluntary organisations also requires an understanding of the "software", nature of this work without insisting on short-term target-orientation.

### **Voluntary Sector: The Alternative Path of Social Development**

In India, once we attempt get into the dimension of the problems that we face, we realize their distributing mammoth proportions, to the extent that the planners, policy makers, national and international resource providers almost throw up their hands in hopelessness. The dynamics of Indian people, divided in endless number of ways, regions to caste and communities ancient, medieval to modern, co-existing, some sections of the population keeping pace with the latest trends in the global economy further multiply and compound the issues involved.

In our experience, the first and the central challenge is to redefine our understanding of the various sectors of activities in our national life, including the voluntary sector. A monolithic

<sup>1</sup> (GARAIN (1994), Development Hegemony, NGOs and the Development in India, Sangeeta Kamat)

approach towards the voluntary sector does not carve out a positive role for them although they seem to complement the efforts of the state governmental as an alternative system of governance. Despite the limited resources and the shift in the government's policy that further prepares to abdicate part of the welfare activities, the complementary and the alternative function of the voluntary sector is yet to be recognized. This situation creates a major yawning gap between what is being done in the social sector and what needs to be done.

As far as the corporate sector is concerned, it has made some contributions for the societal development but all its efforts are through the individual institutions. In terms of the quantum of support being provided by the corporate world under the much talked about corporate social responsibility in India, it appears quite small, couple of thousand and crores rupees. *Hence, emerges the role of the third, the most important sector of the voluntary organizations to fill the gap.* So far this sector has also not really addressed the core areas. Its outreach is very small, almost insignificant compared to the government sector. For instance an organised voluntary efforts in rural development is yet to take shape. The voluntary efforts in rural development in terms of geographical coverage is insignificant as compared to the needs of the country. As per some estimates only 3 to 4 percent of the 0.75 million villages in the country are covered by voluntary action<sup>1</sup>. This sector cannot be just viewed as 'a charitable work' but is as a major partner in the development process.

If we talk of participatory governance, it can be understood in three forms, namely, the electoral government, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the VOs. Hence, what is required is a partnership between the three, the unique component of the voluntary sector being the 'bottom up' approach and not 'top to bottom' approach of the government. This implies that the voluntary sector necessarily involves participation from the grass root levels.

Now, when we look at the VOs from the point of view of the functional democracy then we actually realize that they are as much democratic institutions as the PRIs since organizations, even they emerge from the people's needs and their efforts are for the people. The innovations, empowerment, research and advocacy by the VOs are also unique having distinct features as those NGOs themselves. The need thus emerges enable this most important sector of national activity, the VOs to grow so that this get evenly distributed throughout the country and take-up larger responsibilities in partnership with the LSGs/PRIs and the government.

The VOs are playing an important role in providing and shaping an alternative path of development on the basis of the felt-needs of the community and by involving a great deal of community participation. In the voluntary sector there is urgent requirement of capacity-building of the smaller voluntary organisations through the reputed and diversified organizations. This would also creates enhance networking amongst the voluntary sector working in the same field.

The leaders, opinion makers and the resource providers have to appreciate and accept the crucial role to be played by the voluntary sector in the task of national development. The role of the government increasingly being reduced to defense, law and orders, financial controls and such other activities of the State, the role of corporate-industrial-commercial sector being limited to the market driven activities, some of the real task of social development, inevitably, falls upon the voluntary sector. With the changing times and perception in the Indian socio-economic scenario, there appears to be major void to be filled by the combination of grassroots democratic institutions and voluntary organisations.

### **Prayas Experiments**

In a situation of intensely felt need from a major fire in a slum cluster of Delhi which devastated 5000 houses leaving thousands of children homeless, from 25 children to this day, Prayas has traveled a long way. Now, it accesses nearly 50,000 street children and their proximate communities in the states of Delhi, Gujarat and Bihar. It has been an extremely arduous journey. Today, with nearly 62 centres of alternative education, 16 centres of excellent vocational training, well organized health services catering to the needs of 50,000 street and slum children alone in Delhi running several Children's Homes for the homeless, and an excellent Child Helpline programme, the organisation has become the focal point of change and development in the slums of Delhi, villages of Gujarat and state level programme for rehabilitation of abandoned children in Bihar.

<sup>1</sup> VANI, *Voluntarism and Government*, 2001

Prayas, 'a modest effort' as the name suggests, this NGO has become a vehicle and a medium of change in the lives of thousands of families and communities in the areas of real needs, always responding to its infringing faith that the needs and the rights of children are synonymous. Having the powerful infrastructure including some most vibrant structures in these three States, this organisation is today prepared for a significant role in the process of social development and social change wherever it operates. It impacts directly on the lives of thousands of slum and village communities with multiple programmes of education, health care, self help, micro-credit activities and vocational training, programmes, helpline services through its apex body, Prayas Institute of Juvenile Justice, having research and documentation, information, education and communication, training and resources units, Prayas is acting in close partnership with the government and major voluntary networks at the local, national and international levels.

The organisation visualizes its role in the larger scheme of the voluntary vis-à-vis social development sector in India. Fortunately, this NGO has developed some excellent linkages abroad both, in terms of international organisations, namely, NORAD, USAID, Aus-AID, CIDA, besides a number of non-governmental organisations and individuals abroad. In USA, it operates in partnership with Children's Hope Inc. and a chapter of the organisation opening soon with the support group of highly committed Indian in the country. In Germany, for years now, Prayas is operating a chapter with the help of some dedicated voluntary organisations working with local schools on the issue of environment. We recently participated in a major global consciousness meeting organized by the Club of Budapest at Frankfurt. In U.K., Prayas has found hundreds of committed supporters who have recently, decided to open chapters within and outside the country.

We, at Prayas, visualize ourselves as partners in a National and Global campaign to restore childhood to millions of children deprived of their basic needs. We wish to give them back their childhood in terms of care, protection and opportunities for participation and development.

The Government – democratic institutions – voluntary sector interface may act as the focal point from where an integrated and holistic view of the voluntary sector could be taken. The voluntary, community-based development oriented organizations happen to be closer to the poor and the disadvantaged sections of the society. Essentially expected to be the products of the felt-need situations, the voluntary organizations have a much greater potential for innovations. As against the governmental stereotypes, rule-bound status quoists, the VOs are mostly unusual, flexible and prepared to change the times. Most of the well meaning voluntary organizations naturally respond to the development needs, work in multi-sectoral framework that also attempt to coordinate with the government having convergence with other motivated, local bodies and civil society organization and groups. The voluntary initiatives, whether in the form of community-based or social action organizations, they are much better placed to stimulate and mobilize community based support, enroll and utilize volunteers, and not only catalyze but also create social cohesion.

### **Volunteerism and NGOs**

NGO embrace a bewildering group of organizations varying in terms of innumerable parameters. No standard definition can include all organizations under the omnibus caption – 'NGO'. In the common parlance, volunteerism and NGOs may be talked about as being two facets of a similar kind of activities – the first being in the nature of a spirit and the second being organizational. Volunteerism is considered to be a doctrine in which a free will of an individual to act is a dominant factor. A volunteer is a person who offers services spontaneously without any extra incentives. His work is conscious, automatic and instinctively different from such a desire translated into some planned goal oriented activity. A voluntary organization may also be considered to be a conglomeration of volunteers joining hands with shared values of common concern for specific goals and the raison de'tre of such an organization is based on interests and objectives of a group constituting the organization.

Although, many in the voluntary sector and even outside, prefer to called voluntary Action Group (VOLAGS) or voluntary organization etc, the most common term even now happens to be non-governmental organisations. The emergence of such NGOs as presenting the participation of the civil society on common issues of concern is a global phenomenon.

However, the significance of such non-governmental efforts to achieve the same goals as that of a welfare State through community or non-governmental efforts, finds a new meaning in the developing countries of South-East Asia and Africa. Non-governmental organization or NGO had emerged as an important feature of the Indian social landscape, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be described as the age of the NGOs. This development is not specific or limited to countries like India the NGOs are in existence in American and European countries as well. But the individualistic and the capitalistic societies, the private endeavours to achieve the similar goals are far more pervasive and institutionalized for both altruistic and personal reasons. The voluntary organisations in this sector serve the limited purpose, particularly to look after the disadvantaged and disabled sections of society, more in the nature of specialized activities where the government does not take many responsibilities and when the business and the profit making organisations operate more to express these social concerns. However, in the developing countries, the NGOs or the voluntary organizations are often seen as one of the main driving forces in the process of socio-economic mobilization and change. For instance, in Bangladesh, the massive NGOs like Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) have almost taken the position of the Govt. in the areas of women empowerment and micro-credit and primary education, respectively, reaching out to several millions.

The growth of the voluntary sector worldwide will surely rank among the outstanding developments of the present millennium. In India, it has an almost 100-year history of development. Ahead lies this new millennium which is likely to see a major redrawing of the boundaries as well as merging and complementary roles between the state, the market and civil society. It is important, therefore, to take stock of where the sector stands today and to also ascertain where it is heading in the future.

After five decades of educational programmes neither illiteracy nor the associated problems of social exclusion and gender discrimination have disappeared. Similar situations obtain in several other fields like health, sanitation and sub-standard living conditions, particularly in the context of children, women, disabled and the elders people are increasingly becoming distrustful of the ability of public institutions and government agencies to deliver good governance. While the trend for greater privatization will help promote voluntary initiative, it is also likely to create a demand for a better balance between growth and quality education and health care. On the positive side, today we appear to be in a developmental stage, volunteerism will again become important aspect for social change that also led to social justice.

In some of these countries, the NGOs are seen as the main driving force in the social change and mobilization. NGOs are now pivotal in the field of education and child development.

What does this scenario augur for the voluntary sector? Probably that voluntary agencies will need to continue to provide even augment development inputs to supplement provision: step up pressure on the politicians and administrations to provide good governance: make them more responsible and accountable to citizens: exercise vigilance on issues like health and elementary education and exert greater pressure for equitable social development.

To meet the external challenges, the voluntary sector will need to introspect on its appropriate role, as providers of quality educational services to the deprived as change agents, as a protectors of child rights or as an innovators in development strategies?

In conclusion, it appears to us despite the Government being the largest sector striding the largest to smallest activity in the country, there are ever widening disquieting gaps. The resources available in the government, which could be disbursed all over, from smallest business to biggest corporates, socially spirited individuals to organized charities and in the initiatives in the villages, small towns and the big cities to the national level organizations, we are not able to garner the maximum benefits. There is definite need to associate various segments of population same as crucial sectors of activities and governance to achieve common national goal of creating a healthy and prosperous India. Needless to mention that the success of the democratic governance ultimately rests on people's participation, whether it is organized through political leadership or the administrative machinery, through grass-root level democratic institutions, PRIs and urban local bodies, or through the million odd voluntary initiatives.