

Role of Volunteers in Universal Education

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Abstract of the paper

Mr. Amod K. Kanth observes that we live in an era where there is an unprecedented focus on the universalisation of elementary education and child rights. The author highlights some of the special features of the Constitutional provisions on elementary education, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially right to education vis-à-vis the role of the voluntary sector in ushering the national goal and commitment to children's education. On our overdue historical task of making education accessible to every child a reality, he emphasizes that there is a greater need to acknowledge the role of volunteers and voluntary organisations & develop meaningful linkages between the government and the civil society. Mr. Kanth also mentions in this paper that India needs to develop appropriate human resources and supplement this through promoting voluntary efforts in order to achieve the much-needed commitment to children's education within the given timeframe.

Education is considered to be the single most important factor that ushers in development and social justice. It enables meaningful participation of people in the mainstream of national life. The much-talked about universalisation of primary education is fundamental to the development of children below 18 years of age into various educational programmes, an impossible task without the equal participation of the Government and the civil society at all levels. Following five decades of efforts to fulfil the Constitutional commitment of education to each child below 14 years of age, the Government has now come to realize that it can never create the requisite infrastructure and national ethos except through a movement, now being referred as 'Education for All' (EFA) or 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyan'.

Although, there is a major emphasis today on the formal system of education of putting every child in the school, which would generally mean the voluntary participation. While recognising the need for the concerted planning and action by the Government., the respective roles of the other stake holders, the crucial responsibility of the voluntary sector is to be understood and appreciated. However, the rapid changes taking place in the Indian economy and the consequent effect on the society has left the social sector in some kind of wilderness. At the same time, in all policy formulations, there is a commitment for devolution of power and the mobilisation of the masses to achieve the national goals, among which 'Education for All' is one of the accepted themes. In the given situation, there is a need to ascertain the role of voluntary sector which stands transfixed somewhere between an indifferent political leadership from the level of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) to the national leadership. Still, the demand being made from the voluntary sector is somewhat unreasonable. The volunteers or social workers, in common parlance, are supposed to perform without being paid and act 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 of any demands towards themselves and their families.

Over the years, fortunately, when the activists and leaders in the voluntary sector are attempting to institutionalize the initiatives, their attempts are now being at least recognized as an alternative to the governmental efforts. In almost all the policies and programmes, now particularly those in the 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 as a serious alternative except in case of some known NGOs who have created powerful models.

From our point of view, volunteerism is now synonymous with multiple types of voluntary efforts, described as volunteers, social workers, NGOs, voluntary organizations, voluntary action groups, or community-based organisations. In fact, considering the status of the PRIs despite the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution and other grass-root democratic organisations, like other local self-governments, they may also fall somewhere between the Government and the voluntary sector. Although, such democratic institutions are supposed to be apolitical. In practice they have become highly politicized wherever they have been founded or even struck deeper roots. They have to carry the conviction of the voluntary sector for a fair democratic participation. When we discuss about the volunteerism and the role of the voluntary sector in tackling national issues like that of universal elementary education, we cannot permit the grass-root democratic institutions to also abdicate their primary responsibility.

Needless to mention that voluntary efforts, albeit, in a more organised and institutionalized manner having the sanction and support of the Govt. and the larger society, hold the key to the basic transformation in the country. It is needless to further mention that "Education for All"(EFA) or the Universal Elementary Education(UEE) will decidedly remain a far cry with about 100 million children being out of school system, unless the entire effort is given the shape of a nationwide movement. Out of nearly 380 million children who are found below 18 years of age in Census 2001, at least 1/3rd are said to be directly out of school system. Of the remaining 2/3rd children, at least half of them dropout on account of either the similar socio-economic conditions that hold the children out of school, or for the reason that the formal school system in majority of villages, slums, towns and even in bigger cities like Delhi, are not able to create the possibilities of occupations for entrepreneurial activities leading to decent placement 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, receive a 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 system can be created to deliver the requisite services to the masses.

Our National and International Commitments

The Indian Constitution while recognising the significance of education for socio-economic transformation and for social justice provided in the Directive Principles (Article 45) to ensure free and compulsory education for all children upto 14 years within 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution. We have been chasing this dream for the past 52 years and we hope of realizing it in some form now following the 93rd Amendment in the Constitution, which converts this

provision into the right to education for children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. The founding fathers also understood the value of education as the basis for life and liberty and thus provided for the same generally for all persons (Article 21) and specially for the minorities and the down-trodden (Article 30(l) and 41).

Although, the child welfare programmes occupied a prominent place in the Constitution and also found mention in some of the national Plans, the National Policy for Children could be formulated only in 1974. With all its inadequacies and lack of focus, it at least gave a direction by recognising the educational needs of the children. It took another 12 years to formulate the National Policy of Education which attempted to create some concrete programmes towards the universalisation of education and fulfillment of constitutional commitment. While recognising the UNCRC of 1989, of the four core rights of children – survival, protection, participation and development, the last mentioned includes education – which gave an impetus to at least the disadvantaged among children. Subsequently, the National Plan of Action for Children included education among other components like health, nutrition, sanitation, water and environment. Most of these pious commitments and policy pronouncements have not been able to give the due position of dignity and equal participation in the voluntary sector in the country. As a result, efforts made by the NGOs have, by and large, remained only success stories with very limited impact at the national level. Precisely, for this reason, in case we are attempting to give substance to 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyan' to make the EFA a reality, the participation of the voluntary sector representing the civil society with the Government shall remain the most important pre-requisite.

Community Participation to promote activities of NGOs

The process of decentralization has been an encouraging feature of our efforts to universalize elementary education. National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 visualizes direct community involvement in the form of Village Education Committees for management of elementary education. The Programme of Action (POA), 1992 emphasized micro-planning a family-wise and child-wise plan of education by which every child regularly attends a school or a non-formal education (NFE) centre, continues his or her education at a place suitable to him \ her and complete at least 10 years of schooling or its equivalent at the NFE Centre.

Steps may be taken to harness the services of local expertise of the volunteers in various fields to augment the educational programme of NGOs. For example, proper environment may be created to enable the NGOs to obtain services of Rural Health Workers, Agricultural Extension Workers, Social Welfare Workers etc. In other word, suitable framework for inter-sectoral response in educational endeavours may be solicited and also be operationalised.

Volunteerism and NGOs

In the common parlance, volunteerism and NGOs are 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 his services spontaneously without any extra incentives. His work is conscious, automatic and instinctive different of such a desire translated into some gold oriented activity. A voluntary organization ma best be considered to be a conglomeration of

volunteers joining hands with shared values of common concern for specific goals the *raison d'être* of a voluntary organisation is based on the principle interests of a group constituting the organization.

Although, many in the voluntary sector and even outside, prefer to call 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 phenomena. 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 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 gains. 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 specialised activities where the government does not take major responsibilities and 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 main driving force in the process of socio-economic mobilisation and change. For instance, in Bangladesh, the massive NGOs like Gramin 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 a new millennium which is likely to see a major redrawing of the boundaries between the state, the market and civil society. It is important, therefore to take stock of where the sector stands today, and where it may be tomorrow.

After five decades of educational programmes neither illiteracy nor the associated problems of social exclusion and gender discrimination have disappeared. Instead, people have become 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. 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.

Non-governmental organisation or NGO has emerged as an important feature of the Indian social landscape, and the 21st century may be described as the decade of the NGO. This development is not specific to India. It is a worldwide phenomenon. In some of these countries, the NGOs are seen as the main driving force in social change and social mobilisation. NGOs are now pivotal in the field of education and child development.

As of now, nearly 750 NGOs are supplementing the Governmental efforts towards UEE by rendering co-operation and resource support to non formal education with assistance from the Government. NGOs are emerging as important partners in efforts of the Government towards UEE.

The participation of NGOs together with community support has helped to improve the physical conditions and environment of schools as well as promotion for girls and children.

NGOs embrace a bewildering group of organisations varying in terms of innumerable parameters. No standard definition can include all organisations under the caption – ‘NGO’. Essentially, volunteerism is a doctrine, which held that the will is a dominant factor or it is a principle relying on one’s own free will for an action. Voluntary efforts stood for services independent of state. A ‘volunteer’ is a person who offered one’s service spontaneously without external incentives. His or her work is conscious and instinctive. A voluntary organisation is a conglomeration of volunteers joining hands together with shared values of concern for specific goal achievement. The *raison de’tre* of a voluntary organisation is based on the principle of interest of a group of organisation. They can function based on general interest or interests of a group, which formed the organisation.

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

There are external challenges. To meet them, the voluntary sector will need to introspect on its best role. As provider of quality educational services to the deprived? As a change agent? As a protector of child rights or as an innovator of development strategies?

With the State contracting out more of its responsibilities to the voluntary sector, and many non-profit organisations undertaking entrepreneurial activities to subsidize their charitable operations, the line between the different sectors is getting blurred. What then will be the distinctive contribution of the voluntary sector, and where lies its comparative advantage?

Challenges

The Government at the Centre needs to mobilize all agencies to rejuvenate the educational system for the benefit of the children. Sufficient funds should be provided to the PRIs for opening and maintaining new schools, so that the Panchayats can play a dynamic role in achieving the targets by creating literacy awareness among the rural people. The country has undoubtedly been successful in evolving a national structure for elementary education in the last fifty years. Primary education is now provided in the mother tongue or regional language in all the States and UTs. There has been substantial increase in access to elementary education. First generation learners, girls and the under privileged sections of society have been provided with unique opportunities for vertical mobility. Literacy standards have been substantially improved across the country.

The task of providing education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years by 2010 cannot be performed and sustained by the Government alone without active participation of the volunteers. Despite substantial achievements the task of UEE is far from complete. School and enrolments have certainly increased but so has the number of out of school children. The country today has

one of the largest illiterate population in the world. caste, gender, class and regional disparities in the education sector though reduced, are still glaring and persistent.

During its long journey, volunteerism has changed not only in form but also 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. 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 bleak.

Though commitment to social development is still high in the sector, it is not uniformly so. Many, professionals and non-professionals alike, are in the voluntary sector not because of ideology, but because they need a job. Moreover, not only do harsh economic realities make it difficult, even for those motivated by a higher ethic, to work for a pittance of without pay, but many younger professionals no longer consider self-abnegation and sacrifice to be necessary adjuncts of voluntary action. They rightly believe that development work requires the best, and not the least expertise and that even a voluntary organization must pay well enough to attract it.

Conclusion

The need of the hour is that if these points are implemented with a certain degree of flexibility, it would go a long way in helping the Government to achieve its objectives of UEE by 2010. It is hoped that with a clear vision, firm will, higher investments, greater dedication and increased volunteer's participation, we would be able to fulfill our goal of providing satisfactory quality of education to all the children in the country. As the new millennium moves ahead, we must take a fresh look for a better future