

UNIT 1. EVOLUTION & BACKGROUND OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The spirit of voluntary action has a long history in India. The traditional concept of 'dharma' embodying the code of moral conduct and social behaviour includes honest and meaningful concern (Tandon:2002:p1) for human beings and other life. In keeping with this moral persuasion, various forms of voluntary initiatives have been in practice. Traditional associations such as caste associations, ethnic associations, and religious associations co-exist with modern associations such as professional associations of lawyers, engineers, doctors; apart from these, development organizations, public advocacy, research, support organizations are also found in the voluntary sector. They are called by various names – voluntary action, voluntary organizations, voluntary sector, voluntary associations, voluntary initiatives, voluntarism and so on. Besides, there are phrases such as people's movement, social movement, grass-roots organizations, people's organizations, citizen's initiatives also in (PRIA & JHU: 2000:P7) vogue. We are also familiar with NGOs, NPOs (non-profit organizations), cooperative societies, trade unions etc. Other common phrases 'charity' 'philanthropy' also fall under the rubric 'voluntary action'. 'Non-party political formation' is considered as a form of voluntary action. All these phrases capture a wide variety of associational life outside the formal government structures in India.

It is estimated that there are more than 1.2 million non-profit organizations in the country, mainly engaged in religious, community service and in education sectors. Most of these organizations are registered under Societies Registration Act 1860. In 1999 – 2000, they cumulatively received Rs 17,922 crores. The share of voluntary organizations' contribution to GDP (gross domestic product) at current prices stood at 14.8 % in 1999 – 2000. Total revenue of the voluntary organizations surveyed amounted to nearly 7.7 % of the total central government's expenditure on social services during that year. As many as 20 million people are associated with these organizations as paid full-time or voluntary staff. Contrary to the general impression that they are dependent on 'foreign funds', more than 50% of these organizations generate their own funds either through fees charged for services, or other ways. Grants and donations from domestic and foreign donors to these organizations constitute only 41.9%. Interestingly, the study revealed that only 7.4% of total receipts of the non-profit voluntary organizations came from foreign donations or grants. About 40.7% of all the households in the country contribute for charitable causes. Only one in 12 voluntary organizations employ more than ten staff; three fourths of the voluntary

organizations have only volunteers or at most one paid staff. It is clear that voluntary sector in India is wide spread, yet invisible (PRIA: 2001).

Voluntary organizations are organized, private (as opposed to government or state) entities that are self-governing, non-profit distributing; they are autonomous; and individuals and groups associate with these organizations out of free will, voluntarily and out of self-choice. Voluntary organizations collectively are referred to as 'voluntary sector'. *Voluntary sector* includes all the initiatives, including those that are organized and those that are not organized, functioning in the realm of 'private' – independent and outside the realm of government or 'public' sector. In other words, these are *private initiatives for public purposes*.

1.1. Evolution of the Voluntary Sector in India

Before Independence, most of the voluntary initiatives were in the nature of charity - poor feeding carried out by traditional institutions such as the monarch, caste and temple. Most of the charitable giving was to the temple for poor feeding or 'dana' for supporting Brahmins. It was not organized, but was mostly individual religious activity. Entry of Christian missionaries secularized 'social work', voluntary engagement in helping others; and such secular 'social work' services were open to all regardless of caste and creed, be they poor, belonging to lower caste, beggars, leprosy affected, blind, widows or orphans. In the process, for the first time, ideas such as equality, rationality, freedom were introduced in the Indian context. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others who were persuaded by these 'new' ideas and values led movements to prohibit "sati", promote widow remarriage and prevent child marriage. By and large, these activities were outside government –

both in princely states as well as in the British territories in India (PRIA:1991).

In the later half of the 1800s, the British enacted several social legislations such as the Societies Registration Act, Indian Trusts Act to facilitate philanthropy and voluntary initiative. This created political space for non-governmental voluntary organizations to function. Beyond providing the legal legitimacy, the colonial government did not take on the responsibility to provide welfare services directly; but allowed sectarian non-sectarian activities to extend various services.

That the government was mainly responsible for physical safety and security of its people, and welfare and well-being of people was the responsibility of the society was the predominant belief at that time. Government or *the state* would only respond to individual requests as a last resort.

During the freedom struggle, major motivation for the voluntary initiatives was patriotism, modernization and humanitarianism but not religion. Establishing a voluntary organization and offering custodial, health care and educational services to those in need of care and protection was an expression of patriotism and modernity (PRIA:1991).

After independence, patriotic fervor continued. And, the leaders, who took part in the freedom movement, felt it was their responsibility to look after people's welfare needs – this was the meaning of 'swaraj' to them. In keeping with this thinking, it was decided that *the state* will have to take responsibility for meeting the needs of the people. However, resource constraint put a limit on what government could do for alleviating poverty and hunger. It was decided that government should take the initiative for accelerating economic growth – both agricultural and industrial. By and large, it was left to the voluntary social organizations to extend welfare services to the needy. At that time, the proportion of the poor in society was so large that voluntary organizations were not in a position to undertake anti-poverty programmes on a mass scale.

Based on their personal interest and association with voluntary organizations, the leaders of the time had assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the voluntary sector well. Despite the recognition of the fact that voluntary organizations were not capable of undertaking welfare programmes on a mass scale, a need was felt to encourage and give direction to the voluntary sector. For this purpose, the Central Social Welfare Board was established in 1951. The Board was to give grants to voluntary organizations to enable them offer a variety of services to women and children. During this period, the role of government in social work was considered to be supplementary to the voluntary sector. Apart from providing the legal frame work and statutory custodial services, government's role was considered to be facilitative and secondary to voluntary initiatives. Likewise Khadi & Village Industries Corporation (KVIC) was setup in the period to remote Khadi & Village in societies in rural areas farming on likelihood or artisans (Tandon:2002:P19).

In the late 1960s, unevenness of performance standards, geographical coverage, inadequate coordination, dependence on the leadership of few individuals, limited resources, non-availability of trained staff that characterized the voluntary sector became a concern. Gradually government's role and responsibilities in providing social welfare services increased and government became a dominant player. Government came to be seen as a welfare state. Slowly, voluntary organizations came to be seen as supplementing and not substituting government (public) welfare provision. Relationship between the government and the voluntary sector became ambivalent relationship because of the characteristics of the voluntary sector. .

In the mid 1960s, the country experienced drought, economic hardship due to fluctuating oil prices, wars with Pakistan and China; and succession of political leadership. At the same time, country had to meet the needs of poor and the disadvantaged. As government response was considered inadequate to meet the drought situation, for the first time, foreign funding agencies entered the country to support famine and poor relief work; these agencies were fundamentally different from Christian missionaries. These voluntary organizations were identified by foreign donor agencies and urged by them to adopt participatory management practices; they emphasized integrated approach; they drew the attention of their partner agencies to the issues related to poverty, environment and women. This marked a shift in the nature of voluntary sector - voluntary organizations adopted development approach and started focusing on employment generation and capacity building activities – which was different from remedial, custodial and charity approach. That is, for the first time, poor and disadvantaged were seen as 'capable', provided there was some support from outside.

During the post-Nehruvian era, that is, after the mid 1960s, people's expectation from government coupled with rising aspirations compelled government to introduce populist welfare programmes. Many voluntary organizations were used to deliver these populist welfare services and they became heavily dependent on government patronage and grants. NGOs became dependent on government grants despite the rigidity of government funding policies and procedures. There was no balance between preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitation services; flexibility and pioneering spirit of the voluntary action was lost to a great extent. During this period, however, religious voluntary organizations remained relatively untouched by these developments, retained their autonomy and continued to provide substantial services in education and health sectors.

J P (Jayprakash Narayan) movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s had empowered poor people to fight oppression and assert their right. This period saw an expansion in the flow of non-government sectarian and non-sectarian international development aid to voluntary initiatives. Many voluntary organizations were able to function independent of government. Thus, there were those that were dependent on government grant and those that were not.

In the mid1970s, government shifted from selective approach to universal coverage on massive scale - adopted community based multi-purpose integrated development approach for various reasons; the main reasons being political unrest and governability. When government briefly adopted anti-people measures as a response to political unrest, and democracy was briefly threatened in 1975-76, non-party political formations emerged and addressed the political system as a whole. They did not limit themselves to narrow focus of 'service delivery'. 'Service delivery' was left to typical NGOs; and thus non-party political formations created political space for ordinary people to question the government - a feature of healthy vibrant democracy (Lokayan, 1988).

The mid 1970s to mid 1980s period saw the rise of non-party political formations. They were not formally registered voluntary organizations. They not only questioned the government's right to take unilateral decisions concerning development strategies and projects, but also raised questions about the impact of the development projects on the poor, marginalized, women, SCs, STs, environment, and management of natural resources. This period witnessed an increase in the flow of funds despite the fact that government introduced a law (Foreign Contributions Regulation Act 1976) to monitor the flow of foreign funds for development.

This period also is marked by the rise of voluntary groups which were involved in social action and advocacy that used non-violent civil disobedience methods to improve the delivery system of public welfare services such as poverty alleviation programmes. For example, they successfully persuaded state government to introduce employment guarantees scheme as a poverty alleviation measure for people living in drought affected region. During this period, voluntary organizations realized the need for networking for bringing about changes in the system – for formulating the law, rules for implementation,

for ensuring payment of minimum wages, gender justice. Often funding organizations provided the necessary impetus to networks for bringing about changes in the system (Tandon: 2002).

With the introduction of economic reforms in the 1990s, there was apprehension whether government will reduce allocations to poverty alleviation schemes, whether government grants to voluntary organizations would be reduced and so on. While many of these apprehensions materialized, liberalization, privatization and globalization unleashed new challenges and opportunities. Government started involving the voluntary organizations for implementing large development projects. And, as government grants were gradually drying up, to access government grant, some voluntary organizations took up contracts for implementing these large development projects such as creating awareness among people about sanitation, water conservation and so on.

During the last decade, income tax laws became more stringent. It was no longer possible to donate anonymously; donors came under tax net; service tax became applicable to voluntary organizations. Restrictions regarding investment of unspent grants have always been there. While interest rates fell, these restrictions compelled voluntary organizations to spend the grants for the purpose for which they were given within the specified period. These developments gave rise to network of auditors and other professionals associated with voluntary organizations to lobby with government for a considerate treatment so as to prevent constriction of voluntary sector.

By the end of the 20th century, many Voluntary areas had become more professionalized in the functioning, as complex projects were being implemented by them and donors & government were demanding greater compliance with “results based management”.

Over the decades, with the break up of the former Soviet Union, US domination, internal changes in China, break up of former Yugoslavia, demise of apartheid in South Africa, economic reforms in Brazil, reunion of the Germanys, formation of European Union, intensification of threat of terrorism, civil unrest in Egypt, Tunisia, Libiya and other north African Arab countries, and other developments, official development aid (both bilateral and multi-lateral) and non-government aid (both sectarian and non-sectarian) have been sometimes linked to strategic interests of donor countries. There were changes in the volume and pattern of flow of foreign development funds in keeping with the changes in the

international relations and, depending on exchange rates, volume of fund flow fluctuated. The process of Indianization of some of the non-government foreign donor agencies was initiated in the 1990s. This meant, Indian counter parts of some of these foreign non-government donor agencies had to raise a good proportion of required resources locally in India. Some of the new private banks' community service wings found it safe to 'give' either to these Indianised foreign funding agencies directly or to encourage their customers to donate to them by giving their customers incentives.

Corporate social support to voluntary organizations, however, has been uneven and episodic. In the service sector of the economy, especially in the IT, ITES and financial services sectors, the companies offer a variety of social services to their own well paid employees to retain them; that left little to spare for informed giving or partnering with voluntary organizations.

During the nineties, innovative new voluntary organizations were able to attract large IT companies' support for their primary school education and primary health sector projects. And the voluntary organizations were able to scale up with corporate support. In fact, voluntary organizations in the newly formed states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, states like Rajasthan, Orissa and Hindukhush Himalayan mountain areas (due to increasing natural disaster arising from climate change) had attracted the attention of corporates and have received support in the first decade of 2000s. Although a recent study found that causes like the new health issues -HIV/AIDS, education (both primary school, technical and higher professional education) monopolized corporate support, new areas such as environment, conservation of common natural resources, organic farming have received strategic support from corporates to earn credits in the emerging carbon market. Despite encouragement for corporates to assume social responsibility, only large business houses with a good track record have substantial programme of partnering with voluntary organizations in a sustained way.

Historically, establishment of public trusts and informed philanthropy have been encouraged in India. Large public trusts have grown bigger in size and enjoy disproportionate influence in democratic decision making processes. A good proportion of small private family trusts languish in a state of suspended animation. Neo rich middle class families have established private family trusts and have started helping the needy directly without the intermediation of voluntary organizations.

Liberalization and privatization introduced in the 1990s had an impact on the way government viewed voluntary organizations. In the absence of one single standard regulatory body, government was finding it a challenge to tame or regulate the voluntary sector; it had become difficult to predict from where, when, and in which way support or dissention about implementation of development projects would crop up. It was always suspected that voluntary organizations instigate and organize such protest. In the initial years they were seen more as barriers to development by government than as partners. On the part of voluntary organizations, it had become increasingly difficult for the voluntary action groups to challenge the government's policies that adversely affected the poor and the marginalized in the liberalized, privatized and globalized contexts because they are required to intervene at every stage of policy formulation- not only at the formulation stage but also at the implementation stage and to sustain the pro-people pro-poor policies and programmes implementation over a period of time.

Wide variety of associational life outside the formal government structures in India not only brings out the complexity of the voluntary sector, but also brings out the prospect that setting goals for sustainable development and choosing the strategy to achieve them in the context of diversity is also a complex process; and that voluntary organizations have the potential to be of assistance to the government in the process as voluntary organizations are innovative and effective. But government finds it difficult to partner with them because they are unable to scale up their operations for various reasons. But, both voluntary organizations and government have found that it was possible to work jointly in locality specific development projects. To assist government implement large multi-laterally funded development projects or projects funded by public sector companies (like ONGC, SAIL, GAIL, HPCL, BPCL, RCF< etc) who have been required to spend 2% of their net profit on CSR, voluntary organizations are required to compete for the contracts from government. In this scenario, procedures for accessing government and non-government, national, international and local resources have increasingly become competitive. This is a new funding relationship between government and voluntary organizations and involves long drawn out paper work to establish the voluntary organization's credibility; after accessing resources from various sources, they have to submit to periodic monitoring of implementation by them; they have to be accountable to multiple funding sources; the entire process of this kind of engagement has become tedious and time-consuming. This kind of engagement requires quantification of the impact and result of their work. Many

voluntary organizations have neither the expertise nor the resources for this kind of engagement with the government. While most voluntary organizations comply with all the terms and conditions, there are some black sheep. And, not all those voluntary organizations which are black listed for misappropriation and unethical practices do so deliberately with an idea of swindling public resources given in good faith. A good proportion lands itself in trouble either with the government and/or with their donors due to lack of experience or knowledge and expertise. It must be kept in mind that few voluntary organizations' disrepute is attributed to the entire sector.

In this process, large professionally and financially sustainable voluntary organizations – the so called 'corporate' NGOs - have been able to survive. Others have either faded away or, continue to struggle for survival. This has given rise to a debate about the credibility of the voluntary sector as whole in India. It is a challenge therefore, for managers of the voluntary organizations to know how to mobilize resources, implement development programmes and be accountable to multiple stake-holders at the same time.

1.2. Importance of the Voluntary Sector

Voluntary organizations have an important role in society. Apart from delivering a variety of services, they reach out to people who do not ordinarily have access to these services and/or the government. Being very close to people, the voluntary organizations are in a position to identify not only the unmet needs, but also are able to deliver services at reasonable cost, at the right time, at the right place, in right quantity and quality, especially to *marginalized* people. Voluntary organizations benefit from the indigenous knowledge of the people and hence are effective. People with whom voluntary organizations work trust them because of their commitment and missionary zeal.

Given the caste, class and democratic decision making system, voluntary organizations link the marginalized people and government; and help politicize the issues pertaining to weaker sections which otherwise will not ordinarily be heard by the government. Voluntary organizations are innovative in making the voice of the poor heard; in mobilizing indigenous resources; in simplifying policies and procedures; in building capacity of marginalized people to participate in the political processes that development process unleashes; in organizing the marginalized groups; in mobilizing public opinion in support of weaker deprived sections; and in providing incentive for the marginalized sections to participate in

democratic governance and development processes. In short, they contribute to building social trust necessary for harmony in society among people.

In a democracy, the society defines the ends and the means to achieve the ends. Society creates political space for voluntary organizations to exist and function by adopting various laws and voluntary organizations in turn create political space for people, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, the exploited to dialogue with their representatives and the government. The voluntary organizations take up individual cases or cases of vulnerable groups with the government and advocate on their behalf. In this way, voluntary organizations define and redefine what is private and what is public; what is personal and political; what an issue and a non-issue is. Voluntary organizations as a whole broaden the scope of politics and the forum for peoples' participation that enables the rulers and the ruled talk to one another. Voluntary organizations work with the people in the non-party, non-electoral political spaces and processes so that people can assert their sovereignty and have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

In short, voluntary organizations help government in taking diverse people's needs, opinions into account while making policies, programmes, implementing them and in the process of governance. They contribute to inclusive, sustainable development by making marginalized people feel part of society – develop a sense of belonging and a sense of significance in society. Voluntary organizations work for promoting the dignity and human rights of marginalized people as citizen. Some voluntary organizations work closely with the government and complement the governments' efforts; some reform the government by cooperating with it in formulating policies, implementing welfare programmes, building capacity and getting feed back; and lastly, some voluntary organizations oppose the government when its policies and implementation strategies are harmful, unsustainable, unfair, and deliberately denied. This way, voluntary organizations individually, as members of civil society, and collectively contribute to the promotion of equity, social justice, democracy and social harmony. However, scholars like Deepanker Gupta opine that the voluntary sector does not have a significant role in a globalizing context.

It can be understood from the foregoing discussion that voluntary sector does more than provide human, welfare and other services. The voluntary sector also affects the balance of power among social groups and between them and the state. The shape and size of the voluntary sector in a country is a product of power relationships among a variety of socio-

economic and political groups and institutions. According to this argument, the size, form and relationship of voluntary sector to other institutions, especially government have been shaped by outcomes of these power relationships between socio-economic classes, socio-demographic groups (ethnic, religious etc), state bureaucracies, political parties, religious institutions and international relations, especially at critical moments such as the era of rapid industrialization, independence from colonial rule, formation of a new nation-state and democratization. These critical moments often set a path that institutional actors, including civil society voluntary organizations follow for many years. Choices about whether to rely on market, the voluntary sector or state provision for key services are not simply made freely by individual consumers or service providers as the motivation and preference theories seem to imply. These choices are heavily constrained by prior patterns of historical developments that have been shaped by complex inter-relationships among social strata and social institutions.

1.2.1 Different names of voluntary organizations and their ideological bases

Different components of the voluntary sector do not relate one another nor do they see themselves as part of the whole. They also represent contradictions. Some of them offer services to a broad spectrum of population, are not restricted to poor and the needy; as such, they charge fee for their services according to beneficiaries' ability to pay. Many voluntary organizations established by religious persuasions often are not limited to serving people belonging to their respective religious faith only. Many social movements see themselves as locally and ideologically motivated and reject being identified as NGOs (non-government organizations) without reference to their long term political goals. Those organizations engaged in sports, leisure time, art and culture, consumer protection, micro-credit and savings activities, trade unions, cooperatives often are not generally included under the 'voluntary organization' phrase. Many business houses and industries have established separate public or private trusts as part of their corporate social responsibility or to benefit from tax exemptions.

Recently, phrases like 'civil society organizations (CSOs)', 'third sector' have gained currency. Usage of these phrases began in the 1990s after the disintegration of former Soviet Union and in the political context of China. While state, market and civil society explain the institutional space in which different individuals, groups and organizations are active, it is in the sphere of 'civil society' that 'voluntary organizations' 'voluntary sector'

'voluntary action' is situated. Because they work within the norms of 'civil society' and provisions of the Constitution, they are often referred to as civil society organizations. Others, like the Naxalite groups, reject the Constitution and use any means, including violence to achieve their objectives; therefore they are neither considered 'civil' nor are they considered to be part of 'civil society'. When a reference is made to 'civil society organizations', the underpinning ideology is that civil society is autonomous and sovereign.

Sometimes 'civil society organizations' and/or 'voluntary organizations' are referred also as 'third sector'. Reference to voluntary sector as 'third sector' in India is recent and not common. 'Third sector' refers to those initiatives and organizations that are active in civil society as against political institutions and organizations active in the realm of 'state' and economic institutions and organizations active in the realm of 'market'. The triumvirate - state, market and civil society are not mutually exclusive entities. Because of overlapping membership, it is possible for a person to be a member of state, market and civil society at the same time. There are conceptual unclarity because of the fact that state, market and civil society are not mutually exclusive. (PRIA 2002)

Political instability becomes a distinct possibility when the norms and needs of people are decided by the rulers who are not amenable to suggestion; there is a gap between norms and needs of people and the rulers, and when the rulers do not take the norms and needs of people into consideration while making decisions that affect large sections. That society would lag behind in human development. Political instability in one country can cause disturbance in other countries as it happens in dictatorships and military rule. Financial institutions, investors and multilateral funding agencies, who normally work through the government, feel the necessity to reach out to the civil society, ordinary citizens' groups, and entrepreneurs to extend a helping hand when they no longer can trust the rulers or the government due to political instability. It is in this context that voluntary organizations came to be referred to as 'non-government organizations'. Democracy, freedom, equality, dignity, entitlements, rights, social justice and sovereignty of people are some of the ideas and ideals underlying the concept 'non-government organizations'. 'Non-government' stands for autonomy from government – free to hold its own; not dependent.

Currently, voluntary organizations are also referred as 'non-profit organizations'. This concept arose in the context of liberal and neo-liberal ideologies and in the context of unabashedly capitalist countries like the USA. Poor relief and charity are Victorian ideas. The

Victorian legacy has been incorporated in their tax laws; organizations engaged in charity and poor relief are exempted from income-tax; and they enjoy other concessions by virtue of the fact that they raise their resources by soliciting donations and not by collecting taxes. The laws governing and regulating their activities prohibit them from making 'profit'. In the interest of sustainability, in case they earn 'income', if it is ploughed back into poor relief, it is not treated as 'profit' or 'taxable income'. Thus, 'non-profit' refers to their status in the tax laws as non-commercial legal entities. When voluntary organizations are referred as 'non-profit organizations', it is indicative of neo-liberal ideological position. It means that any 'income' earned by the voluntary organization is to be viewed with suspicion if it is not used for poor relief and charity.

It is important to understand the ideology underlying various names by which voluntary sector/organizations are known. It helps in understanding their financial management and accountability practices. Several scholars have attempted to categorize voluntary organizations. But none are comprehensive to include the entire gamut of individuals, groups, initiatives and organizations engaged in welfare work. There have been several attempts in the past to enforce a common '**code of conduct**' and the debates around the 'code of conduct' generated several labels such as Government promoted NGO (GONGO), big NGO (BINGO), Voluntary Action Groups (VOLAGS), Peoples' Organizations (POs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), International NGO (INGOs) and so on. The GOI formulated National Policy on Volunteer Sector in July 2007. Regardless of how they are referred, all voluntary organizations, even those that are loosely organized and/or unregistered abide by certain norms and laws. The conceptual overlap and gaps can be seen in the way laws applicable to voluntary action in India treat them. These conceptual overlap and gaps also have implications for financial management and accountability. However, it is important to note that voluntary organizations can earn income and make profit provided they use it for the achievement of their objectives.

1.2.2 Laws Relating to Voluntary organizations

In India, voluntary organizations are required to register under any one of the five laws to get formally recognized and accepted by society as legitimate entities:

- ❖ ***The Societies Registration Act 1860***
- ❖ ***The Indian Trusts Act 1882***
- ❖ ***The Co-operative Societies Act 1904***
- ❖ ***The Trade Union Act 1925***
- ❖ ***Section 25 of the Indian Companies Act 1956***

Most of the voluntary organizations are registered under the Societies Registration Act and/or the Indian Trusts Act. There are organizations that not registered under any law for ideological reasons. Advantages and disadvantages of registering an organization under any one or two laws are discussed in the chapter on legal framework. It is to be noted that states have their own version of the above laws and the rules may differ from state to state.

In addition to registration, voluntary organizations have to comply with Income Tax Act, other tax laws, Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, labour welfare laws, laws pertaining to human rights, rights of women, persons with disability, children, mental health, etc in their day-to-day operations.

1.3. Voluntary Organizations' Role in Promoting Inclusive Sustainable Development

The 1980s and the 1990s have seen an unprecedented growth of voluntary organizations in India. While voluntarism has been there for a long time, modern voluntarism is different from the conventional voluntarism in form, content, intent and impact. Conventional voluntarism was primarily aimed at charity, relief, social welfare, delivery of social/welfare services and social reform. It sprang out of religiosity, generosity, patriotism and altruism. Modern voluntarism, while incorporating some of the elements of conventional voluntarism, is based on ideology rather than idealism. It aims at achieving development with social justice, development without deprivation, inclusive development, and sustainable development. Within this broad mission, activities, approaches, ideologies, methods, forms of organizations, strategies differ widely. The variety is so wide that they cannot be neatly

fitted into different categories. Underlying all this variety and divergence is the mission of social transformation.

Some voluntary organizations are large; some work directly with people at the grass roots; some perform support functions of research, documentation, maintaining data bases about useful information for the voluntary organizations and training; some implement concrete development projects; some mobilize people to demand their entitlements, justice and rights; some replicate and expand; some experiment and demonstrate; some collaborate with government and industry; and some work independently. There are several ways of looking at the modern voluntary organizations. Viewed from the perspective of impact, they can be considered as performing three roles.

1.3.1 Roles of voluntary Organizations

Broadly, they can be labeled as '**developmental**', '**mobilizational**' and '**political roles**'.

Voluntary organizations doing **developmental work** aim to improve the quality of life of the marginalized sections. Most of the voluntary organizations are found to be engaged in service delivery. It is this type that receives legitimacy and generally receives support from government and international agencies. This type of voluntary organizations take on one or more concrete developmental activities in selected locations, for selected beneficiary groups, extending education, health, agriculture, housing, savings and credit, conservation of common natural resources etc selected services. Mahajan (1999) calls them public service contractors, collaborators or innovators. Because these organizations work with limited funds, human resources, their size is small; they are open minded; they are flexible; they are pro-people oriented; and hence, they experiment and innovate. Amazingly creative and innovative, they have contributed to new ways of delivering services – community based rehabilitation, indigenous systems of medicine, participatory management, folkways of mass communication; unstructured pedagogy; community health; self-help groups; they cover technical, managerial, social and all aspects of development. They are able to reach the unreachable and overcome resistance. This has enabled them to earn a special place of their own. Despite these achievements, their overall impact is marginal. This is because they are not able to scale up, replicate, and sustain. However, they create political space for themselves and provide valuable feed back on government policies and programmes.

The second category, voluntary organizations engaged in **mobilization** work - they build capacities, self reliance, and empower and facilitate people's participation. Basically, they believe that, unless people become capable and active, development cannot take place. Their approach does not perceive people as passive recipients of benefits and services, but as equal active partners demanding their rights from the government and society. They basically provide information, education and training; they develop awareness, conscientize, livelihood skills in the beneficiaries; they help people get organized. Some also engage in direct non-violent action like street protests and petitioning. Such organizations fight for better/equal wages, better prices for their produce, freedom from bondage, fishing rights, forest rights etc of the people with whom they work. This type of work is helpful in developing self esteem and self confidence in marginalized people as citizen like others. Their impact is generally locality and issue specific; does not result in radical structural change. Government has learnt to deal with this kind of organizations by using pressure tactics.

The third type, **non-party political formations** are not formally organized; they are nebulous groups and drawing individuals cutting across class, caste, urban/rural, gender, occupational differences around an issue that might not directly have an impact on their lives. In the face of failure of the democratic institutions such as the legislature, executive, political parties, trade unions, these formations locate alternate spaces for people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. They redefine democratic politics. They are active in development politics that go beyond legislatures, parties and elections. They attempt to politicize development issues that otherwise would not have made it to the political agenda. Some example of this type of organization are National Alliance of People's Movement, and South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies. However, this kind of work requires tremendous energy and has been difficult to consistently sustain over decades.

There are good reasons for the voluntary organizations to get involved in advocacy. Charity or direct delivery of services is not enough because charitable efforts cannot substitute for public policies that ensure opportunities and dignity. Some problems like rights and entitlements require more than just individual efforts because government policies affect everyone. Democracy is not a cricket game that voluntary organizations can sit back and watch. Every voluntary organization has a role – informing as many people as possible, writing to elected representatives, organizing a campaign etc - for ensuring that people's rights are respected and for ensuring sustainable inclusive development. If the government

laws and policies prevent the poor and persons in difficulty from accessing services, the voluntary organizations working in the area have to find out more about the problem, discuss how to take it up with the government and/or private facility and bring about necessary changes. Seen from this perspective, the voluntary organizations' role is not limited to delivery of services, but also to bring about social transformation, changes necessary to give effect to equality and social justice goals enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Rajesh Tandon (2002) describes the primary roles for voluntary sectors as 1. Service providers, 2 Development promoters and 3 Support providers. He also points out three important functions of Voluntary Organisation involved in national development (2002 a). This can be discussed below.

1. **Innovation:** Voluntary organizations have been experimenting with new ways of promoting more sustainable people- centered development. Through flexible and 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 internationally. Many national development programs of Government of India based on such innovations promoted by voluntary organisations, include hand pump for drinking water, literacy, primary health care, bio gas, community-forestry and in recent years Self-Help Groups (SHG)

2. **Empowerment:** Through awareness-raising conscientisation, and organisation building, voluntary organisations have empowered women, dalits, tribes, slum-dwellers, rural poor and many others to understand their rights and obligations. Most significant contributions of empowerment can be seen on such issues as minimum wages, bonded labor, child labor, access to government schemes, land patta, ration cards, housing rights, access to customary rights on forests and water by tribals, etc.

3. **Research and Advocacy:** On a number of issues of concern to human welfare, many intermediary voluntary organisations in India have undertaken significant public education and policy advocacy through their sustained research. The issues of human, tribals and dalits have become part of national policy largely due to the sustained research and advocacy by the voluntary organisations.

In a democracy, where every voice counts, doing nothing is a political act – it is a vote for no change. Staying out of the process means that policies/laws will get passed/implemented without reflecting the priorities and rights of those for whom the voluntary organizations claim to speak. And elected people's representatives are people too; often they have never been exposed to poor people or their needs, neither do they have time to get to know the needs of the marginalized. Unless voluntary organizations who 'feel the pulse of the people' tell the elected representatives what the problems are, the representatives have no paid staff to find out what problems poor people, who are also voters, experience. Elected representatives need to be exposed to the needs of the poor.

'Advocacy' literally means pleading the cause of others. Social advocacy assumes that people have enforceable rights. Policy advocacy, the next logical step in the process of delivering services, carries the unmet needs into the political arena. It is concerned with ensuring that institutions work the way they should. Advocacy is to speak up; help those who are entitled to benefits get them; and challenge government systems when they do not work.

Advocacy depends on lessons learned in the process of living: how power is wielded, how people are motivated and how the powerful are influenced. Social advocacy is about how to voice needs of the poor, ensure that the government systems are accessible, they work effectively, and if they do not work, how necessary changes can be effected.

Advocacy asks something of others – individuals, groups, and institutions; puts demands into political and policy terms; deals with issues that otherwise would not be dealt with; engages people who come to realize that they are stake-holders interested in the issue; initiates, innovates and invents political systems, procedures and criteria.

Advocacy converts a private issue into a political issue; an individual problem into a social or a public problem; creates political space for public debate. Public argument requires documentation and analysis; developing a story through narratives and pictures; and gaining public acceptance.

Advocacy creates political space for public debate and consultation; in the process power relationships get shifted. Advocacy works in different arenas within this space. Some of these arenas are: networks, ad hoc alliances, long-term coalitions, media, legislature,

government bureaucracy, courts, donors and other stake holders. To work in each of these arenas, voluntary organizations must know the system – the structure (who has authority, who reports to whom, decision making procedure etc), functions (what are the prescribed legal duties, who are responsible for different duties etc), character (background of each person), what are the informal groups/power centres, who influences whom etc), and limitations (legal, budgetary, personal, political etc). Advocates also should have certain skills and resources to make an effective public argument.

This means anticipating how different stake-holders are likely to use the system, what tools they are likely to use to deter or counter the efforts of the advocacy groups. Once the advocacy groups start working in different arenas at the same time, the advocacy group starts using its planned strategy to pressurize the decision makers, to face the opponents, and take tough stands. Unpredictability of the situation makes it not only challenging, but also springs surprises.

Engaging in advocacy builds voluntary organization's confidence in itself and in the system; enables individual members of the advocacy group understand public decision making processes; enables members of the advocacy group recognize that contributions come from different individuals, sources and that all are needed; enables members of the advocacy group learn to convert a private individual problem into a wider social issue; and enables voluntary organizations learn to address wider audience by using various communication methods; enables members of the voluntary organizations and advocacy group overcome isolation and feel the value of being part of something larger than the sum of parts. Engaging in advocacy is an expression of being political and discharging one's public democratic responsibilities. Such engagement enables voluntary organizations as members of the advocacy group and their organizations understand and use of their own sources of power.

By engaging in public arena, the individual and the organization are connecting with other individuals and organizations. These associations exert influence and power because relationships are about tangible and intangible expressions of that power. The challenge is to find an opening in the political and policy system and a source of power for the members and their organizations. This power can be strengthened by ensuring accuracy of information gathered.

The power to punish and reward serves as a great energizer if used well in an open democracy like ours. The power to reward can flow simply from positive, public recognition. The power to punish can flow from simply publicizing the public servant's absence or avoidance during critical decision making occasions. The use of such power, or just the threat of it, enables members of the voluntary organizations as members of advocacy group negotiate with the legislators, government officials, the media etc. Raising an issue publicly gives voluntary organizations as members of the advocacy group power. This power enables voluntary organizations as members of the advocacy group set the political public agenda. In the long run, it creates political space for questioning public decisions that affect the lives of common people and ensuring inclusive sustainable development.

Voluntary organizations can sharpen public differences or negotiate a compromise. Either can be appropriate; neither is right or wrong. For taking up issues from the village to the national level requires voluntary organizations as members of the advocacy group to obtain and synthesize information, collect anecdotes and stories, create own information, disseminate information to larger public in an understandable way. All this brings to the arena of public decision making the qualities that strengthen what is expected of a democratic society:

- That voluntary organizations have a role to play in the political process
- That voluntary organizations are independent of political parties
- That advocacy is a process and not an end itself
- That advocacy requires multiple tools
- Voluntary organizations mobilize people's participation but do not limit themselves to mobilization
- Advocacy groups apply pressure on official bodies, thereby challenge the existing power relationships
- Changes sought rarely move in straight line
- Changes sought are rarely sweeping, but added together, they are greater than the sum of the parts. Also in this context see Khan Azeez Mehndi, (1997)

What is important is finding ways of using civil society's power on matters and values that are held as important; connecting in ways that are familiar and unfamiliar for the sake of improving the lives of those who are in the fringes. Dignity has its own power that deserves respect.

Self Assessment Questions:

- 1. What are the characteristics of the three types of voluntary organizations?***
- 2. Why is it important for voluntary organizations to engage in advocacy work?***
- 3. What are the financial implications when voluntary organizations get involved in advocacy work?***
- 4. What characteristics of voluntary organizations distinguish them from private sector business organizations?***
- 5. What are the different types of voluntary organizations and discuss their strengths and weaknesses?***
- 6. List the laws under which voluntary organizations can be registered?***
- 7. What are the ideologies underlying the concepts - 'non-profit organizations', 'civil society organizations', 'non-government organizations'? Why is 'voluntary organizations' preferred?***