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Identity and Its Challenges for the Voluntary Sector in India

By
Dr. Rajesh Tandon

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It is indeed an honour for me to be able to join you on this occasion of VANI's Annual Convention. There are several challenges facing us in the voluntary sector as we gather today. I would like to take this opportunity to share my views on the role of voluntary sector in addressing issues of Food Security , as well as the wider challenges underpinning the present reality.

Food Security:

I want to suggest that many dimensions of the central theme of this convention food security – need to be addressed simultaneously. The issue of food security, as you all understand , is not merely a question of availability of food. It is a question of access by vulnerable families and communities in our society. Vulnerability in our sector takes myriad forms based on caste , religion , economic activity , asset holding , gender , age , location of residence, access to education and political resources.

People in rural areas who are landless, who are tribals in remote degraded ecological zones, women headed households, children without parents , or single parent, migrant labourers in urban centres, muslim minority groups and illiterate dalit, tribal and minority families are the most vulnerable in respect to food security issues in our society today. The government's solution to the so-called "food Problem" in the last fifty years has been to segment the production of main food crops, wheat and rice, in certain pockets of the country , to acquire them centrally and store them in huge godowns. That is the source of the irony that hundreds of godowns filled with food grains today co-exist with widespread hunger and insecure livelihoods for millions of families in this country.

One of the possible issues to address in this regard is decentralised . locally relevant, locally managed and locally production and distribution of food , at least from the point of view of feeding the family and the community , if not from the point of view of generating surplus to be transacted in the market economy. This has now been possible through the significant amendments to our constitution via 73rd and 74th Amendments. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and municipalities are mandated in our Constitution to become institutions of local self-governance, responsible for a host of issues, including assuring food security to all residents in their jurisdiction.

Local Bodies:

It is hoped that strategies to realise this potential of PRIs and municipalities as institutions of local self-governance will be a core thrust of our debates in the coming days. It is also hoped that state governments would vigorously pursue timely , free and fair elections to these bodies as here in Uttaranchal and Jharkhand (the only state which has not had constitutionally mandated local body elections since 1993). The state governments should also vigorously devolve functions , functionaries and finances to these local bodies in rural and urban areas appropriate to their level of governance. The fact that this is a tall order , as witnessed in many other states, including those proclaimed as " wonders" like Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, should not deter us from pursuing it vigorously.

The issue of food security needs to be examined in the context of local ecological realities and resources. This will be possible by devolving to local bodies the mandate to manage and control all natural resources within their jurisdictions. Unless panchayats and municipalities manage them for their own locally relevant priorities

and plans, even regeneration and nurturance of those natural resources will not occur. Panchayat Raj Institutions, therefore, must have complete jurisdiction over land, water, forest and mining resources within their area, in order for this issue of food security to be addressed on a long-term basis. This is even more pertinent here in Uttaranchal and all other hill states as we acknowledge and celebrate this year as International Year of Mountains by the United Nations.

Civil Society Action:

But the larger question of how this will happen remains to be addressed. How it will happen? not merely by political will, not merely by the goodwill, maturity and wisdom of a few leaders, like our honourable chief guest here. Not merely by the clever design and implementation of paper-work done by sensitive and committed bureaucrats. It will only happen when individuals and collective of local people, in particular those of the vulnerable groups, would organise themselves to manage their affairs, on the one hand, and to influence others whose actions affect them. This is where role of civil society becomes relevant and important.

Voluntary associations and agencies, particularly those involved in development efforts, as most of us are in this hall here, are a small, but important, subset of a vast mosaic of civil society in our country. This development-oriented voluntary sector must initiate the task of engaging with various stakeholders in order to ensure that panchayat raj institutions and municipalities become institutions of local self-governance. This implies that development-oriented voluntary sector must define its own mandate, mission, and identity in a manner that is distinctive and autonomous, suited to the particular requirements of the socio-ecological zones of its operations.

However, the reality on the ground has dramatically changed in the last decade. Many large-scale development programmes of national and state governments, supported by international agencies, are now demanding active participation of voluntary agencies in project implementation. Many voluntary organisations join in the implementation of these projects of the government. For many voluntary agencies, this becomes the prime task and the most significant part of their resource-base. Over the years, the nature of these voluntary organisations become a mere project sub-contractor, and thereby undermines their ability to pursue their autonomous and independent identity and strategies, including those which call upon them to challenge, question, critique and oppose (if needed) the strategies of the government and international bodies.

Identity:

There is, therefore, the urgent task of regenerating our autonomous identity with a clear mission and strategy. This can only happen when voluntary organisations regenerate their independent and autonomous roots in society where they operate, and speak to those sections of society which have the possibility to contribute resources towards their tasks and agendas. Sole dependence on project funds of various government schemes and programmes represents extreme constraints on their ability to create an autonomous identity.

There is another vast section of civil society which is presently neither organised as a sector nor coherent in its identity. PRIA has been involved in a major study on collecting primary data on the non-profit in India. The results of the study from several states indicate that a large section of such associations remains informal, organised, but legally not registered. These community based associations,

citizens' groups and informal networks represent a huge pool of energy, commitment and resources which need to be mobilised to the basic task of addressing a secure and purposeful life of dignity for all our citizens. Engaging with such associations requires ability on our part to acknowledge their existence and to relate to them in ways that mobilise them towards a common agenda.

Traditional associations, 'bhajan Mandalies', youth groups, and professional bodies like lawyers' associations, teachers' associations and students' and youths associations all exist but many a times operate in incoherent, and at times mutually conflictful, manner. This is where civil society contribution can be enlarged and enhanced, if development oriented voluntary sector takes the lead in reaching out to them. In this task of reaching out, special efforts need to be made to reach out to social organisations of minority communities. Muslim social organisations remain "ghettoised" and do not have the possibility of interacting with many other civil society actors involved in a wide spectrum of development initiatives. Once again the beginning has to be made by more informed and proactive development oriented voluntary sector so that further linkages may be established with social organisations exclusively and largely working with minority families and communities.

Strong Platform:

In all these efforts the role of networks, associations, federations, and platforms becomes crucial. It is in this context that VANI as one of the main associations of development-oriented voluntary organisations in the country needs to perform some important roles at this juncture. Arising out of the previous analysis, the key challenges for VANI is the need to support its members and other voluntary initiatives to be able to develop, nurture, and project their autonomous identity.

The pressure to become sub-contractors of projects and get "corrupted" in the process of accessing instalments from various government departments and agencies needs to be challenged in a manner that keeps the interest of both the voluntary agencies and the communities in perspective. The challenge must be such that transforms the nature of the projects and their management structures and systems by negotiating with international donors and implementing units and agencies. The challenge should not result in drying up of those project resources or their outright diversion, as it will undermine the very purpose of those project funds on which poor communities still depend.

Increasingly, the manner in which donors, more specifically northern NGO donors, have begun to behave in countries like India needs to be analysed and challenged. It is not uncommon for donors to renege on their contracts in the middle of the project period. In the last couple of years, several national and international donors have asked their partner to voluntarily surrender a three year contract at the end of the year one or two itself, because the donor was unable to have resources that it had committed to. It is also not uncommon to find donor staff dictating, a more hands-on influencing, of project design, implementing structure, management of the voluntary agency and its systems and procedures. Such an approach not only results in contradictions within the voluntary agency, but also undermines the very uniqueness of contributions that such agencies can make.

VANI must, therefore, raise the issue of increased hands-on "interference" by donors and an attempt to take credit for the programmes carried out by voluntary organisations. This typically happens after a strong base and local rootedness has been established by the initiatives of the local group. Instances are also coming to

notice where bilateral or multilateral development projects , being implemented by the government agencies are “ alluring” senior staff of voluntary organisations , at five to ten times of their annual salary , to join the projects implementation mechanisms. This not only undermines the very capacity of voluntary organisations but also in way distorts the labour , which is detrimental for the long terms sustainability of this social and communitarian sector.

Is is important for a platform like VANI to also find ways to engage those who are operating in the environment of the modern corporate enterprise. The for-profit sector must be engaged with , not only from a charitable perspective , but also in order to invoke their zones of responsibility in today’s context. Associations of traders, small merchants, small business, family business organisations, and others are as important in our context as multinational companies and corporate houses. It is this multifarious capacity of engaging and influencing the state and the market and the donors that VANI needs to command today. Only then, enabling positive and respectful environment will be created for voluntary initiatives to develop and flourish.

Laslty , mere registration as a society or a trust does not make a voluntary organisation. It may create an NGO. Most media reports of corruption in the development sector refer to such “NGO”. Engaging the media with positive example of useful impact by the voluntary sector needs to be promoted by platforms like VANI. But before that, governance of our own voluntary organisations needs to be seriously addressed. Transparency and accountability in our own functioning needs to be addressed at our own inittative. Otherwise , many others are ready to “fix” our governance or “establish” our credibility. For that to happen , myraid “empires” and sky-rocking “pride” within the voluntary setor must be enabled to join as collective leadership on ethical foundations.

Can VANI rise to that challenge today?

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Participatory Research in Asia
 42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110062
 Ph:+91-011-29960931/32/33
 Web: www.pria.org