

Reflections on Philanthropy
for Social Justice

A New
Era of
Giving

ISDM CENTRE FOR PHILANTHROPY
FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Small Acts Can Make a Big Impact Too

Various approaches and forms of philanthropy can cohabit in a mutually respectful and supportive manner

DR RAJESH TANDON

GROWING up in a joint family in the city of Kanpur, certain habits were inculcated amongst all children. One of these was savings in a gullak (Hindi for earthen money box). These savings, in paisas, were essentially made from gifts given by visiting relatives or on certain festivals and, occasionally, the loose change pocketed when we were sent to the shops. Every now and then, we were asked to break our gullak — it was the only way to take the money out — and share some of those savings with certain “causes” supported by our family of teachers. Two of the most prominent ones I remember donating to were a local orphanage (where

my mother served on a managing committee) and cultural activities organised in our neighbourhood between Dussehra and Diwali, or Sankranti and Shivratri (two periods — October and February/March — roughly coinciding with autumn and spring seasons in North India).

Little did I realise that this practice will be called charitable giving or philanthropy!

Even back then, many families like ours supported the schooling of children whose parents were providing various services to the family. Organising sports competitions and festivals by collecting donations (chanda) was very common then; it is still a popular practice in North India for Ramlila (and Pujo in Bengal). Wrestling competitions (kushti dangal) with prizes are still organised through donations. Just the other day, a Dahi Handi festival in Mumbai was put up with such funds, including massive prize monies amounting to lakhs of rupees!

This type of giving — of time, skills and monetary contributions, including assets — has been an integral part of Indian society. All religions born and practiced in the Indian subcontinent encourage giving for the wellbeing of the needy. From feeding birds and animals to pyayu, a custom in North India (providing drinking water to passers-by), these are universal practices of giving, much of which is second nature to us. These practices of contributing to the wellbeing of others, a larger societal good, were part of the socialisation of growing up in this region.

In every religion, contribution to society is mandatory for its followers. The concept of dana (voluntary giving) has been the cornerstone of the spirit of volunteerism in India. A noteworthy feature of all major religions has

been the emphasis they placed on charity and sharing of wealth with others, especially the poor and the needy. In all probability, it is the persistence of the above preaching flowing from generations that the psyche of an average Indian has been completely ingrained with the concept of benevolence. Most think that God loves those who feed the hungry and those who give their clothes to the needy.¹

In pre-Independence India, Mahatma Gandhi called upon citizens and the business community to support constructive social work practices to encourage mobilisation of volunteers for the freedom struggle against the British empire. Their support was critical, but it also left many of those businessmen and their enterprises vulnerable to “imperial” harassment and regulation.

This practice of business community members giving back for the benefit of society and helping the needy continues even today.

PART I: 25 years of philanthropy for nation building

During the first 25 years of freedom (1947-72), philanthropic activities continued along the same lines as before Independence. Local giving for immediate and visible causes remained popular. Donation for religious causes, an age-old practice, was a favoured custom during this period too. Construction of temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras was done through charitable giving. In the event of droughts or floods, concerted efforts were made to reach out and mobilise donors. At the time, the channels of contributing towards relief were primarily controlled by the government. I recall how even children were asked to “break their gullaks”

when the then Prime Minister(s) appealed for support during 1962 war with China and 1965 war with Pakistan.

Another stream of charitable giving at that time comprised of support for the hundreds of Gandhian institutions set up across the country during the Freedom Movement. Several such institutions received support from the local business community. Two important public agencies created post-Independence acted as supporters of such local initiatives in that period. In 1953, there was the Central Social Welfare Board to support local efforts in institutionalised care to the needy and “destitutes” — orphans, abandoned women, street children, etc. (Later, state boards were also set up.) Then in 1957, the Khadi and Village Industries Corporation was set up as an independent entity to provide access to credit and act as markets for village industries that had sprung up during the Freedom Movement.

Both these agencies were instituted by the then national government in the belief that local philanthropic efforts for such charitable causes could be strengthened with additional inputs.

The more formally organised “voluntary development” sector (as it was called then) emerged in the second 25-year period after Independence (1972-97).

It may seem as though global giving to causes in India began during this period. But, throughout the Freedom Movement, donors from around the world also supported the nation’s struggles. Education and health programs established by missionaries in India were recipients of foreign aid ever since the subcontinent was colonised (a practice followed in other regions under the British rule as well).

PART II: 25 years of formalising giving

By the mid-1970s, the sociopolitical scenario in India and abroad had changed.

Drought and famine in Bihar (1966-67) preceded a tropical cyclone that devastated coastal Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (1977). The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was followed by the birth of Bangladesh. Soon after, Gandhian socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) launched the Total Revolution movement for social transformation (1974); then came the declaration of Emergency in India (1975).

Subsequently, a widespread unrest in the country due to inability of the government to tackle the problems of general masses resulted in imposition of an Emergency with severe restrictions on the functioning of the nonprofit sector, which was looked upon by the then government with particular suspicion. The post-Emergency phase saw a significant thrust in nonprofit activities, when a large number of development NGOs, founded by young, educated sections of the society, sprung up with the avowed aim of supplementing the development efforts of the country, mostly supported by government funds. Availability of foreign funds since about the same time gave a further boost to the sector, which seems to have grown enormously in the last two decades.²

The promise of Independence — eradication of illiteracy, poverty and exploitation — was nowhere close to being realised. Many young people, educated in independent India and concerned about the uneven development of society, were drawn to a newly emerging space of charitable activity, a formalised philanthropy. Their focus was on issues

of literacy/education, primary/women's health, agriculture/rural livelihoods and Tribal development. These new entities (legally incorporated as "society" and "trust") began to invite somewhat more "systematic donations" from government, private and international sources.

This era also coincided with the rise of the international development "industry". Bilateral and multilateral development assistance, international agenda-setting conferences of the United Nations (UN) and World Bank systems became arenas for development discourses; and new development actors — variously called village development organisations (VDOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc. — now labelled as "civil society" began to emerge in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as well as "developing" countries. A small proportion of international development assistance began to be routed through international NGOs, and their developing country counterparts.

In countries like India, a new generation of independent development actors were creating innovative solutions to practical challenges faced by excluded and marginalised communities. Much of this had the nature of research and development (R&D) and needed flexible resource support. Several government ministries and agencies — Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), Department of Science & Technology, Ministry of Rural Development, etc. — and flexible international philanthropy (mostly through well established foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, etc.) were partnering with these new generation development actors on an ongoing basis to support such innovations. It is no surprise then that a large

number of public policies emerged out of such R&D efforts by independent development actors and ongoing partnerships with government agencies.

The growing visibility of NGOs provoked a series of associated responses. Major international and national development agencies, planners, ideologists and theoreticians had to deal with the NGOs, their roles, positions, behaviours and dynamics — a phenomenon largely missing a decade ago. Most bilateral agencies engaged in providing development aid have started including NGOs in their framework. The same can be said for multilateral institutions and, in recent years, by such bodies as the World Bank. National governments through the length and breadth of the world, have had to deal with the growing visibility of NGOs, in varying degrees.³

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)⁴ itself is a product of this era and part of this phenomenon. Demonstrating the sustainable impact of community participation in development programs, PRIA was instrumental in influencing public policies and programs, from social forestry, watershed development, primary education, women's empowerment to mainstream systems, structures and processes of participation. Flexible resources enabled PRIA to experiment, pilot, demonstrate and then influence public agencies, both national and international, from the mid-1980s onwards.

For example, a component of the scheme or program is implemented by NGOs and certain funds made available in the official development assistance (ODA) are provided to them by the Government of India ... for example, the Dutch government has given a portion of its ODA to

Dutch NGOs (like Cordaid) which in turn finances the programs of southern NGOs (like PRIA in India).⁵

This flexibility to combine public and private resources supported PRIA's nationwide (and Pan-Commonwealth) program entitled "Governance Where People Matter" taking advantage of new constitutional provisions of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). With funding support from the Government of India, Ford Foundation, Cordaid, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), PRIA mobilised nearly 3,000 other NGOs in 27 Indian states to support the development of newly established PRIs.

From structured capacity building workshops for elected representatives of these new bodies to massive awareness campaigns involving community-based organisations (Gram Sabha Mobilisation and Voter Awareness), to participatory research studies and analysis — all efforts were aimed at strengthening both the "demand" and "supply" sides of the local institutions. This meant developing voices from below as well as advocating for strengthening the institutional capacity of these local bodies and representatives to deliver the goods.⁶

PART III: 25 years of supply overshadowing demand

The third phase since Independence — 1997 till present — has witnessed the establishment of a formalised domestic philanthropy.

New generations of entrepreneurial Indians successfully created surplus personal wealth in a "new" global economy driven by the information technology (IT) sector. New forms

of formal philanthropic structures have since emerged, led by this set of Indians based both in India and abroad (mostly from the United States). New international foundations (again, primarily US-based) like Gates, Dell, Omidyar et al., entered the philanthropic “industry” in the country. The movement towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) gained traction nearly 15 years ago; after it became a legal mandate for companies in 2013, CSR has helped mobilise substantial new resources for the philanthropic sector of late.

The transformative potential of mandatory CSR is not limited to the list of activities in Schedule VII of the Act. Its real transformative potential lies in the board of a company to formulate a focused and result-oriented policy for CSR, which is based on a systematic analysis of challenges and gaps in socioeconomic development of the country. Its real potential can be harnessed when the board-led CSR policy of a company aligns its CSR activities to nurturing long-term business environment in the region or country that promotes sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development for all.⁷

Owing to these two factors, the dominant discourse in philanthropy in India today is about scale and impact. Pre-designed packages of “investments” are available for going to scale; essentially, however, they measure coverage in the short run. The language of present-day philanthropy has changed to adopt corporate lexicon, systems and practices as a new generation of philanthropists (with success in commercial enterprise behind them) are increasingly hands-on. These “corporate-style” practices have adopted the funding instruments created by large international bilateral and

multilateral donors in the previous era ... and are now firm believers in the “God of Logframe!”

This style of formally organised, large-scale philanthropy is driving many civil society actors to become primarily “service providers” in a rapidly privatising neo-liberal policy environment. Following deliberate action by the government, most basic services — education, health, water, sanitation, waste disposal, financial inclusion, skilling, etc. — are being turned over to private service providers.⁸ Hence, for these commercial enterprises, an association with nonprofit organisations perhaps ensures difficult-to-reach *customers* (not citizens) in far-flung rural and Tribal areas.

This focus on the “supply-side” of development by large-scale formal philanthropy agencies in India today has shifted support away from “demand-side” interventions — awareness-generation, social mobilisation, community organisation, bottom-up knowledge and the voice of millions who have become increasingly marginalised. Even the most meagre philanthropic resources are unavailable for efforts that generate feedback from below, for new innovations and for advocacy to adapt national programs for contextual differences and diverse needs; this push for a one-size-fits-all approach has only resulted in a waste of resources. Civil society actions towards holding suppliers of services and governance institutions and actors accountable to citizens have been largely disappearing.

In PRIA’s own experience, the scale of mobilisation for inclusive and accountable urban governance attempted since 2011 or so has not been possible, largely because flexible philanthropic resources have not been available for both demand and supply-side interventions by civil society. The nationwide civil society mobilisation to make PRIA effective

(by focusing on both demand and supply-side interventions) that was gathering momentum between 1998-2005 could not be realised when it came to municipal governance and implementation of provisions of 74th Constitutional Amendment (which grants the decentralisation of powers and authorities to the municipal bodies at different levels). The disappointing performance of urban local bodies during the pandemic, and consequent large-scale exodus of migrant workers from cities, only illustrates the lack of investment in strengthening systems of inclusive urban governance in the country till date.

Yet, the pandemic also shone the spotlight on the almost-invisible, small-scale, locally-rooted practices of philanthropy, a tradition described earlier in this essay. Neighbours provided food to residents of informal settlements, volunteers provided medicines to sick families, local animators in far-flung villages translated and disseminated COVID-19 standard precautions and government directives (mostly provided by national government in English through digital platforms). Migrant workers and their families were provided with shoes, water and food as they walked home in the summer heat. Local gurudwaras, temples, mosques and churches offered shelter and food to the needy, and able-bodied middle-class citizens drove sick people to hospitals in their own cars. Volunteers ferried oxygen cylinders to clinics, hospitals and people's homes; local youth organised village quarantine facilities for returning families and workers.

The rise of everyday philanthropy was as momentous, spontaneous and widespread as the COVID-19 infections in India!

Back to the future

These every day, hyper-local, small-scale, family-driven philanthropic efforts are not a part of the national and international discourse on philanthropy. Their stories do not attract attention of policymakers and the media. They remain invisible, informal, below the radar! Yet they are widespread and effective.

The first and only nationwide survey of the nonprofit sector conducted nearly 20 years ago captured this essence of everyday giving in this country. “Nearly 40% of all households give for charitable causes; two-thirds of all givers live in rural areas; two-fifths of all giving households belong to poor households (annual income below ₹25,000); two-fifths of all giving households had education only up to primary levels.”⁹

This trend of household giving received a new impetus during the recent pandemic, as evidenced by the many media reports from all corners of the country.

Whither will Indian philanthropy go in the future?

It is important to acknowledge diversity of practices and forms of philanthropic giving, from everyday charity to fellow citizens to large-scale investments in service provision. The essential challenge for all philanthropy is to link it to the giver’s vision of a desirable future for the community, a sort of “good society”. How does that vision get articulated?

As the momentum for formally organised, large-scale philanthropy gathers speed in the country over the coming years, it may be useful to think about issues raised in a thoughtfully reflective interview by one of these philanthropic leaders in the country.¹⁰

The cultural and historical roots of everyday philanthropy

in India needs as much encouragement, visibility and enabling ecosystem as is being demanded by and provided for the large-scale formalised philanthropic investments. Recognising and valuing this diversity will make philanthropy more sustainable in the years ahead.