

# Voluntary Movements In India: Gandhian Perspectives

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## **Abstract:**

Voluntary organizations are part of a larger civil society. The concept of voluntarism is as old as the mankind itself, whereas Gandhian concepts of voluntary work are the product of the twentieth century. Voluntary or the civil society sector today is comprised of a very diverse group of institutions ranging from those who want to facilitate the development of the poor and the marginalized, to those who run economic and service delivery activities that privatize public institutions and services.

The Voluntary sector has become an inevitable factor in the socio-economic development of the country. Voluntary organizations are part of a larger civil society. The concept of voluntarism is as old as the mankind itself, whereas Gandhian concepts of voluntary work are the product of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Though India had a rich tradition of voluntarism, Mahatma Gandhi's ideas and directives gave a great fillip to the development of voluntary sector during and after independent period. At a micro level, the VOs have positively impacted the lives of the needy, while building a reputation for themselves. At a more macro level, many indigenous organizations along with some international ones, have become highly professional, bringing a lot of credibility to the sector.<sup>2</sup> They have been working on almost all themes and all issues like health, education, sanitation, environment, empowerment of women, children, tribes and marginalized and livelihood. The voluntary or the civil society sector today is comprised of a very diverse group of institutions ranging from those who want to facilitate the development of the poor and the marginalized, to those who run economic and service delivery activities that privatize public institutions and services. The study looks into its historical development and the Gandhian perspectives on voluntarism. It also analyses how Gandhian legacy contributed for the success of the voluntary movement in India.

## **Definition and Nature of VOs**

The social development sector has been defined by various names, NGOs, VOs, Third Sector, Non-profit Sector, Independent sector, Civil Society etc.<sup>3</sup> The origins of the concept of civil society lie in key phases of modernity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. NGOs play different roles and take very different shapes and forms within and across different country contexts. In the Indian context, the most prevalent term used to describe initiatives of this kind is voluntary. Voluntary initiatives, voluntary associations, voluntary agencies, voluntary organizations, etc. describe a wide array of voluntary actions. Predominantly, this usage describes grass root level initiatives. It includes Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Peoples' Organisations (POs), which may be very micro and local in their actions. It also includes individual initiatives that may not mature into an organized entity. Individual voluntary action is a significant part of the Indian terrain and has been so throughout history.

A major impetus for the use of this terminology derives from the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi. His call for constructive social work as a part of struggle for independence from British colonial rule had a major impact in catalyzing voluntary action in India, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

The NGOs have a legal status and they can be registered under a plethora of Acts such as the Societies Act, 1860, Indian Trust Act, 1882, Public Trust Act, 1950, Indian Companies Act, 1956 (section 25), Religious Endowment Act, 1863, The Charitable and Religious Trust Act, 1920, the Mussalman Wakf Act, 1923, the Wakf Act, 1954, Public Wakfs (Extension of Limitation) Act, 1959, etc. and the specific Act under which they have to be registered depend upon the nature and scope of their activities and objectives.<sup>5</sup> There exists however, a large number of VOs working at the grass-roots level which remain formally unregistered. Registered VOs are thus limited and constitute a small proportion of NGOs. NGO is a much broader concept than VO. In other words, all VOs are NGOs but not vice versa.

The nature of VOs in India has been changing from the traditional role. Voluntary organizations have now changed their focus from the traditional relief, rehabilitation, charity and welfare activities to more towards developmental endeavours. There has been now a clear-cut shift in emphasis in the voluntary sector from care, charity and welfare towards empowerment, development and change.<sup>6</sup> The presence of VOs is clearly visible today than ever before, in the traditional as well as unconventional areas of developmental endeavours. The VOs are now more concerned about capacity building, and development of human resources, conscious raising, conscientising and awakening. They are now widening their outlook towards area development and rural transformation. However, an organized voluntary action in the field of rural development in India is comparatively new, slowly evolving and not yet fully complete in the country. Although the voluntary action in rural areas is more diversified today, however, there are many areas which need to be covered by voluntary action.<sup>7</sup> Studies reveal that there are more voluntary sector institutions in rural areas than in urban areas. However, the total voluntary efforts particularly, in the rural development in terms of geographical coverage are insignificant as compared to the needs of the country.

### **Evolution of VOs**

India has a long history and tradition of voluntary action, providing services to the sick, needy and destitute. Rather, it is a part of our cultural heritage and way of life. Voluntarism in India is as old as the emergence of organized society itself. It originated as pure philanthropy of charity and this motivation sustained the voluntary efforts all through history in the ancient and medieval period.<sup>8</sup> The voluntary efforts in the process of welfare and development have undergone evolutionary changes with changing emphasis on various experimental development programmes in India. The history of voluntary action is an integral part of the study of evolution and changes in the Indian society.

From the ancient period Indian culture placed great emphasis on charity. Every individual or householder was expected to help the needy and the suffering. Even during the modern times, erecting drinking water platforms and feeding the hungry is practiced in many parts of the country. Construction of temples, *dharmashalas*, *anna-satras* (centers to serve food free of cost) was some manifestations of charity.<sup>9</sup> It appears that during the British era and with the advent of modern education, donating wealth for construction of schools and colleges was also practiced. Similarly, the hospitals also used to be constructed out of donations and some of them were conducted as purely charitable bodies and provided treatment free of cost.<sup>10</sup> Such hospitals are found to function even today in our country.

The Upanishads also indicate the gradation of *daanam* which are *Shramdaan*, *Anna-Daan*, *Vastra-Daan* and *Gyan-Daan*.<sup>11</sup> Islam has rules on giving which is *Zakat*. *Zakat* has its own governing rules and along with it *Fidiya* which is more like a fine imposed on those violating the fast in the month of *Ramadhan*.<sup>12</sup> Christianity has its rules of *Tyeth* that is one tenth of the income to be set aside for charity. This is very similar to Sikh religion, which also has its *Dasvandh* that translates to one tenth for the poor and disabled to the least of them.<sup>13</sup> This has inspired many missionaries to do service to the poor irrespective of religion, caste or creed.

Voluntarism in early days had its genesis in charity, philanthropy and relief activities. In ancient and medieval India, charity on a voluntary basis outside the religious channels operated freely and extensively in the fields of education, health, cultural promotion and rehabilitation in crises during natural calamities such as floods, famine, droughts, and epidemics.<sup>14</sup> The voluntary efforts in the early phase were limited in scope and were marked in rural and community development such as digging wells and tanks, planting trees etc. The history reveals that the responsibility of assisting the individual-in-need was shared by the community and the rulers. The kings and the chiefs used to provide free kitchens during famine and shelter to homeless.<sup>15</sup> The directives of the emperor were restricted to the rules of *Dharma Sastras*. Religion emphasized on the value of charity, philanthropy and mutual help. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion began work in the Kartarpur Community in present day Pakistan. Here the traditions of *Kar Seva* based on the principles of *Shramdaan* were born. The base of volunteerism and volunteering has been built on this tradition. *Shramdaan* is seen as an extension of work with your hands, which will provide spiritual awakening to the soul.<sup>16</sup>

During the colonial period, voluntary efforts received a boost with new religious, cultural and social surroundings. The Laissez Faire policy of the British Government in economic, religious and social matters left no other avenue of development open to the natives 'than resort to the self-help' form of voluntarism.<sup>17</sup> Schools and colleges were established by educational societies set up by English-educated natives and affluent businessmen, traders and zamindars. In terms of scope and coverage in development activities, Laissez Faire occupied the largest portion followed by voluntary action through philanthropy, association and individual actions, while the state intervention was minimal during this phase. During the British regime, many Christian missionaries came to work in India. The primary objective of these missionary organizations was of course to spread Christianity. But at the same time, they undertook various activities like medical relief and running schools.<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of socio-religious reform movements also marked the dawn of voluntary action. The introduction of western ideas and Christian faith by the end of the eighteenth century precipitated the widespread emergence of religious and social reform movements in India during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ravindranath Tagore, Dayananda Saraswathy, Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar, Kesava Chandra Sen, Ram Krishna Paramhansa, Sayyed Ahmed Khan, Swami Vivekananda had focused their social action against the rigid social evils and practices like Sati, Child Marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage and other caste-directed practices. Voices were raised by the social reform movements against discrimination by birth and gender and discrimination within religion. The formation of Atmiya Sabha in 1815 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one such example and later it developed into Brahma Sabha in 1828. Swami Sahjanand's Swaminarayana sect (1800) and Manohar Dharm Sabha (1844) of Gujarat, Paramhans Sabha, Prarthana Sabha, Kalyanonmayak Samaj and Hindu Dharm Sabha in Maharashtra had similar concerns.<sup>20</sup> Many literary educational institutions such as the Royal Asiatic Society (1834) and Dnyan Prakash Sabha

(1840) were also founded. The Faradi movement of Haji Shariatullah, founded in 1818 among the economically backward classes of Muslims, reflected similar concerns in the context of Islam.<sup>21</sup> All these were volunteer-based organizations connected and interwoven with their respective religious lexicon. They wished to reform their own religions with constructive work.

Rabindranath Tagore's rural reconstruction programme in Patisar and adjoining subdivisions in Rajsahi district, and Birahimpur Pargana in Nadia district of undivided Bengal during the first few decades of 20th century became successful due to high level of active participation of villagers and zamindars.<sup>22</sup> Both contributed resource in cash and kind, which General Welfare Society of Kaligram utilized. There was astonishing sustained improvement in literacy, school education, agriculture, health, road construction, and commerce through cooperation. Village justice system turned villages peaceful and cooperation saved farmers from the clutch of moneylenders.

### VOs and Gandhian Perspectives

Gandhiji propagated national reconstruction on the basis of *swadeshi*, village self-government and self-sufficiency. Gandhiji gave a new impetus to voluntarism. His model of society was based on values of non-violence, justice and freedom. He reinforced the strength of voluntarism in the economic aspect of national life by decentralization of political authority to the Gram Panchayats (Village Councils).<sup>23</sup> His wisdom that India lives in villages, guided him to concentrate his efforts on villages. His strong adherence to high social ideals and a practical approach inspired sincere and conscientious workers to follow him with a genuine sense of dedication towards voluntarism. With Gandhi, began a process of networking of organisations and he played a vital role as the chief propounder of voluntary efforts in rural development in the country.<sup>24</sup>

Gandhi was a social critic. His philosophy cuts across ideological barriers. Gandhi's experiments with truth were deeply concerned with the two aspects of social philosophy-the truth or falsity of social ideals and their coherence or consistency as agents of social, political and economic change.<sup>25</sup> Other two prominent ideas in his social philosophy are his opposition to centralization of political and economic power and his belief in participatory democracy in small neighbourhood groups.<sup>26</sup> The principle element of his significance lies in his constructive programme which aimed at changing the very basis of the whole social and economic order.

Gandhiji started his Constructive Work between 1922 and 1928 which entailed the 18 items ie., communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, Khadi (handwoven cloth), Gramodyog (village industries), village sanitation, basic education, adult education, women, education in health and hygiene, provincial languages, national language, economic equality, kisans, labour, adivasis, lepers, and students. Gandhi says: "The constructive programme may otherwise, and more fittingly, be called construction of 'poorna swaraj' or complete independence, by truthful and nonviolent means".<sup>27</sup> Development of village crafts and village industries were his main thrusts. Gandhiji's Constructive work became part of the mass national movement for political freedom and he insisted that political freedom must go hand in hand with a sense of social responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

The fundamental principles of Gandhiji's Constructive Programme were: voluntariness and sharing, cooperation, mutual aid, decentralisation, non-violence, self-reliance, self-help and moral action. Inspired by Gandhiji's ideology, voluntary movement in India gained further momentum and a large number of organisations based on Gandhian Constructive Programmes emerged in the Indian voluntary sector.<sup>29</sup> Gandhiji founded Harijan Sevak Sangh, Gramodyog Sangh, Hindustan Talim Sangh, Adivasi

Seva Mandals, etc. Many other specialised organisations like e.g. All India Spinner's Association (1925) and All India Village Industries Association (1934) were active in this era. Gandhiji's call for people's participation at the grassroots level enabled voluntarism to penetrate into villages.

Many prominent followers of Gandhi inculcated Gandhiji's spirit of voluntary efforts in the post-independence era and notable among them were Acharya Vinoba Bhave, Jaya Prakash Narayan, Thakkar Bapa and others. Acharya Vinoba Bhave started the *Bhoodan* (land gift) movement in Pochampalli (Telangana in Andhra Pradesh) with the essential characteristic of the movement being that the surplus lands were to be donated by landlords and redistributed to landless peasants.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, his *Gramdan* Movement (village gift) started in Mangroth village in Uttar Pradesh involving community action with the ownership of land vested in the village community. He further widened the concept to *Shramadan* (gift of labour); *Sampatidan* (gift of wealth) and *Buddhidan* (gift of mental abilities) for the realization of *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) and the benefit of the society as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Vinoba Bhave, thus, built a powerful voluntary movement which had shown a way for peaceful transformation of the rural society.<sup>32</sup> Thakar Bapa also made a mark in the history of voluntarism in the field of education, health and tribal development.

Other similar notable experimental projects for rural development undertaken by a number of outstanding individuals from different walks of life from both within and outside the Government include:-Marthandam Project in Kanya Kumari district in Tamil Nadu in 1921 under the leadership of Dr. Spencer Hatch, Gurgaon Project in 1927 by F.L. Brayne, the Deputy Commissioner of the Gurgaon district, Baroda Rural Development Project initiated by Raja Sir T. Madhav Rao, a Minister of the Princely State of Baroda and gained momentum with V.T. Krishnamachari, the Dewan of Baroda who started Rural Reconstruction Centres (RRCs) in 1932; Gandhiji's Rural Reconstruction Project at Sevagram, a village near Wardha in 1936, the Firka Development Scheme in Madras Province in 1943 for the economic development of villages by promoting khadi and village industries, and Nilokheri Project also known as Refugee Rehabilitation Project, though started in 1943 became fully operational in 1948 when it developed a new township for displaced persons from West Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> Another project named Etawah Project launched by the Government of Uttar Pradesh in October 1948 under the guidance and help of Albert Mayer, was a new experiment in rural planning and development.

### VOs in Post Independence Era

Since independence NGOs have played an important role in India's development; over this time Government relations have alternated between times of mutual suspicion and hostility, to periods of high levels of co-operation with NGOs taking a central role in the development agenda. After a period of co-operation in the 1950s followed by hostility and suspicion through the 1980s into the 1990s, by the early 2000s NGOs were more respected by Government, and were having a more central role in the nation's development, as evidenced by increased funding through Government programmes.<sup>34</sup> This shift in the approach of Government to NGOs coincided with a number of political and economic trends that started in the 1980s but accelerated in the 1990s. The spectacular growth of the Indian economy in the first decade of the 2000s, together with this new rapport with NGOs, has meant the government can resource much of its own development agenda using local NGOs more than hitherto possible, while at the same time international donors, both official and INGOs, are rapidly withdrawing.

After Independence, leadership in India was provided by social workers who had worked under the leadership of Gandhi. As a matter of fact, they were the ones who started the health, education, social



welfare, adult education, rural development etc. The government undertook welfare schemes under various plans and policies, besides encouraging voluntary organizations to undertake social welfare programmes under the grant-in-aid programme and set up autonomous bodies like Central Social Welfare Board, Indian Council of Social Welfare etc.<sup>35</sup>

Some of the institutions started by Mahatma Gandhi and by the wives of the officers with the support of the British Government and those started by the Indian philanthropists, Christian Missionaries, Ramakrishna Mission etc, continued to function. Although national organizations like Indian Red Cross Society, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Harijan Sevak Sangh etc, were functioning. It was around this time that several all-India level voluntary organizations such as Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, Indian Council of Child Welfare, Youth Hostel Association, Association of Social Health etc, were set up.<sup>36</sup>

During the latter half of the 1970s, community organizations gained momentum. Also a radical trend emerged, with social action groups taking the view that poverty is a structural phenomenon which had to be tackled head-on through the active mobilization of the rural poor. With liberal foreign funding, social action groups proliferated throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, and established themselves as the dominant type of NGO in some states, notably Tamil Nadu and Bihar in sharp contrast to the programme-focused approaches which had found favour from the 1960s.<sup>37</sup>

From the mid-1980s, a further trend emerged within the NGO movement, emphasizing the importance of professional approach based on sound management, planning and co-ordination. People's participation in development was much pronounced in 1980s. A parallel development was the creation of resource agencies which work directly with the poor and also provide support services to other NGOs in the form of training, evaluation and documentation.<sup>38</sup>

Encouraged by the incentives from the government and their concern for the alleviation of rural poverty, a new generation of professional groups i.e. educated and qualified young men, some of them with foreign training entered the voluntary sector to work as social activists in the rural areas.<sup>39</sup> A new type of voluntary movement thus started in the late 1970s. The developmental programmes and approaches in the post-independence era went through several experiments and evolutionary stages. The changing nomenclature of programmes resulted in a shift in emphasis in different phases from: community to target or beneficiary groups to agricultural production to employment generation and now to empowerment of people. With this changing emphasis with the passage of time, the ministries and departments also changed their nomenclature e.g. the Union Department of Rural Development which was under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development was reorganised into the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction in 1979 and later into the Ministry of Rural Development and now to the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment. Similarly, the Ministry of Welfare changed its nomenclature to Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.<sup>40</sup>

Although the developmental programmes passed through several evolutionary stages, yet the concept of development with people's participation as the basic approach did not undergo changes. During the 1970s, ideas about conscientization and more people's participation in development began to emerge. During this period, more focused work with target groups e.g. women, children, landless labourers, artisans, small and marginal farmers, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes etc. became the basis of voluntary efforts. Best examples for the successful NGOs are Chipko Movement for conservation of forests, one by Baba Amte against leprosy and another one by Smt. Ela Bhatt against exploitation of women workers.<sup>41</sup> Though voluntarism is a long cherished tradition which has been encouraged by the

Government of India since independence, Gandhian approach is a source of inspiration to many a social workers in the voluntary sector. The Government has launched a number of schemes to implement various developmental projects, wherein concerned Departments or Ministries provide grant-in-aid to VOs to carry out welfare and development activities.<sup>42</sup>

Over the years, there has been a lot of debate and discussion on the various typologies and roles of voluntary organizations. Over the time and again, questions around whether or not voluntary organizations are meant to undertake service delivery on behalf of the Government are raised. Further, the capacity and credibility of VOs is often questioned. At the same time, majority of the Government funded welfare and development programmes talk about partnership with voluntary agencies to reach the unreached. This has led to an amorphous growth of organizations which use the present situation as an opportunity both for service delivery as well as monetary gains.<sup>43</sup> It is important to differentiate between these approaches.

National Policy on the Voluntary Sector was conceived in the year 2007.<sup>44</sup> The Policy was a commitment to encourage, enable and empower an independent, creative and effective voluntary sector, with diversity in form and function, so that it can contribute to the social, cultural and economic advancement of the people of India. The National Policy on the Voluntary Sector recognized strategic collaboration and consultation through a formal process of interaction at the Centre, State and District level as a key instrument of partnership.<sup>45</sup> It promised an enabling environment, necessary for stimulation of enterprise and effectiveness of the voluntary sector and talked about creating systems that facilitated mobilization of necessary funds, greater interaction of Government with Voluntary Organisations (VO) and their increased transparency and accountability. If we look at the growth of the VOs, it is evident that the maximum growth has taken place during the last two decades. The UN General Assembly in its 52<sup>nd</sup> session declared the year 2001 as International year of volunteers.<sup>46</sup> India is estimated to have 3.3 million registered NGOs. They act as buffer between the individual and the state.

Gandhian movement is becoming stronger in the globalised era. We cannot think of the present world without Gandhi and his thought. Gandhian concept of 'sarvodaya' is more relevant today than ever before. There is now growing awareness all over the world about Gandhi's work, teachings and thoughts. To carry out the constructive programme of Gandhi is one of the best ways to express our gratitude to the father of our nation. The clear vision and path shown by Gandhi in voluntarism is responsible for the success of the voluntary movement in India. They are indispensable in a democratic country like India and they perform a number of functions for the welfare of its members, development of the country and integration and solidarity of the society and nation.

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