Comment

The Role of Voluntary Social Work in India

In Indian culture, renunciation and charity are two highly venerated values of life. We also find that the Rishis were put on the highest pedestal in ancient times. Rishis lived in forests away from major settlements and engaged themselves in penance, in training disciples in various walks of life and devoting time in meditation and spiritual pursuits. We also come across descriptions in epics that whenever a Rishi visited the court of a king, the king used to vacate his throne to receive the sage and make him sit on his throne. The king then used to sit at the feet of the seer and seek blessings and guidance for the smooth and benevolent conduct of the affairs of the state. It appears that these sages and seers exercised a moral restraint on state power. The king also received the feedback from them about how well his subjects
were faring in his kingdom. This shows that renunciates enjoyed a very high status in society. In other words, the virtue of renunciation was important and not the acquisition of wealth or power.

Indian culture also 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 (centres to serve food free of cost) were some manifestations of charity. 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. Such hospitals are found to function even today in our country.

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. The missionary organizations were so well managed and efficiently conducted that they were treated as models to follow. However, no such activities were organized by other religious sects in our country. In spite of the fact that charity and renunciation were placed on a high pedestal in Indian culture, no cadre of workers mainly committed to social service was created till Swami Vivekananda emerged on the Indian scene. He could observe that the bulk of the Indian masses was deprived of even the basic amenities of life. Poverty, disease, and ignorance were widely prevalent. He could see that spiritual development can be brought about only after basic requirements for human existence are adequately met. This led him and his colleagues to give birth to a new order of renunciate social workers and it was named as the Ramakrishna Mission. Ramakrishna Mission has been instrumental in running efficiently a number of service organizations of high quality. Valuable services in the field of education, health, relief in the face of natural disasters and similar other spheres were conducted in the past and they are being conducted even today in various parts of the country. It is also noteworthy that Ramakrishna Mission is also running various centres of service and spiritual pursuits in many parts of the North-east India. The nation will justifiably look forward to continued and dedicated services from this order in days to come. Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of service to man is beautifully expressed in the following quotation:

“God is everywhere.
He sleeps in stones,
awakes in plants and
speaks only in man.
Service to man, therefore,
is the highest worship of God.”
Other sects of Hindu background who also organized social service activities and organizations are the Arya Samaj and the Swami Narayana sect which originated in Gujarat. There are other similar bodies also.

The unique leadership of Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle was instrumental to a large extent in creating greater awareness about the role of voluntary or selfless service. He laid great emphasis on the role of voluntary social workers in nation building. A significant aspect of Gandhiji’s leadership has not been fully understood by many. Apart from the struggles conducted in a non-violent manner, he also had the ambition of reconstructing Indian society on spiritual foundations. Mahatma Gandhi is often described as a leader who attempted to spiritualize politics. However, a careful study of his life and work will show that he wanted to spiritualize not only politics but every walk of life.

On one hand, he led the nation in agitational programmes or Satyagrahas one after the other, but at the same time he motivated many to simultaneously join hands in nation building programmes. This was by way of generating awareness in the nation that we have to be self-reliant in rebuilding the nation. He also appealed to the youth in the country to take to the life of voluntary poverty and dedicate themselves in nation building programmes. He wanted a large band of voluntary social activists to take up different activities related to removal of poverty, social inequality, disease and ignorance.

Mahatma Gandhi had prepared a blueprint of a plan of national reconstruction. He named it as ‘constructive programme’. There were 18 items in this programme such as removal of untouchability, welfare of tribal communities, promoting production through Khadi and Village industries, prohibition of alcohol, spread of Hindi and several others. He firmly believed and explained that by implementing all the items of ‘constructive work programme’, it will be possible to evolve a new India. He therefore appealed to the youth to come forward and work as full time voluntary servants of the people.

Responding to Gandhiji’s appeal, many idealist youths came forward and took up one or more items of ‘constructive work programme’. Many voluntary organizations came into being in different parts of the country mainly engaged in production of khadi and some items of village industries. It played an important role in development of rural population. Through these programmes, Gandhiji explained that rendering service merely in relief related activities was not adequate. For the first time, he educated the people that social service should primarily aim at socio-economic development and in promoting higher values of life. It will be seen that it was mainly due to Gandhiji’s leadership and teaching that voluntarism and voluntary social service took roots in our country and is now recognized as a vital instrument of generating moral climate and of promoting overall well-being of the community.

It is generally believed that there are four pillars of democracy—Parliament, Executive, Free Judiciary and Free Press. But experience has shown that voluntarism and voluntary action is the fifth pillar of democracy! If we have a network of voluntary organizations conducted by dedicated selfless individuals,
they could be not only the centres of socio-economic service but they can function as educators and conscience-keepers. Such workers according to Gandhian norm have to refrain from pursuit of wealth as well as power. Such devoted, selfless individuals and their functioning can act as effective moral constraint and wield healthy influence on the state power. The task of conscience-keeping is also expected to be performed by a free and unbiased press, but it is now realized that that is not enough. The band of selfless workers ought to emerge as moral influence and conscience keepers. That alone can maintain the health of the state and democracy.

There is one more aspect which needs to be understood. In a more conscientious and healthy society, the power of the state should be reduced to a minimum. The state should evolve itself more as a facilitator and coordinator. In the ideal state of Gandhian vision, decentralization of power by promoting self-reliant, self-governing village units is essential to build non-exploitative, peaceful and progressive society. Once the importance of this goal is realized, the role of voluntary organizations will be better understood and gain more importance. Voluntary organizations and their workers ought to promote self-reliance in all walks of life, decrease dependence on the state and continuously promote higher values of life.

To conclude, let me repeat that the existence and functioning of voluntary organizations conducted by selfless, enlightened individuals are most essential for the well-being and enlightened existence of a society and of democracy.

This Issue of Ishani is a Combined Issue for July and September, 2009

We have been apologizing about the late publication of Ishani. This issue is also being published late. In our attempt to quicken the pace of publication, we are publishing the issues for 15 July 2009 and 15 September 2009 as one combined issue. The total number of pages of this issue has been increased to 84. We are also getting ready to publish the 15 November 2009 issue immediately after the present issue gets dispatched. Even after this task is accomplished, we shall have to try hard to publish early the pending two issues for the year 2010. We will try our best. Kindly bear with us till then.

I am happy to mention that there are some highly valuable articles in this combined issue. I would like to draw the attention of our readers to three major articles: 1. The article on Energy by Professors Kothari and Miotello, 2. The full-text of the lecture by Madam Bokova, the Director General, UNESCO delivered as first lecture in the series of lectures planned by IGNOU in
commemoration of its Silver Jubilee, and 3. The article by Prof. K.D. Gangrade on the lessons to learn from the Mahatma’s Autobiography. There are also other precious writings related to the North-east. We have carried an interesting article on unforgettable Brother Shannon of St. Edmund’s, Shillong. There is also a very interesting write-up reproduced from a local daily, The Sentinel, on the subject of ‘The Naga’s Wild-goose Chase’. It is written by the eminent columnist and Civil Rights Activist, Shri Kuldip Nayar. Though the topic is not related to North-east, but a young author and a promising Engineer from the North-east has written a highly informative piece on the cars run on Electricity. Some eminent manufacturers have targetted their production in the near future.

We may submit in all humility, that the Ishani team tries its best to serve our readers with something which is useful, highly thought-provoking, educative and informative with regard to the North-east. We try in all humility to present spiritually enriching fare also.

We have been encouraged in the past with positive feedback from our esteemed readers. Some of them have also forwarded valuable suggestions and some have drawn our attention to make improvement regarding some aspects of Ishani. We are deeply grateful for the interest and the concern expressed through these feedbacks. We shall keenly look forward to receive similar feedback in the years to come.

Greetings and best wishes,

Natwar Thakkar

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About Ishani

The Sanskrit nomenclature for the North-east direction is Ishanya or Ishan-Kon. Hence anything concerning the North-east or Ishan-Kon is ISHANI. Keeping this in view, we have selected ISHANI as the name of our journal.

ISHANI will aim at presenting developments in the North-Eastern region, which may otherwise escape notice of the national media. It will also be our effort to evolve ISHANI as a window to view the fascinating, bewildering mosaic that is the North-east India. We will carry views and reflections of the people from the North-east on various issues concerning them. It will also be our attempt to highlight the good work of different voluntary action groups in the region. The life and work of prominent personalities of the North-east will also be presented.

As ISHANI is being published as the journal of Mahatma Gandhi Ishani Foundation, we will inevitably carry articles and other materials related to the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. This will be one of our highly cherished objectives. The publication of ISHANI has become possible
through the generous donation of a donor group. It will continue to be published as a bimonthly journal for some time. ISHANI is a mission aimed at rendering service to the North-east and the rest of the country by being a communication bridge between the two regions. We seek goodwill, support, cooperation and blessings from our well-wishers.

— Editor

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