

Book Reviews

M. L. Dantwala, Harsh Sethi and Pravin Visaria. *Social Change through Voluntary Action.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998. Hardback. Indian Rs 325.00. 199 pages.

This book is an extremely valuable addition to a very important topic concerning development issues at the grassroots levels. It has highlighted the contribution of voluntary organisations and proved that voluntary action can be a potent instrument for bringing about social change, for eliminating poverty and for building an egalitarian and humane society.

In the introduction, the editors remind the readers of the unfulfilled promises made before, and after independence, by leaders to banish poverty and inequality. Five of the eleven chapters in this book take a macro view of the context, the nature as well as the future of voluntary action in India. These articles describe the current state of affairs, the degeneration of the values of sacrifices and an unending quest for money and political power. So, it is argued, that basic values in public behaviour can be restored through vigilant and purposive voluntary action. But a major criticism of voluntary groups is their localism, small size, fragmentation and the failure to institutionalise them. The editors are of the view that thousands of such groups can collectively contribute to social transformation through their modest efforts at organising help for the needy, redress their grievances and fight against atrocities inflicted on them. The articles evaluate the contextual factors influencing the emergence of voluntary organisations and their applicability to the Indian situation.

The succeeding part of the book primarily illustrates the six case studies of successful voluntary efforts, which have met with varied experiences of success. These efforts have many distinct characteristics of their own, but they share the same basic parameters of values. The case studies cover both rural and urban settings and highlight challenges faced by agencies attempting to improve the life of the disadvantaged segments of Indian society.

The goals of social change aim at empowering the poor through the provision of minimum standards of health, education and income and social awareness and participation in the socioeconomic governance of community affairs. This they managed to do through a variety of approaches, like creating opportunities for gainful employment, provision of credit, training for skill acquisition, technology upgradation, marketing and self-help. These voluntary programmes have therefore highlighted the fact that they are capable of undertaking quality work and thereby, achieving a sustainable impact.

The book has also evaluated some of the problems of the voluntary agencies, particularly the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as they tend to view

themselves as a separate 'sector' and not only as instruments of social service. Recently, a number of NGOs emerged as brokers for official and donor-initiated programmes and policies that are not necessarily concerned with their original objectives of social welfare. Thus the importance of internal accountability and transparency is necessary to re-infuse this sector with new spirit. Otherwise, the greater funding support and inflow of dedicated and creative people, is likely to dry up. Finally, it is realised that voluntarism has been the hallmark of Indian society where many people at many places are engaged in multifarious action without any external incentives—political, bureaucratic or market propelled. The editors therefore favour voluntary action which can be both a combative and constructive force laying the groundwork for millions who suffer from poverty, ignorance, disease and inequality of opportunity.

The major criticism that can be levelled against this volume is that none of these voluntary agencies discussed the explicit purpose of bringing about value-based social transformation. Their priority was to assist the poor to increase their income by a variety of approaches. Some of the voluntary agencies held the view that lifting the assisted group above the poverty line was by itself a major social transformation. On the other hand, some other voluntary agencies discovered, through field experiences, that unless the poor gave up alcoholism, child marriages and superstitions like animal slaughter to propitiate the deity, income and employment generation programmes would not be effective. The second group of voluntary agencies, confronted with this experience, made social change or, to put it modestly, weaning away the poor from harmful habits and behaviour, an integral part of their action programme, along with poverty alleviation and employment generation.

In summary, this book is meant for the general reader and the large community of people troubled by the collapse of the values which should govern public behaviour in a civilised society. If the book succeeds in showing a ray of hope to the disillusioned and the cynical that voluntary action can be an organic ingredient for building a better society, the purpose of this book will be fulfilled.

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