

## Book Review

**Vikram Singh Mehta, Neelima Khetan and Jayaypadma R. V. (Eds), *Anchoring Change: Seventy-five Years of Grassroots Interventions that Made a Difference*. Harper Collins India, Gurugram, Haryana (for Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi), 2022, 361 pp (paperback), ₹699. ISBN: 9789356921874**

According to the estimates of the Central Statistical Institute of India, there are as many as 3.3 million non-government organisations (NGOs) or community service organisations (Pradeep Waychal, 2023). They include registered trusts, societies, and other entities. A good proportion of them may be non-existent, or fake. But in general, NGOs or civil society organisations are formed with noble intentions of serving the poor, the oppressed, the rural, and the underprivileged sections of society. They are engaged in the direct delivery of services, developing the capabilities of the people to meet their own needs, and are involved in sustainable systems of development in a larger institutional and policy context. They are formed mostly by selfless people, carrying out several kinds of activities, and various experiments at the grassroots with the sole intention of improving people's welfare. Many activities of these organisations could be seen as experiments on a small scale, concentrated in small areas. Some of the experiments and innovations made by the NGOs and the changes they have made have been widely appreciated, and in some cases, the governments adopted them in their mechanisms of delivery of services or simply responded to the efforts of the NGOs and took several initiatives. Some of the organisations are involved in social and political advocacy, supporting people's movements, and promoting broader social vision. Some of them are engaged in action and action research as well. Some NGOs have worked in collaboration with governments and contributed to strengthening of the public systems. Some NGOs are supported directly by the state or by international organisations and many rely on their own sources and community support, which are normally very limited, but all are non-profit organisations. There is a great degree of heterogeneity and variety among NGOs in their activities and modes of operation. The ethos is also not necessarily common across all NGOs (Tilak, 2004). The diverse areas that the NGOs are involved in India include nutrition, health, education, water and sanitation, poverty reduction, community development, child labour, environment, tribal development, rural development, water management, relief activities during disasters, and improvement of living conditions of migrants, slum dwellers, sex workers etc. Some have focused on strengthening the financial conditions of the marginalised people, by developing cooperatives, and instituting facilities for easy loans, to set up micro-level enterprises, and have worked on their own as micro-level financial enterprises. Over the years, NGOs have emerged as important agents of change in many countries, contributing to several areas. In short, the contributions of the NGOs have been manifold, and except for sporadic accounts of a few, one finds no authentic comprehensive account of how the NGOs work and what contributions they make.

*Anchoring Change* gives us interesting accounts of 24 major interventions at the grassroots, many of which owe their origin to the efforts of civil society organisations, and some to the efforts of the state or local governments, or the corporate sector, and how they made a difference to the well-being of the people. The collection covers initiatives made over a long period – spanning over about 75 years of India's independence, though some trace the origins of the activities to earlier periods; second the book covers many relatively less-known initiatives along with a few better-known initiatives; third, it includes initiatives made by voluntary organisations and associations, governments, social enterprises, and corporate sector; some of the initiatives are supported extensively or partly by the government, and some not; fourth, it covers geographically a vast area – rural and urban -- small places or villages in several states in India from north to south, and east to west; some cover in their operations, small locations, some entire state, and some pan-India; fifth, thematically it covers a

broad array of issues and diverse ways of interventions; sixth, some are engaged in pure service and service-delivery activities, and some in wealth-creating activities or micro-enterprises; seventh, some are engaged in mobilising and educating the people; some are involved in building productive capacity of the people by imparting skills through training local communities; eighth, some helped in forming self-help groups and the like, and cooperatives and some in developing micro level production activities; and so on; ninth, many have complimented existing public and non-state efforts; tenth, some initiatives stood on their own, and some influenced government policies, programmes, and their implementation, making governments adopt or adapt the same or partly modified ones, or to respond intelligently with new models.

An important feature of the book is that, by design, each essay was contributed by the protagonists of the concerned initiative. So, the readers hear the story from the horse's mouth, which may have its own strengths and shortcomings – authenticity and bias; some are nostalgic in their narratives, but many of them are self-introspective, if not highly critical. All the cases presented here are successful stories, and they discuss the process of achieving success, not any 'failures', though they have also described what it took to be successful. However, all the authors are proud of their achievements. The agents of change included in the book are drawn from across India: to cite a few: Seva Mandir (Udaipur, Rajasthan), Eklavya Madhya Pradesh), Jamkhed (Maharashtra), noon meals programme (Tamil Nadu), Anandi (Gujarat), the Ant (Assam), Araku Valley coffee project (Andhra Pradesh), Jeevika (Bihar), Aajeevika (Rajasthan), Kutumbashree (Government of India), Dastkar (Delhi), Goonj (Delhi), spastic societies, and ITC e-Choupal. Although many initiatives were originally conceived as small, local, and micro interventions with possibly very low effect, they have expanded and made significant contributions, giving a big impetus to enduring social change and development. For example, the small initiative taken by Theagaraya Chetty of the Madras Corporation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century finally became a nationwide major programme with a noticeable impact on nutrition and attendance of children in schools. Eklavya -- a micro-level experiment on curriculum changes in elementary schools initiated by the Kishore Bharati known as the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme started in the district of Hoshangabad in the early 1980s has drawn the interest of academics from universities, teachers from schools, the youth, and the elderly citizens, and attracted the attention of curricular reformers everywhere in the country. A small centre started by Alurs with three students in 1972 in Mumbai emerged as a Spastic Society of India (later renamed Able Disabled All People Together -- ADAPT), and has played a key role in the inclusive education and disability movement in the country. The origins of the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker programme under the National Rural Health Mission, can be found in the Jamkhed model – a community-based comprehensive rural health project launched in 1970 in a small town in central Maharashtra. The activity of the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) launched in 1968 in 18 districts in Karnataka has been found to have played an important role in the emergence of self-help groups (SHGs) and credit management groups (CMGs) on a large scale in the country in the subsequent years. All initiatives have immensely impacted the lives of millions of people in the country in diverse ways.

The authors and editors belong to various backgrounds: some are academics, teachers, researchers, writers, thinkers, sector specialists, some practitioners like doctors, journalists, and designers, some are executives of corporate or other bodies, some are social activists, social workers, and some government servants; they have varied rich experiences in diverse fields. But all are actively engaged with people and are involved in social change in one way or other.

As the editors observe, most of the interventions at the grassroots have been driven by the interactions of the triad of the state, the market, and society. The relations between the three have evolved over the years and this has influenced the nature, shape, and scope of social action (pp. 3-4). To buttress this view, the editors describe with examples from specific cases, how the first five-year plan (1951-56) of the Government of independent India created space for civil society to take initiative

and enabled smooth relationships between government and civil society organisations; how the state encouraged these organisations during the 1970s and 1980s to play a supportive role in development, and how during the 1990s, the government partnered with these organisations at the local level for the implementation of the government programmes and schemes. With the mandatory corporate social responsibility act in the new millennium, the corporate sector entered and acted on its own, or partnered with civil society organisations on the one hand and with the government on the other. Accordingly, we find in the book descriptions of initiatives of different nature, scope, and methods.

What are the messages we receive from the experience of the 24 cases? Many of these cases suggest that successful initiatives rest on the bedrock of a few basic principles of selflessness, empathy, honesty, and integrity. As elucidated in the case of Seva Mandir, one can say that *seva* (service), *sadhana* (dedicated practice), and *kranti* (revolutionary change) form the basic ingredients of any initiative to succeed. The success of any initiative requires a group of committed people, and professionals if available, all of whom share a common vision, patience and persistence in their efforts, periodic honest self-critical interpretations, and necessary mid-way corrections in their approaches. As the 'ant' story shows, people have to work in unison, not give up easily, be hugely industrious and capable of performing size-defying tasks, be incorruptible, and do only what is just and right. The success of an initiative requires understanding and influencing community aspirations, and considering the people not as passive subjects in need of help or as objects or receivers of development activities, but as active partners – equal stakeholders in making and creating their own development, taking responsibilities, and even sharing costs and in the process bridging people-to-people connections. Their experiences have to be valued. It is important to realise that people have tremendous potential to help themselves. Democratic and decentralised functioning becomes an important trait of successful programmes. The programmes should focus on capacity building, nurturing of leaders from within the community and giving them formal roles (like in the case of Kutumbashree –an initiative of the government of Kerala launched in 1998). Many successful initiatives aimed at helping improve the dignity of the people, the entire community ('All or none' – 100 percent inclusion), and their autonomous development. The involvement of the communities in the development programmes can be ensured if their abilities and contributions are recognized (e.g., Daskar that focused on crafts and handlooms) and if there are tangible gains, including, *inter alia*, monetary gains to all (e.g., Araku coffee in Andhra Pradesh). Among the scalable initiatives, one that the book briefly refers to is, the Naandi Foundation – a non-governmental organisation established in 1998 in one state, with Rs. one crore annual budget, which has grown to become a multi-state (working in 22 states), multi-crore (annual budget of Rs. 150 crore), multi-sectoral development organisation. It may have to be realised that all initiatives are not necessarily scalable, but some are replicable. Every specific issue requires a specific approach, considering the specific context. Obviously one model does not fit all.

The editors underline five major strands behind these several successful interventions at the grassroots: (a) strong conviction and belief in their abilities to make a change and to convince the people in their abilities to make a change, (b) a sound design and framework of their initiatives that involve significant alliances and strategic partnerships with other actors in the society, (c) involvement of the people in the process, (d) stability, continuity, and tenacity of leadership, and (e) development of a healthy ecosystem in which relationships are forged with the bureaucrats, politicians and other institutions at the micro and macro levels. The cases also suggest that civil society organisations should be non-hierarchical and distributive; one has to be adaptive and innovative; and continuously strive for optimal outcomes, not compromising on sub-optimal solutions, viewing that is ok for the poor.

Three minor limitations I note with the otherwise superbly readable book are in relation to its scope, structure, and style. It could have been thematically organised classifying the 24 essays into different

sections under, say, government initiatives and non-government initiatives, or chronologically into 2-3 distinct phases as already noted, or under economic, social, political, and other initiatives, or by some other way. Second, a few major unsuccessful initiatives could also have been included in the book, as one can also learn a lot from failures; all the initiatives included are immensely successful and impactful, though they have also shown that success does not come easy: they have had to struggle, stumble and face several challenges on their way. Third, while all authors have provided interesting and authentic accounts of their initiatives, a casual reader may feel that a critical objective look at the experiment is missing. The authors, being actively involved in the respective initiatives, could have at least referred to some of the major criticisms that they have received on their experiments, or their structural weaknesses if any. Despite these limitations, *Anchoring Change* is an excellent book, highly readable, with inspiring narratives of diverse kinds of initiatives that have brought a change in the lives of many people and in the approaches of public, and non-state entities to social and economic issues. They depict how innumerable noteworthy activities are happening in the country that make a difference to the people. Not only those who are involved in and wish to take such initiatives but also others interested in social issues and living conditions of the people would find it a rewarding reading.

## References

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