

MYRADA

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MYRADA'S ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

(In the Context of PAPRO)

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What emerges from introspection and reflection by senior MYRADA staff with experience in areas related both to the organisation as well as to operational interventions, is that there are broadly two sets of values. One that could be described as core values of the organisation and the second set which underlies the operational or intervention strategies of MYRADA. The values in these two sets are not completely identical; most of them synchronise well so that they reinforce each other, but some in each of the two sets - while being legitimate, and understandable in each set- do not mutually reinforce one another. Before these observations turn the reader off this piece to other more interesting and seemingly less ambiguous or contradictory statements, a few examples may help to clarify the position taken here.

Core organisational values as MYRADA understands them are those that do not change even if the strategies for intervention in operations need to adapt according to the changing external environment. There are several such core values which have been identified; all may not be visible, some may be stressed over others during certain periods, but all are considered important enough to be internalised by MYRADA's staff if the Organisation is to maintain a clear identity and mission. The need to stress these core values assumes even more importance since MYRADA has diversified its interventions; they range from deputing staff to Government to manage a Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme to building houses with its own resources to supporting the emergence of people's institutions like SHGs, Village Forest Committees, Village Water and Sanitation Committees. As a result, it is only these core values which provide a common bond among the staff and the projects; these values in turn project the image of the Organisation wherever it is intervening and whatever programme or strategy it may adopt as appropriate to the situation. The core organisational values as identified by senior staff are the following:

1. The belief that MYRADA as an organisation does not exist for itself; it exists to help establish other institutions primarily of people at the village level which ensure their involvement in the process of their own development, including decision-making, money management, and safeguarding their collective interests. Such institutions may, at some stage, take over some of MYRADA's roles and

responsibilities; they may also add on new functions. This has already started happening to a significant extent. As a result, the staff strength of MYRADA has decreased over the past 7 years from an all time high of 720 to 428 by mid-1997. Our new interventions during the past few years have been strategic, focusing on building people's institutions and not in delivering goods. For example, in Uttara Kannada District MYRADA has only 8 staff; in the Devadasi project MYRADA has deputed staff to Government. Though MYRADA has handed over responsibilities to the self help groups, the budget has remained constant - around Rs 20 crores annually - while the area coverage has increased.

While this value guides MYRADA to adopt strategies from the beginning that allow it to withdraw from areas and activities leaving behind the SHGs, Apex Societies and other Institutions like Banks to take over, it does conflict with the expectations of many staff. Given the limited job opportunities in the country especially for the educated from rural areas (95% of MYRADA's staff hail from this background), it is understandable that the staff view job security as a priority. Withdrawal, from an area, and handing over responsibilities to people's institutions tend to undermine their sense of job security. The new areas of MYRADA's intervention require new skills in logical analysis, and a systems approach in writing and presentation; they require higher levels of leadership and more mature conflict management skills, they require the ability to deal with higher levels of staff of Government and other institutions.

MYRADA is conscious of its responsibility to invest in staff to help them to acquire these skills; it has conducted in house training programmes, sent staff for training to prestigious institutions in India and abroad; in all MYRADA has invested over Rs 10 million during the past 10 years in its staff. As a result MYRADA has managed to cope with new challenges; it has also built up a good second line. It is true that this approach has also made our staff more "attractive" to other development institutions; several staff have found employment elsewhere or started their own consultancies and NGOs; this is part of any organisation's experience and contributes both to its growth and to the growth of its staff.

There are, however, several who have not been able to absorb the new skills. MYRADA has offered several voluntary severance schemes (VSS) to staff who could not cope with the new challenges as well as to those whose approach and philosophy had gone out of synch with the organisation and those who have several limitations especially in their capacity to foster trust and provide leadership; some have availed of these VRS schemes. It must be noted, however, that MYRADA has been fortunate in not losing good staff through the voluntary severance schemes. In fact, in the first scheme that was introduced in the early 90s which was availed of by over a hundred staff, the organisation was sorry to

see only two leave. MYRADA conducted an exercise that came to be termed “**SWIPE**” (Strengths, Weaknesses, Innovations, Problems - and Exit or Entry) in some of the Projects where staff who opted for the severance scheme were organised in small groups . Each one was asked to assess whether he/she was comfortable with his/her past performance in relation to the Mission of MYRADA. Each one then assessed the time and money that the organisation had invested in them to enable them to cope. Ample space for individual and group assessment was provided in the context of all the facts available. Each staff was then asked to decide what would be in the best interests of all concerned. It was not an open ended exercise; a decision had to be made regarding exit or entry, and the consequences of staying on had to be accepted and implemented by all concerned. This exercise not only helped staff who could not cope to leave and to establish themselves elsewhere, it also helped the organisation to redefine its responsibilities and to reaffirm the core values of MYRADA.

As already mentioned, institution building is a core activity in MYRADA. This requires that MYRADA gives priority to foster people’s institutions. From experience MYRADA has realised that these institutions are not the same in every case, they need to be appropriate to the resource to be managed. In other words, MYRADA cannot saddle an institution that is appropriate to manage credit with several other responsibilities like managing housing, milk, natural resources, drinking water and sanitation systems, etc. The tension here is between this value of MYRADA and the pressure that MYRADA experiences from Government and from several donors by the nature of their internal priorities which force MYRADA’s extension strategy to compromise on the process and time required to nurture young institutions. These pressures often reduce these people’s institutions into an additional link in the delivery chain of goods and services; they are considered to be cheap implementors and a good opportunity to shift the responsibility to people. In many Bilateral and Multilateral programmes where MYRADA is involved with Government, the projects strategy requires that groups of people play a role in the process of planning and implementation- and recently in maintenance. The reasons that prompt intervenors to support this strategy differ. The procedures adopted by the Government and Multilateral/Bilateral Agencies requiring NGOs to bid, as well as the pressures that build up to meet targets that arise from a contract that flows from a bid, and the inability to synchronise physical interventions with the process of institution building, places severe strain on the space and flexibility required to foster people’s institutions.

2. Another core organisational value is that MYRADA targets the poorest of the poor. Operationally however there are other pressures which tend to focus attention away from the poorest. For example if a poor family has a child who is eligible to be a foster child, the family is given priority, even if it is not among the

poorest. Even in many of our self help groups there are indications that it is the enterprising poor who tend to get the greatest benefits since they are seen to be more credit worthy and have the necessary initiative to invest. The tendency in our operations is to become complacent that MYRADA's interventions have targetted the poor. Strategically however while MYRADA accepts that in its initial interventions it is the enterprising poor who will make the best use of investments, if the organisational core value of targetting the poorest is to be realised, it requires a constant effort to analyse where benefits are going and to devise and foster new strategies which can provide support to the weakest families.

3. Another core organisational value is more easily expressed negatively - not to get involved in party politics. Unfortunately given the present state of society, party politics based on caste and community is an all pervasive factor; as a result it is extremely difficult for Project Officers of MYRADA, especially those who command large annual budgets ranging from Rs 3 to 4 crores in one block, to insulate themselves from local politicians; the latter see the MYRADA staff as sources of benefits which would enhance their own image if they establish some degree of association with the Project Officer. Unless they are careful, the Project Officers could easily consider politicians as points of patronage and status and even of protection from groups that have the confidence to question the decisions of the project staff or wish to further their own interests. Fortunately MYRADA has Project staff who do not succumb to these traps. But as usual there are exceptions. It is this involvement based, at times, on interests perceived to be mutual (for example when staff enlist the support of politicians when they are transferred) that gradually and often imperceptibly pushes our operations to compromise in the degree of transparency that is required. Alliance with politicians also pushes the project's interventions towards supporting groups which are not the poorest and sometimes not even the poor. Political power is not in the hands of the poor; to be aligned with politicians locally is to be seen to be aligned with the powerful. Unfortunately this has occurred in our Sira project where MYRADA had to take a firm stand to withdraw entirely from the area rather than compromise its position since our Project Officer was involved in politics. It also happened to some extent in H.D.Kote though the negative fallout was contained; while in Madakasira where the alignment took place between a few lower level staff and political groups, senior staff and a few perceptive politicians were able to strike a balance. At the time of writing, however, the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved. The advice from a senior academician to social/development workers in the early eighties is still and will always be valid: "Do not take a favour from any politician; if you do, you will be paying for it all your life". Experience in MYRADA has demonstrated the wisdom of this advice. MYRADA will remain committed to the value of preserving an independent image even at the cost of favours and publicity and even of protection.

4. Staff commitment to MYRADA is another cherished core value. This is defined by what the staff are prepared to give up in order to remain in MYRADA., for example, the choice to continue in the organisation even though there is a market for their skills and experience with much higher compensation packages (offered mainly by MYRADA's donor partners but also as in the new and growing market for development consultants). Some major development agencies are adopting a more aggressive approach in recruitment - almost amounting to headhunting - and MYRADA is a potential area. The pressure on staff to leave is therefore growing. Several staff have left over the years, many of them reluctantly, and they have always maintained a soft corner for the organisation in which they acquired the skills and experience that now command a wider market. While on one hand MYRADA endeavours to pay a fair compensation package and to ensure that all the laws of the land are observed, it also believes that staff must show their commitment by giving up a little if they want to be closely identified with the organisation and become part of its core. MYRADA also realises that its best staff are also entrepreneurs - development is an entrepreneurial occupation; they will feel the pressure to leave either due to family commitments or to focus in certain niche areas where they feel their talents are most suited, or to expand to newer experiences. It must be acknowledged, therefore, that there is potential for conflict between the core value described here and the aspirations of individual staff especially after they have devoted 8 to 10 years in the organisation. For those staff who remain, the organisational values have been internalised, as one of the senior staff pointed out.

Another aspect to commitment is to refuse to succumb to blackmail. MYRADA refuses to be blackmailed whether by politicians, staff or by vested interests among people. MYRADA is vulnerable on this account. In the Sri Lankan Repatriate project in Kodaikanal, the repatriates assumed that the Government of India was obliged to support them for ever, even though adequate investment had been made in land and infrastructure. When MYRADA withdrew, complaints were rushed to the highest political authorities. In Kadiri resettlement programme, a few grabbed power within the cooperative society and were supported by outside interests. They assumed that MYRADA would have to go along as the land was given by the Government. MYRADA refused and withdrew until the people gained power once again. In Sira, MYRADA was blackmailed on the basis of the commitment to the foster child. MYRADA was pressurised to go along with the decisions taken by its project officer in collaboration with local politicians when MYRADA knew that to do so would lead to the local power lobby taking control of resources and mis-utilising them. MYRADA withdrew even though its partner decided to continue to support the sponsored families for a while; this in hindsight was a humane decision, but one

that an organisation located far away (in Delhi) could more readily take. The latest in Madakasira where the PWG is supposedly obstructing the transfer of a sector officer is intriguing. Incidentally years ago when the PWG still retained some ideology, our Kadiri project was evaluated by an armed team of four. Their conclusion: "MYRADA is doing good work, but not enough". We assured them that we were satisfied with good -- we leave them to do "enough".

5. MYRADA places value on its character as a voluntary organisation (or an NGO); it is not a consultancy. To preserve its 'volag' characteristic therefore amounts to a core value. It interprets the mission of a voluntary agency as one that enables the volag to foster alternate strategies and institutions in which the poor have ownership and over which they exercise control. This stand is particularly relevant today when bilateral and multilateral donors involved in large Government programmes are recognising the role that NGOs can play in areas where they have a comparative advantage. A consultancy is not free to respond to people's demands for ownership which begins by their insistence on transparency in decision making and accountability in implementation. A consultancy is constrained by the fact that it has offered to place a 'bid' and it is constrained by the conditions of the contract it signs with the principal (usually the Government); a consultancy does not commit itself to implementation and to remaining in the area for a length of time so that it is accountable to the people.

MYRADA values the space that an NGO must have so that it can respond to any situation arising from the field; to be a Consultant, in MYRADA's experience, is to have little or no space to respond to changing situations where people's demands, particularly for increasing ownership, transparency in implementation and accountability - especially in projects where people have contributed - need to be supported. This support to the people need not take the shape of polarisation or demonstrations; it can also be expressed through lobbying in the right level and by presenting clear arguments backed by evidence. In contrast, a Consultant puts priority on establishing a secure relationship with the principal in order not to jeopardise the future. Since the competition among Consultants is also growing at a faster degree than among operational NGOs, the pressure to go along with the principal are strong. (This does not mean that all Consultants are devoid of values and ideological commitments that influence their choice of contracts and their manner of executing them). MYRADA does not wear a halo and it does not judge others; it has a responsibility to constantly review its own operations as well as to ensure that accountability and transparency are increased

6. Another core value is MYRADA's commitment to manage funds that have been given to it in trust in a way that is not only increasingly effective in its interventions but also least wasteful in management and administration.

Therefore every effort is made to cut conspicuous expenditure on office embellishments, in the use of paper, in photocopying, in hotel accommodation and in the conduct of seminars and workshops. MYRADA does not qualify to be a Gandhian institution, nor does it aspire to be, but the constant concern for cutting costs is a value it wants to preserve.

7. Last but not the least, the core value of honesty in financial transactions, particularly in all transactions involving suppliers, contractors, and people. MYRADA cannot insulate itself completely from the surrounding culture where in the first two categories, a 'cut' which was once called 'bribes' are endemic; they are part and parcel of every transaction in society. MYRADA, at the project levels particularly, makes major purchases. Most are managed by the groups, but in the interests of cutting costs, and reducing the difficulty that people have in travelling considerable distances for purchase and transport of materials, many are purchased in bulk. It is extremely difficult in these cases to conduct a transaction without the supplier or contractor offering a 'bribe'. Yet, in the majority of cases by far we know that MYRADA staff have not succumbed to these pressures. In some cases, however, particularly in some projects, a few staff have given in. At times, these staff are also the best in terms of motivating people; they do not take any cut from the people. Therefore their public support is strong. How does MYRADA cope with these pressures? Decentralised purchasing through groups has provided one answer. However, the pressure to explore the lowest cost option and to open bids in some projects also forces the Organisation to go in for bulk purchases. Ultimately, no amount of control through systems and procedures will protect MYRADA; it is only the commitment of the staff to this core value that will establish credibility and make others hesitate to offer a 'cut'.

There are other values which some staff may consider to be "core values"; they will be added as this process of organisational renewal proceeds.

