

MYRADA

Rural Management System Series
Paper - 8

No.2, Service Road
Domlur Layout
BANGALORE 560 071. INDIA.
☎ : 5353166, 5354457, 5352028
Fax : 091 - 80 - 5350982
E-mail : myrada@blr.vsnl.net.in
Websit : <http://www.myrada.org>
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WHERE THERE IS A MISSION

(A working paper for further discussion in all programmes)

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Aloysius P. Fernandez

While the RMS papers brought out so far document the processes that have developed in some of MYRADA's major programmes they have not spelled out explicitly the main features of MYRADA's strategy which this RMS paper attempts to do.

In 1983 and 1984 we were struggling to see our way through several institutional problems and at the same time to evolve an ideology which, briefly, we interpreted to mean a pattern of inter-related concepts which underlie a vision of society. In 1984 we had written;

"MYRADA does not adopt an ideological stance to development; it does not, therefore, approach every project determined to create a revolution, nor does it accept an established institution as the prime mechanism to implement change. A careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each target group has helped MYRADA keep its strategy flexible and creative. Where it has discovered that existing cooperatives are biased heavily towards the large farmers, it has sought to establish groups of the marginal and landless, often against great opposition. Where change is possible within the existing structures, it has worked to give the marginal actions an effective role in the management. MYRADA has placed its firm belief in organisation of the people."

This approach helped us to relate with other NGOs and to groups in the villages; to respect them, to learn from their experiences and to support them in turn. During this period we had to cope with NGOs who criticised us because they believed in absolute ideology, usually radically formulated. Though often shaken, we refused to become defensive, even though our stand did not attract the attention (from development theorists) that other more radical groups received. Gradually, when we began to assess their approach in reality, we found that some of them used their ideology to justify and rationalise their take over of smaller NGOs who came to them for assistance on the grounds that they alone could organise mass movements which

were necessary to change the system which the smaller NGOs could not. Some of them did not go so far, but took refuge under the pattern of networking, which when further analysed, meant that they controlled and often channeled the funds which these smaller NGOs received.

MYRADA found it difficult to accept the word "ideology" since due to historical linkages the word "ideology" had gathered radical and absolute content. MYRADA on its part, decided that :

1. it would not allow its "ideology" to cloud or obstruct its constant search for solutions to people's problems - solutions which originated from the people.
2. it would not accept an "ideology" which demanded a strategy that was formulated and imposed from outside and in different circumstances and which was limited in scope and did not allow for alternatives. We thought that if an ideology restricts its options for change to a radical restructuring of the system (or to any single option for that matter) then it could also imply that the official system only could solve all problems. This would not allow space for the emergence and nurturing of alternative systems managed by the people.
3. it would make adequate room for staff to identify, evolve and experiment with new strategies that would help the poor to achieve self reliance and which had their roots in rural society.

We realised that this approach called for selective choice of staff, for intensive staff re-orientation and upgrading of skills on a continuing basis.

MYRADA during 1984 - 1986 went through a process of explicitly articulating its mission and of clarifying its goals and objectives and the strategy to achieve them. It adopted the word MISSION which it felt projected a message of a goal to be achieved - a vision of society - and which implied a committed search to achieve this goal. Today, the word MISSION is common in Government which has invested it with content ranging from provision of drinking water to management of wastelands. Underlying these various Missions however, is the common message that these programmes will be implemented with a high degree of commitment, with professional management and completed on an agreed time schedule. A Mission also allows a degree of freedom to adopt alternatives and appropriate and innovative strategies towards achieving the goal.

To make explicitly MYRADA's mission demanded a period of intense reflection, introspection, discussion, sharing and a high degree of consensus. What emerged as the mission statement in 1985 was the following :

"To foster a process of on-going change in favour of the rural poor in a way in which this process can be sustained by them through :-

- * Supporting the rural poor in their efforts to build local level institutions with appropriate and innovative management systems.
- * Influencing public policies in favour of the poor.

It was reviewed in 1988 and a few additions were made :

"To foster a process of on-going change in favour of the rural poor in a way in which this process can be sustained by them through :-

- * Supporting the rural poor in their efforts to build local level institutions rooted in traditional values of justice, equity and mutual support.
- * Working towards recreating a self-sustaining habitat based on a balanced perspective of the relationship between natural resources and the legitimate needs of the people.
- * Influencing public policies in favour of the poor.

MYRADA also decided as a normative goal to work with one million poor and to support their efforts towards self-reliance by 1995.

THE STRATEGY :

With the degree of freedom given by a "mission" to adopt several options, MYRADA then attempted during 1985 to answer the following questions :

1. What should be our approach to the "System" (political, economic, social)? Do we accept the radical demand for a structural change of society as the only solution to poverty? Is the system totally dysfunctional in its strategy to help the poor? Has it become totally insensitive to dissent - treating it as wrong?
2. What should be our approach to components of the system which are meant to implement anti-poverty programmes. In the same context, would it be functional to label the bureaucracy as part of these anti-poverty programmes; or do we assess individuals, within the bureaucracy, many of whom are sensitive, upright, decisive but often find it difficult to function, and often welcome the opportunity to collaborate with NGOs? Briefly, is no one in the system able and willing to implement existing laws and programmes in the favour of the poor?

3. How does MYRADA create a situation where people can develop alternate systems based on traditional patterns and values but with appropriate institutional changes to cope with the emerging social processes, new relationships and needs in rural society? There is ample evidence to prove that such traditional management systems existed in the past but were destroyed or are lying dormant. To hold that only the official system whether the present one or a new one can answer the problems of the poor is to imply that the poor cannot or will not be allowed to develop and revive their own systems based on traditional values and patterns of behaviour which in the past have served their purposes and which if regenerated and adapted will do so in the future.

To summarise therefore - MYRADA did not cling to an absolute ideology but evolved a mission from which flowed a strategy that had three thrusts which are not disparate but interlinked.

1. TO TARGET THE SYSTEM for structural change in the long run and for the creation and implementation of new policies and legislation in favour of the poor in the short run.
2. TO SUPPORT COMPONENTS IN THE SYSTEM and responsive officials in implementing Government programmes and policies to eradicate poverty.
3. TO SUPPORT THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE INNOVATIVE AND APPROPRIATE INSTITUTIONS of the people in their efforts towards self-reliance.

1. TO TARGET THE SYSTEM

A. Why?

There is little doubt that the poorest find it difficult to obtain justice whether in terms of wages, hours of work, possession and use of lands, availability of credit, etc. The attempt to decentralise through the Panchayat Raj has not really helped the poor; it has given power and legitimisation at the local level to the dominant role played by the upper classes and in many places to criminal elements. The recent statement of the Prime Minister to forbid convicted criminals from standing for elections is an effort to cope with part of the problem. Consequently, even officials committed to implementing anti-poverty programmes find it difficult to implement them since they have to cope with the power and political structures which permeate down to the village level. There is no longer a poor man or woman they are either "Congress poor" or "Janatha poor" or "BJP poor".... When funds trickle down through the political system the "syphoning effect" is even higher than when they flow through the bureaucracy.

A structural analysis of society brings out the exploitative nature of society and the nexus between the dominant elements in the political, economic and social sub-systems who join together to protect their interests at the expense of the poor. Laws to protect their rights are not implemented, corruption and delays reduce the benefits they should receive through Government programmes, traditional feudal relations continue to dominate; the poor receive scant respect in Government offices, loans - many of them for urgent consumption needs - are unavailable from official sources, and they have to approach other farmers who provide them at exorbitant rates of interest or on mortgage of their labour and often on lease of their marginal lands. The poor have little faith in the law and order system which, they know from experience, tilts in favour of the powerful especially in the rural areas.

As evidence that the system cannot effectively support the poor, NGOs point to the New Economic Policy which favours increasing liberalisation, privatisation and the domination of market forces, as a result of which resources meant for the poor are diluted and the direct attack on poverty which featured in the 5th and 6th Plans has given way to the trickle down approach of the earlier Plans which failed to make a significant dent on poverty.

Others point out that political processes (which in the final analysis have a value only because they empower the people and which power in turn influences these processes) no longer work or at best are sabotaged. They hold that the political system is today governed by two basic features.

1) distribution of doles. 2) a struggle for power. If one adds to this scenario the general sense of insensitivity for public opinion (the poor do not enter the picture), the distortion of political processes is serious. It is now assumed that public opinion, normally so crucial to healthy political processes can be purchased or manipulated. It can be purchased at election time and manipulated at all times through the press, publicity, TV, AIR and regular dollops of consumer goods. What can one expect of such a political system even when it is decentralised? Unless there are radical changes towards a more egalitarian structure, feudal and even criminal elements will rapidly gain control of the lower level institutions, like the mandals, as is already evident in many states.

B. How?

A structural analysis of this system makes one angry and committed to redress the wrongs committed, but what is the strategy to be adopted? "Society has to be restructured totally; there is no other way", reply some NGOs. But does this involve violence? A few NGOs say "yes" and are ready to accept the consequences including death. Others are willing to talk radically but stop short at placing their lives at risk. Yet others leave the poor to bear the burden of their radical talk. Participants in the exercise of structural analysis of the causes of poverty get angry, and are rearing to change the system; but they soon become frustrated when they discover that they

cannot even change their own organisations, leave alone society at large. Several religious personnel have had this experience.

MYRADA believes that it is necessary to go through an exercise of analysing the causes of poverty if we are to go beyond the symptoms of injustice and understand the causes of the injustice in the system. This exercise, however, should be supported by a field experience, preferably outside MYRADA, where human nature is seen at its worst and best; where one meets with stark suffering which demands full time work like a disaster (man-made or natural) or brutal repression. Such an experience may not help the participants to understand the causes of injustice but it surely helps them to share and feel the consequences with those who suffer them.

Together, these experiences strengthen commitment; but it has to be balanced with the realisation that the strategy to bring about structural change is a long term one and has to be broadbased. To be successful, such a strategy requires that we analyse the strengths and weaknesses of all those involved, that we realise that any hastening of the process could result in more suffering than the poor previously experienced. An analysis of society therefore is necessary, but to conclude that only a structural revolution in the short run is the solution is naive to say the least. From the history of South American countries we find that their revolutions only replaced an elite with another; the poor were always left out.

What then in MYRADA's approach towards the system? As part of our Development Professional Training Programme, we expose our staff in groups to the exercise of structural analysis and follow it up whenever possible with an actual field experience of a movement or a crisis which helps to give them a feel of such situations where injustice and suffering are operationally evident.

We also help them to realise that a strategy for action cannot be worked out as a consequence of a class room exercise which also operates on the macro level and removed from actual field situations. The tools for structural analysis are useful but they are to a degree, abstract. If carried to a particular village the exploiter is no longer a faceless "caste" or "class" or just "A" in an analytical framework. He or she is a name. The relationships are no longer only those of power, they are far more complex - one of blood, of groupings, of political alliances which may link one group of the poor with one part of the powerful. These relationships raise a whole new set of parameters which must be taken into account when strategies are evolved. Further, the exercise on the board does not tell us the varying strengths and weaknesses of the characters involved, the extent of their goodwill or malice. An assessment of these factors is the macro level which is removed from the actual situation will not only be a fruitless exercise, but will above all relegate the people who are the prime movers and actors to a secondary role on whom a strategy is imposed.

C. CHANGE AGENTS — THEY ARE NOT BORN

But why does MYRADA believe that these experiences namely - an exercise in structural analysis and a field exposure - are necessary. To begin with it has on its staff a large number of intelligent, hardworking and honest young people, who come from rural areas, but from richer families in the rural areas, and have grown up in the midst of a feudal and caste influenced society. We find that education which has thrown them together with others of different castes, has weakened their caste pattern of behaviour - they are willing to mix and eat with every one, though they may not eat everything. This degree of openness however, diminishes if they work in projects which cover their own villages where people know them well. Shift them to other areas and they are free to work. But when it comes to class and feudal structures, they are far less sensitive. This is even true of those "committed" young people from institutes like IRMA, IIMS and Institute of Social Studies. These young people most of whom do not come from rural backgrounds have collected over the years a "baggage" which they are unwilling to or find it very traumatic to shed.

Both these groups come with what we call "cultural and psychological *burkhas*". For example, some of those from National Institutions are willing to take a cut in salary but not to off-load any of the cultural baggage collected over the years. They have been conditioned by an intensively competitive educational system, have imbibed the message that they are being groomed to become "managers" with all the frills that this image conjures. Consequently, while some are willing to work for the poor, they are often so alienated that they appear to need the poor more than the poor need their support; many of them demand a great deal of time from colleagues to sort out their own personal problems; they also need and demand quick upward mobility and are overtly concerned with achieving personal goals. This attitude especially in voluntary agencies where commitment to others is rated high, does create certain tension among the staff. We once had a IIM graduate who wanted to work in MYRADA, but who had decided that this was a mere stepping stone to achieve his personal objective - namely a position in an International Organisation related to development - within 10 years. Yet another's ambition was to join the Donor at the first opportunity (MYRADA has also been fortunate in attracting and keeping several of these graduates whose commitment and professionalism is exemplary).

A characteristic common to many in this group is a lack of understanding and respect for people in their traditional solutions to problems and latent strengths; as a result this group is adept at budgetting and trotting out traditional social theory but unable to listen and feel with people and hence do not spot emerging processes through which poor people can move towards establishing self-reliance. Such people need to be shaken up thoroughly so that their "accumulated baggage" falls off; so that their *burkhas* are removed and their sensitivities aroused. A thorough course where they understand the causes of poverty and not just see the symptoms, and an experience which makes them review their expectations and objectives is necessary to make them effective workers in development. Further, a one time experience is not enough; the

burkhas keep returning unless pulled away at least once in two years. Briefly, what MYRADA tries to attract and develop is people with commitment, professionalism, entrepreneurship and the ability to work in a participatory way. It has been fortunate in its efforts to do so.

2. **The second thrust of MYRADA's strategy is to support components in the system and responsive officials involved with programmes to eradicate poverty.** The major focus of MYRADA here is in the following areas :

- a) to motivate and institutionalise the role of people in planning, implementing, managing and sustaining these programmes.
- b) to modify and adapt these programmes where they are inappropriate to local needs.
- c) to influence the effective implementation of existing policies and legislation in favour of the rural poor.

In this area of cooperation with Government there are several NGO positions.

One group holds that NGOs should not collaborate formally in programs sponsored by the Government and should not receive funds directly from the Government; to do so would be to lose their independence and voluntarism; infact there are Government officials also who share this opinion. Another group holds that NGOs have a role to play in Government programmes aimed at poverty alleviation, a role (mobilising people's participation) which is essential to the success of these programmes and which the Government cannot provide; since NGOs need funds, the Government should provide funds directly to NGOs to enable them to fulfill effectively their role in alleviating poverty.

On the part of Government, while senior officers are usually open to collaboration with NGOs, many officials at the local level perceive the NGOs as a threat to their interests or as an outside agency usurping the Government's responsibility. The response of NGOs therefore is also conditioned by the attitude of Government officials with whom the NGO relates, by the NGOs own degree of competence and professionalism (often Government staff are more technically qualified) and their perception of Government's attitudes and roles. The differences in perceptions are conditioned by size, confidence and competence of the NGO, the experience of its leaders, and the orientation of its programme.

The provision of funds plays a major role in this relationship. The Government is aware that it has to back up its support of NGOs with resources, and is willing to give funds directly to them. Some NGOs however, perceive this as the beginning of Governmental control and recall the experience of cooperative societies which started

by accepting funds and ended up under the control of the Government bureaucracy and politicians. Other NGOs feel that dependence on foreign funds tarnishes the image of self-reliance. Besides, those funds can be cut off at any time. Government funds they feel are more reliable. Others take the position that the NGO should have several sources of funds, both indigenous and foreign to enable it to have a degree of independence; further, they say, experience has shown that changes in policy which result in stopping or diminishing cash flows are common to both foreign and indigenous sources. Besides, the Government itself accepts not only large loans and grants from abroad but also technology and management expertise; on the other hand NGOs support the development of peoples management systems and appropriate traditional technologies; so why should only the image of NGOs be tarnished by receiving foreign funds?

There are yet others who are reluctant to receive Government funds directly but are actively involved in mobilising and managing funds given directly to beneficiaries through Government anti-poverty programme. They organise local groups, assist them in developing skills and attitudes to manage and use funds and ensure that these funds reach the beneficiaries in time and in totality. These funds do not pass through the NGO accounts; these NGOs see their role as providing the added service required to make the programme achieve their objective. A large number of Government programmes have been mobilised by MYRADA in this manner.

To what extent can NGOs collaborate with Government without losing or diminishing their voluntary features? Can NGOs perform their role effectively if they are too closely integrated with the Government? The debate continues. In a way it has helped to keep options open and to create opportunities for Government and NGOs to meet, work together and build up mutual confidence. In a limited way, the debate helps to keep the official system flexible, resilient and honest enough to absorb the consequence of involving NGOs especially in organising the poor to participate effectively in their own development.

The importance of people's participation as the key to all anti-poverty or minimum needs programmes has been accepted officially, but its implications have still to be worked out; meanwhile, the official system has to be kept flexible and resilient to absorb the consequences of this acceptance. Once again each experience will differ from the other. MYRADA believes that it has to develop a strategy not only to build effective participation of people but also to make the official system especially at the interface more open, flexible and responsive. MYRADA does not adopt a rigid position that all the Government does is against the development of the poor; to do so would be to close all doors to constructive dialogue. It is finally, the poor who would suffer as a result of such ideological pride.

While MYRADA does collaborate with the Government in implementing these programmes, it has been careful to avoid the image of being a "turn-key" operator or a contractor. If this image of a contractor is allowed to grow, MYRADA would lose its flexibility and the ability to press for change where these programmes are inappropriate. Often Government officials, pressured into attaining targets, find MYRADA non-cooperative since achieving targets is not a guiding norm or the major indicator of success in MYRADA. The pressure on Government Departments to achieve targets in the bio-gas programme (which MYRADA successfully avoided) led to disastrous consequences in Karnataka. Other pressures to install infrastructure and "models", which MYRADA knows from experience to be unsustainable by people, were also avoided. While in the short run, therefore, MYRADA may be considered non-cooperative, its long term strategy has given it sufficient space to involve people in the planning and implementation of programmes which ensure that all infrastructure is maintained by the people and not left unused after an initial burst of enthusiasm and publicity. As a result, of this approach MYRADA today mobilises with the people approximately Rs.2 crores a year through Government anti-poverty programmes. These funds go directly to the poor.

There is another emerging trend which is causing concern. Several international donors who provide soft loans or grants to the Government are now insisting that NGOs should be involved. This requirement is often not based on a real appreciation of the role of people but are usually gestures made to appease pressure groups abroad who have been sharply critical of programmes formulated by experts. Translated in practice, this demand for NGO participation often turns out to be as follows : A team of experts - both from abroad and from India - formulate a proposal. Sometimes an NGO representative (seldom from an operational NGO) is included on this team. The Government is then expected to implement this proposal with an NGO who is brought in after the agreement is signed between the donor and the Government. The NGO which is expected to implement the proposal has had no hand in the formulation. This pattern of operation is becoming common and once again reduces the role of an NGO to a symbolic gesture. MYRADA has been drawn into one such project but is making its involvement conditional to a new formulation of the proposal based on interaction with local groups which MYRADA has organised in the area.

3. How does MYRADA create a situation where people can develop alternate systems based on traditional patterns and values but with appropriate institutional changes to cope with new relationships based on equity and justice and addressing basic needs of the poorest in rural society? There is ample evidence to prove that such traditional systems existed in the past but were destroyed or are lying dormant. To hold that only the official system whether the present one or a new one can answer the problems of the poor is to imply that the poor cannot or will not be allowed to develop and revive their own systems based on traditional values and patterns of behaviour which in the past have served their purposes and which if regenerated and

adapted (in the context of socially functional groups in which there is no domination) will do so in the future. This third thrust is the major one in MYRADA's strategy and is what gives our programmes a distinctive character. Unfortunately this paper is already too long to allow adequate consideration of this third thrust. However, the following RMS papers already brought out have dealt with this thrust in detail and with reference to specific areas and resources.

- RMS Papers
1. Appropriate Sociology
 2. Looking beyond the Cow
 3. Credit Management Groups
 4. Toward a PIDOW model of Watershed Management - PIDOW Gulbarga.
 5. Mini Watershed Management Systems. How they interact in PIDOW Gulbarga
 6. Peoples Participation in the Management of Mini Watersheds - The 'P' in PIDOW
 7. The pains of processes as experienced by 16 womens' groups in Holalkere
 9. The Entry Process.
 10. Look around the Dome (A note on MYRADA's biogas programme)
 12. Village Sanitation.

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