

# Building Communities of Resistance and Hope

## Developing Alternatives

-Mervin Mackwan-

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By any stretch of reality, it would not be rhetoric to say that this world still is an unequal one where only a few privileged individuals, communities and nations have the access to resources of all kinds. This is due to asymmetries, hierarchy and oppression caused and aggravated by various forces<sup>1</sup>. Throughout history the enslaved, suppressed and the underprivileged were not just mute spectators to these forces of oppression. At various points in history they protested and resisted against all sorts tyrannical elements. Uprising and revolutions in the political, social, cultural, and economic aspects of human life dot history of every country. These resistances not only tried to bring change or alter the hegemonic ruling structure but also transformed into movements whereby which brought ideological and action oriented alternatives.

In this seemingly rosy story of how resistance makes this world better through alternatives, lies enormous struggle and tormenting pain endured by innumerable people who wanted to visualize a world where everybody is equal. Enduring pain and struggle is an ongoing phenomenon for those who resist as hegemonic structures change very fast to acquire a new face and compliance to match the resistance of those who are victimized by the same forces.

An attempt is made here to unravel the patterns involved in such struggle, resistance and movements; and some ways to understand such collective mobilisation organically. It is through appreciating, recognizing and analyzing different objectives, ideological patterns, programmes, leadership and organisational structure of people's organisations and movements, the civil society can play a very active and constructive role in supporting and strengthening such progressive collective action and becomes a way of life for those proclaim by equity and justice.

### Understanding ourselves

For the past 27 years CNI Synodical Board of Social Services (SBSS) has been involved with the people's struggles. During these years it has attempted to understand people's aspirations and learn from their experiences. As a progressive and learning organization we have moved from service to the rights based approach with the decade long perspective of *Towards Building Communities of Resistance and Hope*. In the late eighties and early nineties the SBSS leadership<sup>2</sup> playing a prophetic role, had predicted the disastrous effect of changing economic relationship on the poor of our country. In the year 2000 reading the signs of the time it became important for the SBSS to embrace the theme 'building communities of resistance and hope', or 'alternative communities', or in biblical note, 'creating a new heaven and new earth'.

Our understanding is, the *theme* is based on an *activity*, and the activity is *building*. But we also know that when working with people the activity cannot be a one time event i.e., building up human lives is a long cyclical process and ought to be a holistic one also, covering all areas of

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<sup>1</sup> For instance fundamentalism, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, caste, creed and religion, globalisation etc are some of the forces which purportedly keep the asymmetry of relationship alive.

<sup>2</sup> like Bishop Anand Chandulal and Bishop George Ninan

human life as well as all people should be involved in this process. So SBSS through its strategic action plan has developed a time bound programmes with definite methodologies and purpose in this long-term process. The word 'towards' is added to *building* to show that the process has just begun and will continue even after the present time bound programmes end. The key words *community*, *resistance* and *hope* are the objects of the *building* processes, communities of the people needs to be built up, when we refer to communities we are referring to a condition of all human existence as human beings. In the context of *resistance* and *hope*, we are talking about moving towards an authentic community irrespective of caste, creed, sex, age, etc. But united in the suffering and struggle (VEDNA) resist the forces of fragmentation and disunity such as communalism, fundamentalism and strive for a wholesome community devoid of exploitation and oppression. In the present era of globalization competition has become a key word for success which is drastically changing the concept of community. Some people thought that globalization would create more mutuality and interdependence among people and communities and nations, but it has only contributed in fragmenting the society and making community consciousness almost impossible. *Resistance* is the second word, which qualifies and motivates our community to find alternatives and search for alternatives to counter the 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) syndrome. *Resistance* in the context of SBSS is understood in certain ways. They are

- ⊖ Resistance, first of all, is not an abnormal characteristic trait of the affected community. It is present in the very making of society which inexorably produces the consciousness of relative deprivation, creating the reasons for permanent resistance.
- ⊖ Resistance is expression of growing and sign of survival
- ⊖ Resistance is also about who will set the agenda for development and who will handle the decision making process

*Hope* is the final objective in our building process; it has religious and cultural undertones. However it is not just a spiritual exercise. It could be rooted in the experiences and stories of the people. It is holistic and inclusive both here and now and hereafter and could lead and motivate creative action. So the overall objective of the SBSS is building up communities which would resist the forces which destroy human life and environment, divide the community as rich and poor, and move towards an inclusive community.

Having explained the theme which is a mix of politics and theology, SBSS at present is focusing on building communities at the grass root level before entering in to larger arena. Today we are working with 24 DBSS partners covering sixteen states and one union territory of India. We engage with the struggles of more than 2500 communities, at the national level. We have responded to issues of human rights violations, imperialists and capitalist policies of the developed countries and misuse of anti terrorist act. We have about 450 staff who is engaged in the building process at various levels. This engagement with community has given some opportunity to form people's organisation (PO) to address issues effectively as well as to empower the fragmented people by bringing them together who are actually fragmented.

### **Understanding of people's organization**

In the last few years, while mobilizing people for collective action on various issues, we could convert simple mobilisation of people into number of people's organization built in

our reference areas. These collective mobilizations of people are based on some core objectives. They are

- ⊖ Collective mobilisation of people is concerned not only with protecting and enlarging the autonomy of civil society, but also whenever needed alter or overturn the economic and political basis of governance.
- ⊖ Sometimes they may raise issue of humanity cutting across the interests of all classes, but again here the focus and perspective will be of the underprivileged
- ⊖ The lobbying and advocating to create alternative political force will not be in the line of party politics as the alternative political forces attempt to give voice to everybody who is oppressed

It is not how trade, market and the ruling power will be fair to the poor, but it is about how the poor and underprivileged will control the hegemonic forces like market; negotiate with them and overthrow the dehumanizing forces. It is not how majoritarianism will express itself but how minorities will be respected and their dignity will not be in question.

These POs have not only challenging the unjust systems and structures at the village and district level, but also actively participating in the democratic process of the society like contesting elections. We believe that organizing and unifying people is not only for the sake of people's participation alone, but also for increased ownership of the development processes by the communities themselves and their struggles for social change. So attempts have been made to bring a right based and a need based approach together and to converge immediate practical interests in survival and economic development with long term more strategic perspective of social change. For us empowering the POs means enhancing their power to act, based on their unity and identity, and act towards self defined goals, as an influential force or pressure group in civil society. It is a process of building citizenship of the earlier excluded, marginalized and poor communities which gives them a voice and the space in the society to claim entitlements, livelihood and rights. They gain collective bargaining power to struggle for recognition and resource.

In the process of empowering the POs to emerge as relative autonomous entities today we as SBSS and DBSS are challenged to relook at our roles, responsibilities and functions and restructure and reorient their concepts of promotions and their scope of work so as to develop meaningful partnership with the Pos. The ownership and the need for independence have challenges us to redefine partnership in terms of moving from dependence to independence to interdependence. It is our vision that these Pos will some day become an alternative political force which will ensure good governance in this country and justice will be given to all those who are oppressed. As a move towards this direction, in the Panchayat elections we have supported 959 candidates out of whom 112 were women 438 were elected who are now actively advocating for the cause of their people, the role of the Pos was very crucial in the entire process.

### **The way and process**

The marginalised everywhere protest against the oppressive forces. They usually do not mutely witness it. At individual and micro level people in fact show their dissent, protest and their difference. But in a country like India which is characterized by cumulative oppression, it is almost impossible to articulate one's protest in public. The challenge and the responsibility is how to transform these micro level protests into resistance which lead to

collective action. Collective action in the context of SBSS is a step by step process if not a 'linear' development of the same process. By supporting and carving space for micro level resistance, people largely come under an organisational structure. At this level, people organise, become aware of their identity, how unitedly can address the issues and make strategies to make their demand public. Members of the organisation may not have the potentiality at this juncture to address the power structure face to face, but they definitely create a space for themselves as an identity to raise their dissent. When they attain the ideological and operational strength to become a movement, they bring change in the ruling structure or alter the entire structure and find an alternative way to set the agenda, take decisions, acquire and execute political authority. The continuum of collective mobilisation in the context of SBSS thus begins from gathering the protesting voices in to one resisting force to people's organisation and people's movement. Once they become a movement, they obtain the position to alternate the power structure to find alternatives.

### **The Challenges**

The vision of developing a world where oppression, marginalization, communalization, fundamentalism and other social maladies is increasingly becomes a distant dream, in spite of an active history of people's mobilisation and people's movement. In fact most of the time uprising of the people is suppressed with iron hand by the forces of oppression. So the challenge for the civil society, especially for the non-profit sector is huge. These challenges are both external and internal. The internal challenges are

- ⊖ The need to continuously sustain the faith, commitment and the passion of SBSS staff and the implementing partners to fight for people's rights and justice
- ⊖ The need to continuously draw the support of Synod leadership and diocesan leadership to develop alternatives political force
- ⊖ Involving the congregation and making to play an active role in ensuring holistic development of the communities

There are and external challenges also. They are

- ⊖ Growth based development Goals of reformist economic regime
- ⊖ Growing fundamentalism and communalization of politics and the society
- ⊖ Amorphous growth of non-profit sector and their strategies, structure and systems attracting unprecedented views and opinion of the state and public

Unless there are systems, approaches and action plans to counter challenges, it will be nothing but walking in wilderness for the civil society which has moral duty and ethical position take these challenges and convert them as opportunities to work for alternative.

### **The need to participate in the Workshop**

Given the social, economic and political challenges and highly contradictory scenario, especially in the wake of neo liberal globalization and global governance, it has become important for SBSS/ DBSS as civil society organization at the local and national level to take up global issues and get involved in global activism and global lobbying like the transnational corporate sector and the multilateral institutions do. So hosting a workshop on alternatives BCRH and inviting people from the FCFC and DBSS is a perfect opportunity to share our vision and build alliance with other like-minded organisations. It will be good opportunity to share and exchange our experiences, debate, discuss strategies to confront the challenges posed by our people. Our experiences have shown that at present the initiatives of our people's organizations have expanded till district level. It has always been our aspiration to build these small initiatives to a movement. Since SBSS is a network of organization spread

over the entire north India there is an opportunity to bring all the peoples organizations on one platform to lead a campaign on a burning issues and build a movement. So gives us opportunity to learn from other social movement groups and deepen our understanding on building mass movements. It is also an opportunity to witness among various actors of the civil society of the church contribution in nation building.

### **Conclusion**

The most challenging phenomenon our society is facing is that of globalization that has been imposed by the western economy, which is slowly replacing our ancient value systems. Mammon is playing a vital role in the globalization; globalization of economy has also led to poverty being globalised. In our reference areas we have been witnessing the effects of this in terms of starvation deaths suicides and helplessness and hopeless among the reference groups. The forums for collective form of Cooperation ( FCFC) and 20 Diocesan Board of Social Services of Church of North India give us opportunities to forge strategic alliances to confront the problems of this magnitude. In the present context we cannot afford to work in isolation nor can we afford to hide under the grab of religious institution and make our selves inaccessible to others. We are in the danger of being irrelevant, we need to open our selves learn from others experiences and respond to the issue confronting the people. Let us make the best of the opportunities that has come to us