

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

A journal of our collective action

April-May 2024 | Volume 4 Issue 5



People practices in CSOs

CONTENTS

Editorial

- 03 **People practices in civil society organizations**

Reflections & Opinions

- 05 **“Managing people” at work**
How did we get here and what does the future hold?
Sujatha Rao
- 12 **Nurture, trust and patience**
Our mantra for our people
Surya Prakash Rai
- 15 **Building a supportive space: nurturing culture in a non-profit**
Mainak Roy and Trisha Sharma
- 17 **People function practices at Vikramshila: fostering commitment and growth**
Shubhra Chatterji
- 21 **People first: fortifying human capital for grassroots impact at Shiksharth**
Ashish Kumar Shrivastava
- 26 **Nurturing inclusive environments**
Supporting human functions in civil society organizations
Anwar Jafri
- 31 **Reflections on our efforts to build a wholesome organization**
Our principles of action and our gradual training
Arjun Trivedi

Ground Zero

- 37 **Community centred people practices**
What it means and what it can do
Samuhik Pahal Team

People practices in civil society organizations



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Traditionally, civil society organizations (CSOs) in India have not focussed that strongly on people practices in their organizations. A part of the explanation has to do with the fact that focusing on people practices was seen to be a part of the corporate heritage. Therefore, implementing consciously formulated human resources policies were not seen as very appropriate for the institutional culture of non-profit, voluntary organizations.

However, things have changed. Many CSOs now focus on people practices. A part of the explanation must take cognizance of the fact that these days CSR funding comprises a large portion of the financial support for non-

profit work in the country. Another reason has been the increasing difficulty in attracting talent. CSOs are feeling the need to have a structured approach to be able to attract and retain talent.

Irrespective of the reasons as to why CSOs have started focusing on people practices now, their explorations in this space involve many interesting journeys and outcomes. Because of the community orientation of many of these organizations, community members have played, and continue to play, important roles in programmatic and organizational initiatives, both as team members and volunteers. This is critical, as it provides depth to the organization's work

and helps in attracting talent in an organic manner.

Another important aspect to the people practices work in non-profits relates to equity. Some organizations are consciously creating flat structures and keeping hierarchies to a minimum. Capping salaries of the heads of the organizations to a certain low multiple of those who are paid the lowest compensation, is a part of the brew.

Trends involving de-credentialization (where relevant work/volunteering experience matters more than degrees/qualifications) are also a part of this process. In many organizations, this is integrally tied to the process of building teams with community members.

Sometimes, members of the community do not have the required credentials and degrees for the job at hand. Recruiting them irrespective of their credentials, and then building their capacities systematically, is a strategy that many organizations are following in a conscious fashion. Therefore, capacity building is slowly emerging as a key part of people practices of CSOs.

Flexibility is another important facet of the emergent architecture of people practices in CSOs. With the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become evident that many roles in non-profits, such as fundraising and communications, etc., can be performed remotely. CSOs are increasingly resorting to offering remote working opportunities, and other similar elements of flexibility, to attract and retain talent in many key functions.

However, the foundation to all of this is a growing focus on organizational values and culture. In a world, which is increasingly characterized by uncertainty, a shared sense of values, and more importantly values that reflect and ground the mission and vision of the organization, can go a long way in creating organizational cultures that are robust and help in human flourishing.



Apni Shala

If small CSOs operating in a 'project mode' are to stabilize and establish themselves and evolve into 'institutions' that can make long-standing social contributions, this substantially depends on how they are able to attract and retain the right colleagues for the long-term. This includes helping them grow and learn, motivating them, and compensating them fairly, and not just financially so.

This process must also involve creating an organizational culture that supports individuals coming together as a team with a common vision. Thinking through, implementing and continuously upholding appropriate people practices is a crucial enabler in creating and sustaining such a vision, and in translating it into practice on the ground.

“Managing people” at work

How did we get here and what does the future hold?

Sujatha Rao

Homo Sapiens are social animals. Since we made the journey out of Africa some 65,000 years ago, humans have realized that banding and working together provides the species a greater chance of survival, growth and flourishing. For thousands of years, human beings operated in small, nomadic tribes that were fairly egalitarian.

However, the settling of human populations into stable agricultural societies and the development of city-states and organized religions brought about a fundamental restructuring of how human beings managed themselves. Social norms became more complex, hierarchies came into place. The idea of kings and leaders became established within human society and empires were built.

But for millennia, the world of work remained relatively stable. People lived and worked within their own communities. Occupational trades were followed across generations. Work was usually gendered. By-and-large an individual had significant control over their own work and its manner of production. Then something changed and it created a seismic shift in the nature of work and its management.

The rise of the ‘industrial man’

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of enormous change, flux, and volatility. Industrialization had begun in many parts of the world. Colonial expansions into developing countries had enabled factories to source large quantities of raw materials and convert them into products using automated machinery. A strong capitalist/entrepreneurial class had



Meeting with NCSM and CMC officers at Science City Camp Office in Calcutta, 1993

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Biswarup Ganguly

emerged. Notions of efficiency of production, factors of production (land, labour and capital) and ideas of scientific principles by which production and distribution could be managed (Frederick Taylor’s idea of the principles of scientific management) had begun to find mainstream acceptance in society.

As more people moved from farming/ agricultural occupations to trade and factory work in industrializing countries, conditions under which people worked in these factories deteriorated. Human beings were considered to be a factor of production, akin to raw materials and machinery. Child employment was rampant and working conditions were terrible.

Violent clashes between workers, who had organized themselves into unions, and their ‘managers’ and employers broke out in the early 20th century. India was no exception to this rise in union labour. The first registered trade union in India, the Madras Labour Union was founded in 1918. Over the next 6-8 years, industrial conflict, and worker strikes, increased exponentially in the country.

At the same time, countries like the United States and Great Britain were recovering from the aftermath of World War I. Many of these countries were experiencing a severe deflationary period known as the depression in 1920-21. Unemployment was sky high. Conditions of work had deteriorated further and wages for workers had stagnated. These societies recognized that there was a 'labour problem' or issue that needed to be addressed.

Against this background, in 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) was established as part of the Treaty of Versailles. It was set up with the recognition that against a background of exploitation of workers in the industrializing countries at that time, there was a need to establish an organization that focused on fundamental social justice and working rights for everyone.

Frederick Winslow Taylor, industrial relations and the management of labour in factories

Driven therefore by different motives of social justice, broader economic reform, the desire to preserve a capitalist system against the challenges of communism and Marxism and influenced by Taylorism (Scientific Principles of Management), there emerged a group of industrialists, economists and academics who felt that a more collaborative view of the labour-capital relationship was needed.

They felt that the careful application of scientific methods of 'personnel or labour management' and workplace reforms focused on safety and offering a fair wage could result in a balance between operational efficiency, profitability, increased productivity, and worker well-being. This first attempt at 'managing people' in these industrial workspaces was called Industrial Relations (IR).

Frederick Taylor's ideas of management, human motivation, efficiency, and the 'one right way' of doing things disproportionately influenced ideas of managing people at work. For centuries before Taylor, human beings

had developed their skills and knowledge by observing others at work. Informal, apprenticeship-based work was the norm. Even within early industrial work, workers learnt to do their job by observing colleagues, experimenting with their work, and designing work in a manner that suited them. Workers self-regulated the way they worked.

Taylor shifted agency of work from the human being performing the work to a 'manager' who would control both the means of production as well as the knowledge involved in that production. He distinguished between two types of work—the planning of the work and the 'how-to' that lay with management and the execution of the planned work by labourers.

He stated, "It is only through enforced standardization of methods, enforced adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and enforced cooperation that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of enforcing the adoption of standards and enforcing this cooperation rests with the management alone" (Taylor 1919; page 83). From the work of Taylor and others, ideas of division of labour, management vs labour, control and command mechanisms of organizing, hierarchy of command and the division between blue-collar and white-collar or knowledge workers became the entrenched management ideas worldwide.

In the beginning, Industrial Relations (IR) departments in corporations were focused on ensuring that factories and corporations worked without strikes and stoppages. A lot of the work was on negotiating with unions, establishing workplace safety standards, ensuring compliance to work standards, worker attendance, and ensuring compliance with labour rules and regulations.

In opposition to Taylorism

In the 1930s, the Human Relations Movement began. This was in response to what social commentators, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists recognized as the de-

humanization of organizations, workplaces and factories, and the need to stop treating humans as part of the machinery of production.

Social scientists like Mary Parker Follett and Elton Mayo recognized that human beings have social needs. These include the need to be recognized, have a voice and agency over their work, meet and engage with others in the workplace, have some control over the nature of their work, and have informal norms of collaboration and communicating with each other.

The word “Human Relations” was meant to emphasize a return to the notion of labour as a fully thinking, feeling, relational, social person, as opposed to an instrument of production. This movement began to shift the work of IR from purely the management and control of labour into a personnel department that began to think of workplace conditions that fostered more humane practices and methods that could motivate people at work.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a lot of work emerge in the western world around behavioural theories – what motivates human beings in social contexts. Theories of human motivation (such as Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs) as well as leadership ideas around how managers perceived workers (McGregor’s theory X and theory Y) began a movement that is referred to as the behavioural science era today.

Concepts that emerged during this period are prevalent till date. Ideas of two-way communication between management and staff, employee participation in decision-making, joint goal setting, notions of team functionality and group dynamics, management by objective settings, performance management and appraisal systems and feedback loops, greater employee participation in organizational decision making – all emerged from the work of behaviour psychologists asking

fundamental questions around what motivates human beings at work.

The ‘Human’ in ‘Resources’: its rise and critique

By the 1980s, personnel management as a discipline of study had taken firm roots. Capitalist ideas of profitability, shareholder value, expansion and growth, efficiency of operations, globalization and the rise of multinational corporations had grown worldwide. The term “knowledge workers” began to be used in the context of people doing intellectual work as opposed to manual work.

Increasing competition for profitability and market share meant that there was also competition for human talents and skills. Like land or capital, the skilled human being became a scarce resource. The careful utilization of human knowledge, skills, experience and expertise began to be seen as an integral part of an organization’s strategic success. The use of the term Human Resource Management began to replace the term Personnel Management.

Organizations began to set up HR departments to oversee and manage a range of people related functions and processes. HR departments themselves came to be reorganized into sub-teams. These included recruitment and selection, compensation and salaries, performance and career development, learning and development teams, etc. These catered to different needs of people in workplaces. HR managers now had a say in the organization’s strategy and goal development. HR became an integral functional area within management.

The rise of oligarchies and increasing inequity in societies worldwide, led to the rise of a strand of management thinking and enquiry in the 1990s called Critical Management Studies (CMS). CMS began to offer a range of alternative ideas to mainstream management practices. The motivating concern within

CMS was (and continues to be) to critique taken-for-granted management systems that feed into and reproduce social injustices, inequities, and human alienation at work.

Ideas that emerged from such a critique included the questioning of power and its distribution in the workplace. This process brought out ideas of distributed leadership, team leadership, self-managing groups, diversity of thoughts and ideas in the workplace, and servant leadership. The very idea of human beings as resources was questioned.

The growth and development of ideas around managing people in India has echoed mainstream western ideas of people management. Initial forays into people management in India stemmed from the rise of unions and the unionization of textile and mill workers. The first Trade Union Act was established in 1926 to regulate labour issues in pre-independence India.

After independence, the country's pathway from an agrarian society to an increasingly industrial economy and the rise of the services and IT sector in India have echoed the changing patterns of people management seen in other developed economies.

India too has seen the narrative of people management change from Industrial Relations to Human Resource Management. Many of the tools, frameworks, ideas, and belief systems about how people need to be organized and managed effectively, come from dominant western ideas of capitalist economies.

How can people be 'managed' in workplaces?

We now come to the central dilemma in the management of people in workplaces. Year after year, surveys of workplace satisfaction and engagement show dismal results. More and more people are disengaged and unmotivated at work (Gallop, 2023). Studies also show deteriorating mental



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health conditions at work. The Deloitte Mental Health Survey 2022, indicates that 80 percent of the Indian workforce experience mental health issues and 47 percent of the respondents indicated that workplace related stress was the biggest factor affecting their mental health.

Organizational leaders and social entrepreneurs are not exempt from this stress. The “Business of identity: mental health of entrepreneurs” report, 2020, states, “the mental health of entrepreneurs reflects the symptoms of an unrelenting system, in which failure is personal, and success is measured primarily by the wealth of the enterprise, and not by the aspirations or the joy of the work.”

This is even more evident in the mental health of employees in NGOs. Their scope of work is complex. It also often involves threats to personal safety and job security concerns brought on by funding uncertainties. Therefore, a central question emerges. Is it possible to ‘manage’ a complex human being?

Social, economic and political inequities in the world are also staggeringly high (Oxfam, 2023). A generation of young people are craving greater agency with their work, choosing gig employment and contractual work rather than work full-time with one organization (Fortune, 2023). There is a growing demand that workplaces cannot function as machines, but as living organisms that enable people to flourish.

Organizations have also become sites for political activities. There are now demands seeking that a just society must be modelled within the organization itself. Yet, many of the human/people/organizational processes that are in place are legacy ideas that come from an industrial, capitalist concept of growth at all costs. The workplaces of today need a radical redesign.

Civil society organizations – purpose and people

In this complex scenario, what is the role of the industrial relations/personnel management/human resource management/people functions team in civil society organizations (CSOs)?

During the early years of India's independence, CSOs operated primarily as volunteer-driven organizations. Operating as trusts and charitable foundations, they depended on voluntary contributions of time, resources, money and expertise from well-meaning and interested community members. Organizational and governance mechanisms were very fluid and flexible.

Most CSOs then operated within the space of social service. No formal HR functions existed. People participated in the working of these organizations on a predominantly voluntary basis. Formal employment was offered to well-intentioned individuals who were known to the founders or were from the local community.

The early 1960s-1970s flavour of community-led and managed NGOs changed significantly in the 1990s with the sector becoming far more formalized. International donors, large corporate NGOs, NGO networks and mandatory CSR funding have somewhat pushed peoples' organizations and community led initiatives into the background. Legal requirements of governance and monetary accountabilities have also resulted in NGOs adopting

corporate governance structures and strategies.

For NGOs to be seen as legitimate, and attract CSR and philanthropic funding, it has become necessary to adopt the structures, processes and functional departments that are characteristic of commercial enterprises. Formal functional departments like Human Resources have become an integral part of CSO structures.

Adapting HR thinking from the corporate world has meant that typical HR processes are adopted in CSOs too. These include recruitment and selection processes, performance management processes, team management and leadership, compensation and salary structures, training and development functions, etc.

The influence and dissemination of techno-rational management practices from for-profit into the nonprofit world has created significant tensions about how people need to be managed in CSOs. Civil society organizations' very purpose of existence is to work toward the elimination of social inequities and inequalities and bring about foundational justice and freedoms in society. CSOs work to empower ordinary citizens and fight against entrenched power coalitions in society. For that work to happen, the internal organizational world of the CSO must "walk the talk." And many CSOs struggle with this.

It is not uncommon for an NGO to talk about and implement participatory approaches in their intervention programs but be top-down and control-driven inside the organization. Often NGO founders are valorized and placed on pedestals. This creates inequitable power systems within the organization itself. Challenging entrenched ideas of managing an organization becomes difficult when employee voices are not heard or when people refuse to air their concerns.

Mechanistic forms of management, sometimes driven by funder requirements,

can often drive the life and energy out of socially purposeful work, making employees feel little more than cogs in the wheel of a nonprofit industrial complex.

The dysfunctionality and dissonances of the internal world of the organization has a significant influence on its external impact as well. For the over three million active NGOs in India today, this is a key issue to address.

To enable CSOs to internally organize themselves humanely and to enable people to flourish within the organization, careful and purposeful organizational design is necessary. The people function has a central role to play in this.

Redefining people function in CSOs

Perhaps a series of questions can help guide this redefinition of the role of the people function in organizations.

1. What are our belief systems around human beings? Do we see humans as fundamentally curious, creative and thoughtful individuals who can be trusted and enjoy work collaboratively? Or do we see people as essentially resources that need to be put to work, cannot be fully trusted, and need to be controlled and led by a leader? Our belief systems will guide our design of the organizations - will it be top-down and centralized or decentralized with self-managing teams or something in the middle!
2. Whose needs are being served by the people function? This is an important focal point, because the people function team can often lose sight of their reason for existence. Are they serving the purpose of the organization through their activities and the manner in which they conduct them? Are they serving the interests of elites within the organization or the interests of people in the field serving communities that are most in need? And how can the competing needs
3. What principles and values anchor the treatment of human beings at work? The design of all people processes in the organization must be anchored on fundamental principles by which human beings will relate to each other. For example, is it principles of fairness or justice or agency and interdependence? The identification of the principles that matter to the organization will determine the nature and flavour of the HR processes that will be constituted in the organization and the role that the human resources function will take on.
4. What kind of 'society' do we want represented within the organization? If we seek a society that is fair, egalitarian, diverse, inclusive and just, then it becomes necessary for the organization to represent itself internally as the society that it is working toward. All people processes within the organization must represent those values. Non-adherence to some of these principles creates dissonances in organizations. It leaves people feeling disenchanting, demotivated and disconnected from the broader purpose of their work and with the organization itself.

In conclusion

Today there is a movement toward decentralized, self-managed teams with greater agency and autonomy to design and implement their work collectively and collaboratively (Laloux, 2014). Results have shown that as people have greater agency to structure their work, make decisions and work in a more egalitarian way with each other, accountability, and ownership of work increases (Bushe and Marshak, 2016). People also feel more fulfilled.

The function of human resources has therefore shifted considerably from a people

management role to that of an enabler of people flourishing within the organization. This means taking on roles of coaches and mentors and building the capacity of people to lead and manage themselves. The evolution of ideas such as teal organizations, sociocracy, holacracy, and humane organizational designs signal this shift.

This shift in human consciousness and a growing call for creating more equitable societies is an opportunity for CSOs to embrace humans flourishing in their workplaces. Today we have the knowledge, skills, tools, and belief systems to experiment with people practices that are empowering for human beings, sustainable for our planet and create organizations that contribute to the growth of just, equitable and fair societies. It is an opportunity worth grabbing!

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Nurture, trust and patience

Our mantra for our people

Surya Prakash Rai

Creating a diverse team

At PRAYOG, we are proud to say that our team is the heart and soul of our organization. Our library educators are motivated, dedicated and passionate about creating a place of openness, exposure and opportunities in the lives of children and young adults.

They are responsible for curating the collection, planning and facilitating activities, and creating a welcoming atmosphere for children and our community members.

They set the ambience of the library with a welcoming smile and a helpful attitude with growing knowledge about the collection. This enables the users to connect with the library.

Our team is a microcosm of the local community, representing various castes, genders and religions. It comprises individuals with diverse backgrounds, skills and expertise. We work together in a collaborative and supportive environment, sharing our knowledge, experiences and insights to enhance our programs and contribute to collective learning.

Our full-time team now has 13 members. We expect to triple this size by mid-2024. For a long time at PRAYOG, we remained as a small team, with just three people. The importance of identifying suitable people, nurturing them and staying with them, has always been a core value.

The seed to focus on nurturing was sown during the first ever visit by a Wipro team member in 2016. Then very few children could share about the library's books. This



PRAYOG

Debriefing session - an integral practice at PRAYOG

was despite us highlighting about our library work.

Building a culture of inclusion

We started in 2013. The first phase of PRAYOG (2013 to 2018), which was also the phase of initial learning, had four paid volunteers. The volunteers were from the same community. They themselves had shown interest in engaging with our work. It was because of this we decided to pay them, so that they could also continue with their education.

Our intention to engage with children was pure. What has remained constant is the integrity of our people and the commitment to stay with them. By the time we got associated with the Wipro Education Fellowship Program, one of the volunteers, Binit, was ready to take on a central role at the organization. He applied for the Fellowship as well. This was the turning point. Through our association with Wipro, we have benefitted a lot on building our capacities. Binit is now leading our library programs. He has emerged as a thoughtful educator and leader.

The second phase, during 2018–23, was the period of aligning our vision and intervention design. We re-visited our strategies. We also focused on building a team, not only in numbers but also in terms of its quality. In this phase, we included six library educators, five of whom were women. The hiring of the female team members was a result of a suggestion which came from one of our mentors. It has worked beautifully for us.

Keeping capacity building at the centre of people practices

While hiring was one thing, we also realized the need of capacity building. One of the team members, Ragini, often recalls – “When we joined the organization, we had never thought that reading books and discussions around stories would be an essential part of our daily job.”

We have collaborated with organizations and experts in the field of library and early childhood education. We have invested a lot on building our team’s capacities. We plan to continue this at PRAYOG. The effectiveness in our work has come because of this approach. The team’s motivation has also been sustained as a result. Every day, there is something new and no one is bored in their jobs.

We try to ensure that each team member gets sufficient exposure. We send them to attend appropriate training courses outside Bihar. For travel, we take care to make the best possible arrangements. Many a times, they travel by air to save time. All this has also been possible because of the trust that our donors place in us.

Looking beyond formal qualifications

Educational qualification is important in hiring. However, we know our context in rural Bihar. Knowing our youth has been very important. We know that our youth drop out after their higher secondary education and only go to college once a year to appear in their exams. So, what qualifications do we

keep as criteria while selecting people for roles?

In the recent hirings over the past one year, we had higher secondary pass candidates appear in interviews as well. In this process, we have seen that the selected candidates have turned into valuable team members just by constant daily engagement and structured capacity building exercises. They have been quick learners. They have also been taking on responsibilities quite fast. Their longevity in the organization is also high. Since 2020, we have hired eight people. Out of them only two have exited PRAYOG, that too because of personal reasons.



PRAYOG

A read-aloud session in progress, in a school library site

What has also worked for us is patience on our side. Not all will begin to perform and engage as desired. Anita, one of our library educators since 2020, is one such case for us. She would not at all speak in team meetings. Or her voice would be often very low. Sometimes, we would question our decision to select her. However, we then came back to question ourselves. Why did we select her in the first place?

She was selected because she could sing well during the selection process. And then we stuck to our decision and continued engaging with her. Our selection criteria were not based on the qualifications, but on assessing what additional qualities and skills a candidate could bring to the team (e.g., sewing,

knitting, singing, poetry, dancing, etc.), and the commitment to work with the children in our communities. Today, Anita engages very effectively with children. She is also able to present her work to various stakeholders. She is a classic example of what happens when we trust people and give them time to live up to their potential.

When people join us, it's also for their growth. At PRAYOG, we now have a well-defined salary structure which has incentives like health insurance, accidental insurance, and allowances for mobile recharges and travel. For the people who joined in 2020, their salaries have doubled by now. This is also because of the quality of the work that they have been doing.

The self-dependence and mobility that our work offers to women team members is also an additional attraction for them. This is especially true in the case of married staff members, as everyone has to learn riding a two-wheeler. They have expressed their happiness to us many a times that joining PRAYOG marked one of their major life changes, as it involved the freedom to move out of their house for work.

For the library educator cadre, everyone must engage with children in schools and community sites. The more experienced educators are now getting to lead this process. In the upcoming projects, the experienced library educators are getting the supervisory/co-ordination roles. This is because they know much of the details of the work. We plan to hire only for the entry level positions now.

Challenges

By mid-2024, we expect to triple the team size. We are very excited in this journey. However, we do realize that inculcating the values in new team members is a tough task. It will take a lot of sincere effort. The existing team members who will play a larger role in this process also need to be continuously engaged with. This is because values are

something that need to be constantly demonstrated through our work. We also need to go deeper with reflections on our practices.

We have a very well-defined and rigorous hiring process. This helps us identify the potential candidates. However, our induction process needs to get more streamlined. The supervisory cadre, comprising of the more experienced library educators, are almost ready. We need to nurture them and have trust in them. They are the ones who have lived through the values of PRAYOG. And they are the ones who would nurture the next pool of people joining us.

Nurture, trust and patience are the three values that we have been learning through practice. We want to keep this process of learning alive!

Surya is the founder of PRAYOG and has been a Wipro Fellow from 2018 to 2023. He currently focuses on the design and capacity building vertical of the organization. He also engages with diverse stakeholders to keep the library work thriving.

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The Prayog team

Building a supportive space: nurturing culture in a non-profit

Mainak Roy and Trisha Sharma

The world of education is often filled with unsung heroes. For two years, Mainak worked as a government schoolteacher. In the process, they witnessed firsthand the dedication of these educators despite the lack of support and resources. This experience fueled their desire for change and led to the creation of Simple Education Foundation (SEF).

SEF has two main goals - to empower government schoolteachers and create classrooms where children can truly thrive. We believe that a child's success in the classroom translates to success in life. However, reaching a million teachers across India was a monumental challenge that could not be tackled alone. SEF needed a strong foundation – a vibrant culture where everyone can grow and succeed.

Building a positive culture is a difficult task that requires unwavering commitment. At SEF, we are determined to break free from the stereotypes of non-profits being unprofessional or delivering subpar results. We aim to be a high-performing, data-driven organization with a deep connection to the communities we serve.

Overcoming challenges

One of the challenges we have faced is the lack of funding for capacity building, which is crucial for developing a strong team. Donors often prioritize immediate program implementation over long-term investments in our people.

This makes it difficult to cultivate a learning environment that is necessary for sustained excellence. However, we remain committed

to building a thriving culture. We try to do this by actively investing in capacity building for individuals, teams, and the larger organization.

Empathy and inclusion

Non-profits champion humanity and inclusivity. Yet, the sector itself often falls short in these areas. This can lead to burnout and disillusionment among talented individuals. At SEF, we strive to break this cycle.

We do this by actively building a humane and inclusive organization. We want SEF to be a space where people from diverse backgrounds feel safe to express themselves and be themselves. We understand that this is an ongoing process. It requires constant effort and persistence.

Building the team

Attracting and retaining talent remains a constant challenge for non-profits. This is due to the lack of talent in the ecosystem and weaker remuneration structures. At SEF, we have taken several steps to address this issue.

We have made our salary bands public. This ensures transparency. It also provides clarity for potential candidates. We have developed a comprehensive competency framework. Its goal is to identify individuals who align with SEF's culture and the dispositions required for each role. We prioritize learning and growth opportunities for our team members.

We intentionally recruit for early-level roles. We provide opportunities for internal growth



SEF

into senior positions. This approach has helped us retain talent. This also ensures continuous learning.

Spaces to learn

One of Mainak's earliest learnings at work was the influence of both physical and figurative spaces on learning. At SEF, we have created open spaces like "Voices of SEF" to explore identities and how they impact our work and approach.

These spaces allow us to understand each other better. They also strengthen our commitment to the organization's culture and values. We have designed our office to be a safe and comfortable space for our teams. It provides simple joys like a comfortable sofa, a cold glass of water after a long week, and thus is welcoming to all.

In conclusion

SEF's journey is far from over. We continue to refine our approach. We are constantly learning and adapting. However, one thing remains constant. This is our belief in the power of a strong culture.

It is the invisible thread that binds us. It empowers us to tackle ambitious goals. It also fosters an environment where individuals can flourish alongside the organization they work for.

In a world often focused on outcomes, SEF champions the journey. We believe that by building a thriving internal ecosystem, we can create a ripple effect. This can potentially empower educators, enrich classrooms, and ultimately shape the lives of countless children.

This is the legacy we strive for. It is a testament to the transformative power of a culture built with intention and nurtured with care.

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People function practices at Vikramshila: fostering commitment and growth

Shubhra Chatterji

Nonprofit organizations, established with the intention of positively impacting society by addressing specific needs and challenges, initially operated with the dedication of volunteers guided by a strong sense of purpose and mission. Over time, they have undergone a formalization process. They have been developing their own sets of policies related to recruitment, retention and staff development. These days the policies often resemble practices observed in the corporate sector.

Nonprofits rely on external grants for sustainability. They face challenges in attracting skilled and passionate individuals. This is due to lower salaries compared to the corporate and government sectors. The temporary nature of many nonprofit roles, often linked to specific, time-bound projects, complicates recruitment further.

Despite these hurdles, nonprofits strive to fulfil their missions of social change. They must navigate the delicate balance between operational sustainability and impactful work. This has to be often figured out within the constraints of project-based funding and a competitive job market.

People matters: the Vikramshila story

Vikramshila had its beginnings in 1989, initiated informally by a group of individuals. Until its formal registration, those involved were voluntary workers, dedicated to their tasks without monetary compensation. The focus was on the evolving idea, with financial considerations taking a backseat. The



Vikramshila

dynamic shifted with formal registration and the launch of a specific full-time project.

Through steady growth, Vikramshila now has 139 staff members, working on 15 projects across various states and regions. Through time, some have remained while others have left. Currently, 70% of our team has been with us for more than three years. In a 35-year organization, the average age continues to be 35. We remain young and open. The average tenure is five years. Nearly 30 percent of the current staff have a tenure ranging from 5 to 35 years.

In the early days recruitment was informal. It was based mostly on referrals. Over time, we have adopted a structured approach. This includes assignments and interviews to ensure role fit. Yet, assessing candidates' motivation, dedication, and value alignment remains a challenge. Sometimes, a sincere personal interview offers deep insights into these crucial areas.

Our approach to people management has primarily relied on intuition, shaped by our

The Vikramshila approach to people practices

Issues	Our approach
Hiring/ Recruitment	Structured recruitment via assignments, FGDs, panel and personal interviews. Sourcing through advertising, social media, and referrals.
Capacity building	Initiatives encompass induction, fieldwork, mentoring, exposure to projects and organizations, and certified courses (e.g., SEL by UNESCO) with possible funding. Knowledge sharing involves academic discussions and expert interactions.
Motivation	Values alignment, fostering individual growth, mental well-being support, mentoring, and recognizing good work are key.
Compensation	The policy aims to maintain parity with similar organizations to the extent possible. Performance-based appraisals and increments.
Equity and diversity	Our ethos values innovation and performance irrespective of tenure. Our diverse workforce includes 58% aged 25-35, 30% aged 35-45, 10% aged 45-55, and 2% over 55. Additionally, 20-30% represent minority groups, and 58% are women, with 44% in middle and senior management roles, fostering diverse perspectives.
New lines of leadership	Practice of decentralized functioning adopted along with distributed leadership to encourage the emergence of new leaders.
Challenge mitigation	Challenges involve funding uncertainty, short project cycles, and external changes. Solutions include retaining talent and collaborating with similar organizations to navigate changing ecosystems and adapt.

collective experience. The success we have achieved in retaining a motivated team can be attributed to several factors. These include our commitment to learning, a value-driven approach, open communication, mentorship, and a culture of experimentation.

The NGO as a learning space

In a bid to understand our practices in retrospect, and through a variety of perspectives, we reached out to seven former employees of Vikramshila, who spent between 2-8 years in the NGO to revisit on their tenure. There was a uniform reminiscence on both their professional journeys and personal development.

They spoke of a culture of genuine respect, understanding and faith, collaboration, camaraderie and mentorship. They believed this led to a community where innovation

was encouraged and celebrated, providing a fertile ground to bring their ideas to fruition.

They felt that this space and learning environment was pivotal in fostering confidence and allowing for the experimentation and design of new initiatives without the fear of failure. The emphasis on continuous learning and skill development with workshops, trainings, exposure visits and regular brainstorming, underpinned the



Vikramshila

organization's commitment to employee growth and career advancement. There was a recurrent mention of a culture of minimal hierarchy, as appreciated by employees which led to an environment free from coercion and overburdening.

We have spoken at length with those who have chosen to remain with us. What emerged was that they have been drawn to the organization's focus on a variety of opportunities, vertical and lateral growth, and a sincere commitment to staff well-being. They have also found opportunities for upskilling and constant learning meaningful.

Furthermore, the organization's mission, centered around making a positive impact on children's lives, on those who are the most vulnerable and marginalized, resonates deeply with them. This seems to have infused their work with a sense of purpose and fulfilment.

The importance of collectively developing a value-driven organizational culture

Our aim has been to establish a work environment that goes beyond the traditional employer-employee dynamic. We have also tried cultivating a community dedicated to making a meaningful impact on the ground.

It was also felt that the organization extended beyond mere professional support. It was evident in the flexibility offered to accommodate personal needs and promote a healthy work-life balance, crucial for those managing multiple uncertainties and commitments.

One of our ongoing challenges is retaining dedicated, high-performing individuals during lean periods, between project gaps. Our ability to offer competitive compensation is constrained by bottom lines and donor directives. The absence of institutional funding has further limited our investment in

Voices of team members

We share here the voices and responses from some key staff members, who continue to work with us. These provide a sense of the team's own understanding of how they perceive the NGO's HR policies.

"The organization's on-ground connect, provides me an opportunity to engage directly with communities on the margins. This is important for me."

"I do not look at it as my job, but as an opportunity to make a difference. I also value the humility of the organization, with no pretence of 'knowing it all' despite its extensive experience."

"Here I got an opportunity to engage with diverse projects. And that has helped me in my personal growth. The democratic functioning and absence of a rigid hierarchy promote an atmosphere where I was always encouraged to learn, adapt and grow."

"The organization is passionate about ground and field level work, which aligns with my own values."

"Whenever I faced challenges in the 15 years of my time in the organization, I was mentored by my seniors. Resolving complex challenges has given me resilience and lateral thinking."

"I like the balance between disciplined independence and accountability, that I find here."

"The organization's humaneness, empathy during personal challenges, and lean structure that encourages personal growth contributing to a sense of achievement and satisfaction – this is what has made me stay on for this long."



Vikramshila

staff capacity building, compared to our ideal aspirations.

Despite these significant constraints, any social sector organization driven by purpose, integrity and dedication can still attract the right individuals by fostering a culture of growth, independence, and genuine concern for staff well-being. Our journey hasn't always been smooth. We have encountered instances where individuals with different values have disrupted the equilibrium. However, they have transitioned out sooner than later.

In conclusion

Organizations can attract individuals by communicating about what they offer in terms of culture, opportunities, learning and exposure that can help the motivated individuals see past the salary. In the social sector space, or for that matter elsewhere as well, people practices are intimately tied with commonly held values and patterns of organizational culture.

Living out the organization's values on a daily basis is crucial. This stems from those in leadership positions. These values must be operationalized in the routine functioning on the ground, both within the team and how the organization interfaces with the field.

We have worked on establishing a framework of people-centred equitable practices. This has always drawn from the organization's own experiences. This continuous effort that aims to create an environment where individuals aligned with our values thrive, has contributed to the sustained growth of our organization.

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People first: fortifying human capital for grassroots impact at Shiksharth

Ashish Kumar Shrivastava

People are the key

In 2013, during an encounter with a government teacher in Dantewada, I was told, “You all seem to have excellent programs. But how can we implement them with only two hands?” This sentiment, whether expressed explicitly or implied, became a recurring theme. Government officials and community stakeholders seemed more enthusiastic about partnering with individuals who were willing to work alongside them, rather than merely introducing impressive programs.

This realization became one of the founding principles while setting up Shiksharth in 2015. Working alongside community stakeholders is a central part of our strategy. While funding support is essential for the work, developing long-term advocates for children in conflict zones is paramount.

The essence of a grassroots organization like Shiksharth lies in its community engagement, necessitating a hands-on approach. Recognizing the importance of recruiting committed individuals early on, we understood that merely securing funding was not enough for our mission’s success.

Challenges in team building

Over the past decade, our recruitment efforts for over 5,000 individuals have highlighted three main challenges in building teams in remote areas. These are briefly discussed below.

Lifestyle change: The shift to living in remote, rural, or tribal regions requires significant personal adjustments, deterring many from such commitments.

Desire for systemic transformation: Many young, talented people are more inclined



Shiksharth

toward systemic change, like policy design, rather than grassroots involvement. This limits the pool of candidates for fieldwork.

Professional stigma: Working in rural or tribal areas is often undervalued. This affects opportunities and perceptions compared to urban experiences. This is so, despite the critical impact of such roles.

These insights shed light on the complex realities of building a committed team in less accessible areas. These also underscore the importance of addressing the challenges to attract and retain talent in the development sector.

Challenges of people practices for a CSO working in a remote geography

Beyond recruitment and induction of team members at Shiksharth, routine people functions, particularly for those based in Sukma, are profoundly affected by a range of challenges. These extend beyond the apparent hurdles associated with operating within a conflict zone. These impact the very fabric of our work and the conditions under which our team members operate.

The challenges outlined below significantly influence our day-to-day operations, the overarching mission, and the effectiveness of our initiatives. They require thoughtful consideration and strategic interventions to ensure the well-being and productivity of our workforce and the successful implementation of our programs.

Capacity building and team performance at Shiksharth: Despite a lack of concrete evidence, a discernible pattern suggests that individuals drawn to grassroots work, particularly in rural or tribal areas, arrive with robust fieldwork skills. However, they often encounter difficulties with program design and strategic thinking. We have observed that our team members excel in community mobilization and implementation tasks. But their programmatic thinking is somewhat limited. This limitation hampers the efficiency of program delivery. It highlights a critical

About Shiksharth

Shiksharth develops contextually relevant, positive childhood experiences for children coming from spaces of conflict and adverse geographies. It does this through an integrated approach, which includes strengthening classroom instruction, community participation, and system support.

Based out of Sukma, Chhattisgarh, Shiksharth has been working in government schools in the state's Bastar region. In the last nine years, the CSO has served 50,000+ children and 500+ schools in the region. These include 300 reopened schools earlier destroyed because of conflict, and 6,000+ out-of-school children coming back to school.

With a team of 60+ people, which involves 40 local community youth, Shiksharth now works in 400+ schools and community centres in the region. In the process, it serves 15,000+ children in elementary classrooms through interventions in school support, multilingual education, STEM and ecology education.

need for enhancing strategic planning and design skills within our grassroots team.

Employee retention: At Shiksharth, a notable challenge has been retaining young professionals who, despite their initial commitment to long-term, grassroots work, find sustaining prolonged engagement in remote areas challenging. The average tenure observed has been of two years. After this period, individuals often depart due to better job prospects or the desire to be closer to home.

This high turnover rate necessitates frequent induction and orientation for new team members. It leads to significant knowledge loss. Recognizing this challenge, we have

explored solutions such as offering remote working opportunities to retain talent and mitigate the impacts of frequent transitions.

Employee engagement: Sustaining long-term employee engagement needs innovative and adaptive strategies. This is a critical requirement in remote geographies, where conventional recreational options are limited. At Shiksharth, we recognize that engagement must go beyond the mundane. It has to address the unique needs of team members and the desire for fulfilment and instant gratification prevalent among today's youth.

To combat this, we continually seek new ways to engage our team. We understand that a dynamic approach is essential for maintaining enthusiasm and commitment. Some of the aspects of such an approach include relaxed work timings, frequent group get-togethers in the form of picnics and sight-seeing, etc.

Social and intellectual isolation: In the secluded geography of our operation, both the founding team and newer members have experienced a sense of intellectual and social isolation. Despite the presence of a supportive community, the craving for intellectually and ideologically aligned companionship remains unmet. This often leads to a sense of loneliness that can demotivate team members.

To address this, Shiksharth has implemented various measures. These include remote work opportunities and engagements with diverse programs to foster social and intellectual connections. However, the challenge of replacing face-to-face interactions with virtual ones persists. We are firmly convinced that the challenges outlined are not unique to Shiksharth. These are shared by many organizations working intensively in rural or tribal settings across a variety of themes and domains.

The importance of value alignment

Surprisingly, we have found that the right mindset and personal qualities outweigh

skills in importance for impactful work. We prioritize four values that we have found to be critical. These four values are humility, perseverance, the willingness to learn, and skills and competency. This prioritization reflects our belief that enduring and thriving in challenging settings requires more than just talent. It demands patience, humility and perseverance.

The four values/traits we prioritize have led us to pass on some candidates. They had exceptional talent. However, they seemed to lack the patience and perseverance essential for on-the-ground work. Working with a grassroots organization, especially in challenging locations, is often an underappreciated endeavor. Achievements can go unnoticed, far from any spotlight, with success stories being few and far between. Daily, one faces unpredictable challenges, making humility and perseverance both valuable and necessary for enduring and thriving in such an environment.

Developing local talent is crucial but time-consuming. There is thus a challenge in balancing between the need for immediate results and cultivating long-term expertise. Initially, local talent offers vital context and engagement, complemented by external members' programmatic contributions.

As roles evolve, locals increasingly lead. This needs a development trajectory of around 3 to 5 years. This timeline is often at odds with the current preference for quick outcomes. This necessitates initial reliance on external talent.

Principles and practices for a people-centered human resource strategy for CSOs

Reflecting on the complexities we face, our human resources strategy is aligned with the following principles. These aim at addressing both the needs of our team and our programs' goals.

Recruitment and induction: We ensure a thorough immersion phase for new recruits.

This allows them ample time to assess their fit for fieldwork before commencing with their specific responsibilities. This phase includes comprehensive discussions with the leadership team.

Our interviews are adaptable. These accommodate different languages. Our questions are also tailored to individual candidates. The selection process begins with an orientation. This provides a deep dive into the organization's culture and values.

Comfortable living and working conditions:

We recognize that finding suitable accommodation and managing daily logistics can be a challenge in the geography we work in.

Therefore, we prioritize providing a supportive environment. This includes quality boarding and lodging options. For example, we offer fully furnished accommodation and kitchen facilities along with a cook for anyone who joins the team.

In addition to this, two-wheelers are made available to all the team members. We have seen this as a gamechanger for people who come with lots of anxiety and concern at the time of joining. Additionally, the organization also offers interest-free loans to team members for any personal emergencies or needs.

Capacity and profile development: Beyond building skills, we focus on enhancing each team member's career prospect. We try to facilitate this through intentional design in our organizational structure. We support both professional growth and profile enhancement.

In the last three years, our team has attended different capacity building workshops in pedagogy (STEM education, multilingual education, library engagement, leveraging art, writing for children, etc.), leadership development (individual and group), organization development and domain

knowledge (gender, menstrual hygiene management, ecology, etc.). We also support mentoring processes for everyone in the team through internal and external mentors.

Well-being support and flexibility: We acknowledge the stress and isolation that can accompany ground-level work. Therefore, we emphasize sincerity over outcome. We strive to create a supportive environment for our team members. They are encouraged to maintain their mental and emotional health.

Relaxation and time-off options are not counted against leave balances. This ensures that well-being is prioritized. Recognizing the need for improvement, we continue to develop support systems for our team members to express themselves and take necessary breaks.

Some of the primary support we provide is in the form of our policy on leaves. We have more than 36 days of leave in a year. Along with that, the policy provisions 4-10 days of work from home for team members who come from outside Sukma.

Team members are free to take days off for simply stepping out. We have also been in touch with counsellors in case any of the team members needs help and support. We have not had any one avail of the services yet though.

One highlight for us has been designing the holiday calendar keeping in mind local context and festivals. This means our local team members get additional holidays depending on different rituals and festivals in their communities.

Multiple levels of check-ins (formal and informal) with co-founders, the operations head, and the program heads help us provide support to our team.

Quality and accountability frameworks:

We have tried to implement a system that emphasizes quality and accountability.

This helps team members appreciate the impact of their work. They are also able to understand their contributions to our collective goals.

We co-create monthly outcome-based action plans with our team member. These individual action plans are created in alignment with the overall organizational and programmatic goals. This helps the individuals to self-review their work. All our products are peer reviewed along with feedback from the ground to improve the quality.

Leadership development from local talent:

We are committed to cultivating leadership within local communities, preparing individuals for roles at various organizational levels. This helps ensure sustainable development and representation. We are working toward a goal of handing over the entire operation to local team members by 2028. We have already identified eight people as potential leaders in the organization. Simultaneously, this academic year, the second line of leadership will be managed by local team members. Adequate program management and task management skills are being introduced to the team.

Acknowledgment of organizational vulnerabilities:

We are transparent about our limitations. We advise potential recruits about the realities of working in grassroots settings. This includes managing expectations around compensation. Usually this is sufficient only for basic living costs. We try and prepare them for the possibility of feeling isolated, despite our best efforts to foster a supportive team environment. We believe that individuals who can navigate these challenges with emotional resilience, perseverance and patience are best suited for long-term engagement with our work.

Remote working for long-term employees:

After two years, team members who wish to remain with Shiksharth but need to work from remote locations are afforded the opportunity

to do so. This helps them maintain their contributions to our vision, while balancing personal commitments.

Expanding remote opportunities: We recognize the need to tap into a broader talent pool. Therefore, we have recently made positions in communications, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and content development available for remote work. We have done this with the goal of strengthening our program delivery.

These initiatives underscore our commitment to foster a supportive, flexible and growth-oriented workplace. This is a result of our recognition that the diverse needs and potentials of our team members need to be supported, as we pursue our mission.

Around 70% of our team comes from the local communities. This highlights our commitment to developing local leadership and ensuring our operations are driven by those we serve. We are striving to transition the entire operations to local team members in the next five years. This underscores the importance of patience, listening, and fostering a culture of trust within our organization.

We sincerely believe that our people are our greatest asset. This drives us to address the challenges of human resources management. This effort requires time, commitment, and ecosystem support to transform how solutions are implemented and co-designed, contributing to a broader impact.

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Nurturing inclusive environments

Supporting human functions in civil society organizations

Anwar Jafri

Introduction

Both in civil society and community-based organizations that give primacy to education and learning, fostering inclusive and participatory environments is not just an aspiration—it's an imperative. When we consider the issues involved in human functioning and team dynamics of any organization, we find that the landscape is complex and interesting. It is full of intricacies, which demand thoughtful consideration and unweaving.

A rich literature is available today on these topics, including in the specific context of civil society organizations (CSOs) from which practitioners can learn. In addition, many young people with professional training in organizational development (OD) are entering CSOs today. However, conditions were very different some thirty to forty years ago, when CSOs started functioning on a larger scale. While looking back at the initial years of CSOs' formation and functioning, we find that in many ways most members were rather unprepared to deal with human dynamics and other related aspects of organizational functioning.

At that time there seemed to be disdain amongst CSOs for learning from writings on management or team processes. These were linked in our minds very closely with business and corporate practices and hence to be avoided. Engagement with a formal understanding of organizational and team functions was yet to find its way into the cultures of pioneering CSOs, such as Kishore Bharti, Vidushak Karkhana or Eklavya. Each group laboured to evolve its team structure

and dynamics, and build its own system of decision making, from scratch. This was often at a cost to team members and their efficiency. What many members shared in fair measure in those early days was a strong commitment to the CSOs' vision and the ideas of programs. They also had firm beliefs in ethical and participatory functioning.

In organizations, as in society at large, there have often been high and unrealistic expectations from the leaders. A leader is expected to be a know-all, who will solve all the problems. And because of these expectations, many leaders try to fit into such an image. On the other extreme, in organizations, which laid stress on introducing democratic functioning, there were efforts to downplay the role of any one leader, leading to a philosophy of "no leader". When a democratic form of leadership is used, the leadership will inform and consult the group. This means taking inputs and feedback while taking decisions. This will lead to higher levels of engagement and commitment and bring in diverse perspectives and inputs to problem solving.

A more interesting scenario for participation emerges when the leadership recognizes its own limitations. Thus, leadership is distributed amongst members of the team, according to the perceived, context-specific requirements. Recognition of their own limitations by leaders will help them create new roles and avenues for the team. This could potentially compensate for these limitations. One method for doing this, would be to create spaces for constructive dissent, when leadership is perceived to be making a mistake. And additional forms of distribution



Samavesh

of leadership could be to include delegation of leadership functions amongst team members. With such issues and questions in the background, it would be interesting to listen to actual experiences of some leaders and senior members of CSOs, who have played a role in charting a path from the early days of an organization to an established and stable status.

Diverse paths to participatory functioning

It is instructive to hear different narratives of the development paths followed by CSOs that have achieved a high level of stability and effectiveness. Through what processes did they reach their present levels of program management and decision making? What were the debates around issues of hierarchy and participatory processes? How were decisions taken regarding organizational systems?

To get some insights into such issues, I decided to learn about the historical processes regarding initial setting up and consolidation, leadership formation, participation and team dynamics in decision making, etc., from some senior members and leaders of different organizations. My objective was to understand the experiences and dynamics that team members and organizations went through in evolving stable systems and styles of leadership. How did the systems and structures in

organizations evolve as they grew in size and understanding? Why were old systems given up in favour of new processes?

To initiate the discussions, I posed some basic questions to the leaders and senior members. I list a few of these here. When your organization started, did you have a collective understanding of human functions, such as team dynamics, decision making, etc.? How did this understanding develop? Was any planned external support taken to take this process forward and how effective was this? Was there any special focus on participative leadership in the group? What was the strategy adopted for this and how effective was this?

Capacity building for an egalitarian society: the case of Vikas Samvad Samiti

With these questions on my mind, I had a discussion with Sachin Jain, who now works as the Director of Vikas Samvad Samiti (VSS). It was formed in 2001 as a project in Bhopal. Today VSS is a research, documentation and capacity building organization that works to build a team of socially sensitive cadre of workers and communicators in the nonprofit sector. In this interview, Sachin Jain talks about how the organization initially functioned in a centralized manner. However, over the years, experience taught him the need for participatory functioning. Following this, organizational change processes

were introduced. It is instructive to see the introduction of formal systems and OD processes, as VSS has developed from a small organization into one that has been taking up bigger responsibilities in several states in the Hindi belt.

Personal beginnings: Sachin did not have any background of social service at home that would prepare him for civil society work or activism. His father had worked in a bank, and his grandfather was a pujari in a mandir. So, he says, he found himself totally isolated in the family, while developing this interest to be involved with social issues. In his community, there were strict social norms. For instance, they would not even drink water in another Jain family. Water would be warmed before drinking and could be used only for three hours after that. So, many eyebrows were raised when he first decided to do a summer project in tribal Bastar.

Later, while thinking about the nature of the organization he wanted to set up, he was clear that he did not want to make this a “personal entity”. People who were associated with him and later became part of the Board, were very supportive in giving praise. However, they could not offer any critical inputs, which he feels was required.

How are we different from other organizations: Sachin wanted to be clear how his organization was different from others. So, he would often pose the following question in his team. “Why are we here? What sort of a society do we want to build?” He tried to ensure that the vision and mission remain critical in decision making at both the institutional and individual levels. He realized that if the organization’s vision is not kept central to the decision-making process, then a leader’s individual thinking may take over and foist its direction on the organization.

Decision making in a small organization: Like some other founders, Sachin had not worked with any other organization. So, this was his first organization. He was learning from scratch. Everything was an experiment, and

an opportunity to learn, without the shadow of another organization falling on him.

Sachin related that, to begin with, there were only five people in the organization. They interacted continuously to understand each other. This happened both inside and outside of the meetings. As a result, their decisions were not just the result of meetings. The personal interactions they held outside of the meetings also contributed as well. This worked well in a small organization. It also seemed quite democratic. Any conflicts or differences were sorted out through mutual interactions. Contexts were clarified at the platforms available for discussions.

Challenges of growing bigger: Once the team grew in size, the continuous sharing and close understanding of earlier days was not possible. Team members had to take decisions through formal meetings. This often did not give time for differences to be sorted out or contexts to be clarified. In a centralized system, the pressure on a single leader kept growing. Sachin found that he had to take most decisions single-handedly. From repairing a broken tap in the office to the appointment of a new team member, each problem was being referred to him. This made him uncomfortable and irritable.

He had believed in being accessible. So, the accountant would walk in unannounced any time with cheques or other budget work. He had little time left for his writing and research. His role in trainings and material development was also getting affected. It was this compulsion that made him realize the need for decentralization. It led him to develop participatory systems in the organization.

The responsibility for all financial matters, along with program implementation and reporting, was handed over to the program leads. All roles and responsibilities were clarified and fixed before a project was started. In the project plans, each activity had to be broken into a monthly plan, along with a concept note to explain why an activity had

been included. An expenditure plan was also prepared. This was linked to, and had to be kept within the limits of, the project budget. A program committee was set up to oversee these operations. Thus, the load for managing programs was distributed amongst team members.

This was some years ago. Since then, Vikas Samvad has initiated a full-fledged OD program with support of a professional organization. This is helping them to plan ahead in a comprehensive manner. However, this should be the subject of a separate story.

Collaborative beginnings for collective action: what it takes to plan for and start a democratically run CSO

The second case study describes the initial processes during the establishment of an organization. It was set over forty years ago to work in school education by a group of young academics. They had already been working together to develop shared goals and mutual trust. This founding group of six persons had support from members of another organization. The latter had served as a base organization for the new initiative. To understand the dynamics of this process, I talked to a senior member associated with the organization since its inception. We shall call her Kavita. Some critical points about what gave a strong foundation to the new group emerged from this interview.

The new organization was not the result of an individual's initiative, but the outcome of joint efforts by a group of motivated individuals. They had left their jobs to commit to full time participation in this new initiative. The group spent more than a year in preliminary planning and in examining alternative strategies to start work. No external inputs regarding organizational systems and structures were taken. However, the experience of the supporting organization provided a strong base of values and operating systems for participative functioning.

Starting with a process of group leadership of diverse individuals seems to have provided many benefits. It provided the organization with a broad base of academic and social skills. It also helped attract new members with diverse backgrounds and interests. Kavita had participated in group meetings of the founding group, since she had been visiting the parent organization for her master's project work. However, at that point, she was not part of the new group being formed. But she had sat through many discussions in the new group, since these discussions were open and were being held in an inclusive manner.

Her insights give interesting pointers about the dynamics in the organization during its formative years. A critical contribution to the institution building process was made by a member of the group, who invited written views from the other members on their vision for the new organization. Based on this, a consolidated paper was shared with the group for discussions and to develop a unified vision. This was a timely input that helped develop mutual understanding. It also brought cohesiveness in the objectives and priorities of the group's members.

Another member played a crucial role in meeting and motivating new members to join the group. After participating in the initial stages of discussions on objectives and planning, two other members put in a month-long effort to prepare a strategy paper that gave a clear-cut action plan to set up the structure. This was later shared with the professional community and the government, whose partnership was considered the bedrock for changes in the school education system.

So, by the time this organization started functioning, the participatory process that had preceded the establishment, helped set up a close-knit group. It also had clear-cut and documented plans to start the initiative and take the program forward. This long process had prepared the team for critical

and frank discussions. This, thus, had created a lively and robust environment.

Decision-making structures: Initially, while the working group was small and had just six to seven persons with relatively uniform backgrounds, it functioned and took decisions in a very open and informal manner. When a second wave of new persons joined the organization, which included some junior members too, then the question arose about who should participate in decision making. At this point, a council of members was formed from amongst the larger working group for decision making. It had been agreed upon from the beginning that the Governing Body would not play a decisive role in the organization. The council of members would run the organization and take decisions based on consensus. The Governing Body would play a supportive and advisory role in the programmatic and financial decisions of the council. In addition, there would be no full-time Director.

From this initial formative period, the organization promoted a democratic and federal form of functioning. The organization functioned as several centres of innovative action. Each of these shared and focussed on common programs. However, they could also initiate separate activities and programs.

Decision making principles: If a critical decision had a split vote, say 8 versus 7 in a group of 15, then the group would go back to the discussion table. The stress was on consensus and ensuring participation in discussion of many, and not just a few, during decision making. Observers from the team were invited to council meetings as non-voting members to learn and enhance understanding. The initial program of the organization was to cover all the schools in a district. So, the team was spread out in that district over three centres. This promoted decentralized functioning. Many independent initiatives were promoted at the different centres. In fact, the initial name of the organization carried the byline “Centres for educational research and innovative action”.

A fourth centre, which played the role of coordination, was opened at Bhopal. However, special efforts were made to ensure that this centre did not become too powerful and subjugated the others. In the first year of formation, a senior member started a regular but informal newsletter to share what was happening with all the centres. This helped develop stronger communication channels amongst all the members.

This brings our story to the end of the very beginning of this organization. Its journey after this point involved huge structural changes necessitated by a long period of growth, multiple inputs for organizational development and a drawn-out period of change management. But all this we shall leave for another day.

In conclusion

To summarize, the two case studies here have dealt with some very early challenges that all fledgling organizations must face. These include involving members in decision making and growing in the direction of participatory leadership.

The first organization had to face simpler challenges. However, the second organization had advantages, since it started with a larger group of ‘more equal’ members. Therefore, it could develop an early form of group leadership. This allowed it to start a process of leadership turnover in good time.

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Reflections on our efforts to build a wholesome organization

Our principles of action and our gradual training

Arjun Trivedi

“Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Dhamma and Discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch” — saying attributed to Gautam Buddha in The Udāna 5.5

Wholesomeness of truth

I state the following tersely as a fact of life — truth is profoundly wholesome.

Truth, for practical and existential reasons of humanity, must be rightfully organized in its various sub-domains of sub-truths. However, awareness of this singular fact must be anything but forgotten in this great organization.

Else, this great organization of truth starts manifesting as its great fragmentation¹. In other words, such an organization is not static. It is in a profound dynamic governed by this singular fact.

Wholesome truth's collapse and fragmentation in common life: suffering and peace

All sub-domains contain inherently within them, as if birthed by the fact of life, subtle to obvious signs that reveal not just how, but also why we must keep this great awareness. However, it appears that in ordinary life this great equanimity of truth starts to collapse². Or it becomes elusively profound and transcendental.

Such signs keep getting increasingly subtle to becoming non-existent. Experiences of ordinary life appear more consistent with the great fragmentation of truth, and, therefore, with more existential suffering and practical problems than with peace and prosperity. The wholesomeness of human beings, let alone organizations, feels more like a fool's errand. It seems accessible only to the extremely far and few³.

I write the above with humility and the awareness that such may just be our existential condition and even consistent with this singular fact. However, we also have deep personal and collective experiences of glimpses of wholesomeness through subtle to obvious signs in all sub-domains of knowledge. We all have had fleeting, to even significantly long-lasting, experiences of freedom from suffering, in other words, of peace.

A thesis for compassion

Thus, I wonder what if we can use just one such sub-domain to not so much dig into its technical details but as steps on a path to wisdom that bestows the ability to look profoundly higher and wider with this great awareness of singular truth and with its insights alleviate suffering and bring peace?

Consider the following arguments, which are anything but comprehensive or complete. However, hopefully, these are inviting enough to be accepted to make a thesis for compassion.

Compassion and experience of wholesome truth: The ability to be compassionate

is directly dependent on our ability to experience and understand the nature of wholesome truth⁴.

Compassion to fill the great voids of our times: Is it not that but for deeper spiritual connections and loving-kindness, for most of us, in our personal lives, and relative to all our great material and cultural development, it continues to feel like a void⁵?

Compassion as a relevant and practical system of secular ethics: Is it time we realize that we have a deep, inherent need for frameworks that make coherent practices of secular ethics that are inclusive of compassion and other flows of spirituality? This is critical for both existential and practical reasons. We need not forsake these just because we have not been able to make arguments for them in analytical, predictive and computable frameworks. Their grounding in other frameworks, for example, in religion, contemplative and other traditional philosophies, need not be a ground for forsaking them.

Compassion and education: Education is of many kinds. It includes learning at home, in schools, colleges, professional life, and the generalized experience of learning of human beings. In all these settings and processes how many of us are directly working on our respective abilities to be compassionate as noted above, viz-a-viz all the various abilities that we are working so hard at otherwise?

We find such arguments, based on our experiences of daily life, to be compelling. In fact, these are compelling enough for us to put forward and work from the thesis of cultivating compassion in an effort to be a wholesome organization.

The first foundational-stone rule and the right⁶ start on the path

“Don’t act out of fear or anger.” We see this thesis as the foundation in our efforts to build a wholesome organization⁷ that is exploring compassion as the basis for work.

Karunar Kheti in English means “cultivation of compassion”. We may not get into theories⁸ of the what/why/how of fear and anger. However, we start with their experiential mindful awareness. I, from the depth of experiences of life’s dukkha⁹, have made just this one request in action to all our teachers and staff. We can unapologetically, yet compassionately, hold us all accountable to it.¹⁰

I did so because I knew if we could practically follow this through, we would get off to the right start. In due time, through a larger collective churn, the depth of the values and practices will flow from just this one rule. We would together write it with the profound simplicity-terseness, for example like that of Gautam Buddha’s four Noble Truths or Einstein’s two postulates of Special Relativity.

The path

We are now on the path. Each day is now above all being in the wisdom of making the right effort to cultivate and practice the emerging values. Not just dealing with our challenges~opportunities¹¹, but to weave into a larger fabric of culture and consciousness. This is especially useful, if one yearns to be collectively compassionate and prosperous.

Overarching and key challenges of Karunar Kheti: The what/why/how of such a start for us humbly began from me¹² and my personal experiences growing up and living in the tea-plantations of Assam. This also stemmed from my experiences as a student and professional in various parts of India and the world. There are two overarching aspects, which Karunar Kheti needs to respond to. These are not exclusively independent.

Being an organization of wholesome peace in a landscape of fragmentation and crisis

The tea-plantations of Assam are facing an extreme crisis. This crisis is rooted in the increasing knottiness in socio-economic-political-environmental realities of a vast scale of humanity¹³. These have their origins

in the colonial times¹⁴. These are only getting more complicated in emergent modern India¹⁵.

Be a fundamentally new institution for the post-colonial world: The word fundamental here connotes something particular with respect to India and other post-colonial nation states. At independence in 1947, India emerged as an overwhelmingly agrarian economy. It had a dominantly traditional culture in a modern world. Yet, it had also been deeply transformed by developments spanning material to consciousness—scientific and industrial revolutions, new socio-economic-political systems, and culture—during the colonial era.

We need to use our wholesome intelligence and compassion to create wholesome models of development. We must note here that a disproportionately large population of people¹⁶ are anything but participating in such emergent systems, at least not to any significant degree. In fact, such disproportionately large populations of people are entangled in energies that fuel deep systemic cycles of disempowerment, fragmentation and crisis.

It's in this perspective that India needs fundamentally new institutions where disempowered people are peacefully empowered for a wholesomely balanced accountability to humanity.

The first foundational resource and the education crisis

Efforts to build such a fundamentally new institution in a landscape of deep-rooted fragmentation, crisis and disempowerment are impossible without developing the hard-working capacity of the heart¹⁷. Karunar Kheti began at the individual level of reinfusing the balance of the heart with the mind and body. There has also been a simultaneous striving to build larger coherence of heart~body~mind at individual~collective levels. We have tried to keep these efforts mindful of the interactions

with larger approaching scales of culture and consciousness.

The fear and anger that I wanted our teachers and staff to be mindfully aware of are but symptoms of our two overarching challenges. These are also at the core of the education crisis. Education is central to the process of moving away from fear and toward freedom. Education will be anything but complete without the resources of the heart in balance with the mind and the body.

Our current emergent principles of action

I deliberately use the words “current emergent.” This is because, it is all in flow/flux. It is paramount that we maintain the awareness of being in the process. We need not feel rushed toward the steady asymptote reached by the Buddha or Einstein. As such, our current emergent principles of action, which are basically making values actionable in a wholesome framework, include the following.

Empower communities directly disempowered by problems to become a part of the solution.

Listen to the communities. And then build wholesome empowering movements together, mindfully, reflexive of the communities' capability and capacity, scale of economy, pace of the cultures, and wisdom of the consciousness.

Develop ground-up and contextual. This process, if required, must be based on first principles. It must also involve practical systems applicable in the real-world. This is important if we want to manifest the coherent wisdom~skills of the individual~collective heart~body~mind. In this context, the discipline of truth and participatory processes go hand in hand.

Such principles of action are in a feedback loop with our experiences and some deliberate rules, principles, and practices to deepen our understanding of them. We will



Karunar Kheti Trust

list below our first mixed-bag building blocks of such, and from those that are becoming particularly steady.

Our first mixed-bag building blocks of rules, principles and practices

From “Don’t act out of fear or anger,” we found ourselves flowing with a mixed bag of practices reflecting our developing intention through explorations, experimentation, learning through mistakes, and attempts to be inclusive. We share a few of these here.

The first is of course - “Don’t act out of fear or anger.”

We have tried hiring not for specialized skills validated by degrees and experience, but for wholesome character.

We have also been hiring locally. This is not to fragment external~internal. However, this involved an intention to begin to trust and build confidence in ourselves.

We deliberately don’t use existing curricula or textbooks in our school. This is especially true in the 1st year. This helps our teachers to experientially unlearn~learn - from rote learning toward becoming curious and to trust the process of learning from mistakes. It also helps them in their journey from being a know-it-all teacher, toward trusting children, listening to them, and learning from them.

We have even deliberately used formal organization development processes as aids to unlearning~learning. We have not wanted to directly get bogged down by all such

skills that no one in our community has had. Instead, we use these opportunities to unfurl the wholesome character of people we have hired.

We also have been involved in exploratory practices to cultivate a community of compassion. These include circles of trust and listening. We have also opened ourselves up to learn and share with each other our various non-material traditions (faith, religion and spirituality, etc.). We have also been deliberately trying to prevent their fragmentation from material traditions (such as science, industry, and the socio-economic-political systems).

Our teachers, staff and leaders are encouraged to be the custodians of our classrooms, toilets, grounds, plants and trees. Our open and informal meeting structures try to focus more on the non-linear individual~collective journeys. This makes the linear school/organizational outcomes a part of these larger trajectories.

Our current emergent steady state practices

We also share our current emergent mixed bag of practices to nourish our principles of action here.

We practice morning and evening circles. We are developing meditation as a tool for building concentration, mindfulness, gratitude and compassion. We also conduct circles of trust for diverse expressions of speaking~listening, which include silence, dance, songs, stories, reflections, etc.

Our team members practice collective community work as the custodians of our school and earth. Our meetings function as wholesome, balance-making processes that explore the interstices of non-linear self~collective journeys and linear organizational/school-related outcomes.

From a single stepping stone toward a terse completeness of coherency

Einstein's two Postulates of Special Relativity and Siddhartha Gautama's four Noble Truths are but two deeply personally experienced examples of profoundly terse, fundamental and irreducible encapsulations of the essence of particular domains of knowledge, which are vast in their scale and diversity.

In other words, from two to four points that can appear trivial in superficial reading—those that can be written in half a page—emerge lifetimes of coherency of the individual~collective heart~body~mind work spanning immediate challenges~opportunities to the significantly larger aspects of culture and consciousness.

As a leader of an organization with a vision to weave from our immediate stepping stones into problems old at the scale of centuries, and, further, into the still deeper fabrics of culture and consciousness, the knowing that there can be such terse encapsulations that will take up insignificantly little space in memory to remember deeply calms my being because we will never lose our essential points of reference. Our current principles of action, as such, are but above all the right effort toward such a terse completeness of coherency.

End notes

1. Consider, for example, science and spirituality, and how carving out for them the exclusively permanent domains of objectivity and subjectivity, respectively, can cause such fragmentation of a wholesome understanding of truth.
2. This practical collapse is powerfully reminiscent of theories of physics where unifying symmetries of physical phenomena are so only in theory. In reality, they are, to various degrees, broken. These may even have to be so, for life to manifest.
3. The story of Gautam Buddha is powerful in this regard. After attaining enlightenment, it is said that he had decided not to teach his great wisdom. Either it was his compassion that made him act otherwise, or, as they say, he had to be pleaded to at least teach the extremely few.
4. "Interbeing" in this regard is a profound concept to develop the awareness of "the inter-connectedness and interdependence of all elements of existence" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interbeing>). It is developed by Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the most singularly insightful teachers of compassion in the modern world, whose teachings are rooted in the 2,600 years old wisdom of Gautama Buddha, even in a literal sense to the Sutta Pitaka that note Buddha's spoken words.
5. "Have we become more terrified of intimacy than interstellar travel?" is a

particularly insightful and validating reference, which reflects the scale of such a void, crafted in words by Aaron Stewart in “On Interstellar, love, time, and the limitless prison of our cosmos.”

6. Words like “right” and “path” are generally used here in the context of Dhamma’s Eight-Fold Path. My personal principles of action are becoming increasingly coherent, and even coming to direct submission to the already existing wisdom of Dhamma. Sometimes this is even attuned with the wisdom, as expressed in the literal words of its suttas. This emergent understanding, and its interactions with, and feedback from, Karunar Kheti is my experiment with this wisdom, its path, and its many techniques.
7. The need to be wholesome is a core thesis of our organization’s [concept note](#).
8. There is a perfectly profound balance between theory and experience. However, one must begin somewhere in this vast space, even if to create the configuration space of this balance.
9. Dukkha is used in the contextual meaning of the Dhamma’s four Noble Truths.
10. On occasions, even if extremely few but just as intense, I am anything but an example of not acting out of fear or anger, and when the challenge of being a leader can only be met because I am able to submit to, seek empowering forgiveness, and follow this great overall accountability that we all have created.
11. Tilde (~) is deliberately used between words when needing to be grounded in their interdependency viz-a-viz their exclusivity.
12. Not the ego-centric me, but the me that is simultaneously a drop of water and the whole river.
13. Tea-plantations of Assam are the third largest employer after the Indian Railways and Armed Forces.
14. “Coolies of capitalism: Assam tea and the making of coolie labour” by Nitin Verma is a comprehensive reference for the colonial history of tea in Assam (Varma, N. (2017). ‘[Tea in the colony](#),’ in “Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour” (1st ed., pp. 15–42). De Gruyter.
15. Our [concept note](#) contains several references.
16. “Can the Subaltern Speak” by Gayatri Spivak, a post-colonial scholar, is a powerful scholarship for reference (In “Marxism and the interpretation of culture” – edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 271–313. 1988.).
17. First and last are meaningless in an equanimous perspective, where all resources are equally valuable. It is only in the practical perspective of having to begin somewhere is the word “first” used.

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Community-centred people practices

What it means and what it can do

Samuhik Pahal Team

Anita (not her real name), like many other girls from her low-income community in Mumbai, had dropped out of school at the end of her 10th standard. At that time, Chehak, a city-based NGO working on disability and community-based education, had a program called Umang. Here, girls who had completed their matriculation were offered basic skills in English speaking and computer operations, etc.

Anita, ended up enrolling in Umang. Around this time, she started out as a volunteer in an inclusive pre-school, which Chehak was running. Seeing her interest in the space of inclusion and disability, the NGO sent her for a CDA (child development aid) training, which is a certificate course, in which she did well.

Then the organization got her connected to the Helen Keller Institute. They offered her a scholarship for doing a diploma program for special educators. Chehak nominated her, and she went for that diploma course. While she was studying, the organization supported her with a small stipend, which was necessary given her socio-economic background. Anita completed her course. She now works as one of Chehak's senior special educators. She has been working with the organization for more than eight years now.

According to Neha Madhiwalla from Chehak, "Anita's journey is very typical. The girls from our school get involved in volunteering. We put them through training and then they come back and work with us. Not all our staff from the community have gone and done a full-fledged diploma. However, most of them have the potential to do so. It is just a matter



Chehak Trust

Experiential learning at the new centre of Sangharsh

of us being able to find the resources and to free them from their work."

From community-based education to community-centred people practices: the story of Chehak Trust

Chehak Trust is a community-based nonprofit that works in Mumbai. The school that Neha refers to is a non-formal school started in 2000, in Jari Mari, to address the learning needs of girls who had dropped out of school because of poverty, lack of adequate schooling in the neighbourhood, and social norms. Thus, community-based alternatives were perhaps the only way out to address the educational needs of the girls who had dropped out.

Chehak's non-formal school initially offered classes for four hours per day, with 20 out-of-school adolescent girls and one teacher. This grew into the Sahyog School. It offers elementary and secondary education through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) as well as Sahyog Jhula, a life skills program. The school translates into practice Chehak's Trust's vision that sees women

and children realizing their potential and positive changes in their communities as concomitant, synergistic processes.

The second Sahyog School was set up in 2002 in a slum rehabilitation project at Dindoshi, Goregaon East. This was a natural expansion, as many families of the girls who were attending the school at Jari Mari were relocated to this area after their homes were demolished by the authorities.

In the same year that the second Sahyog School was established, Sahyog Sangharsh, a centre for children with disabilities was started in Jari Mari. The story of how this centre was started, helps us connect the dots of community connect in interventions, and community-centredness in people practices.

When the first Sahyog School was started in Jari Mari, Chehak was doing surveys in the community to inform their work. A pair of girls who was doing the survey came back with information about three sisters who were hearing impaired.

Thus, becoming alert to the issue of disability in the community, Chehak undertook a special survey just to identify children with disabilities. They used the standard, basic tool developed by World Health Organization (WHO). The girls from the school worked as volunteers, and helped identify 90 children with disabilities in the community.

That is how the Sahyog Sangharsh Centre for disabled children was started. Then Chehak tried to consolidate this into a program. National Institute of the Mentally Handicapped (NIMH) initially supported this work by taking Sangharsh up as a field project and by placing two of their interns supervised by a faculty.

However, it was not possible to support the initial cohort of 20 students at the Sangharsh center with only two interns. That's when Chehak started offering scholarships to some of the girls in the Sahyog school, who started helping out for two hours, twice a week. They were getting around ₹200-500 per month, which was enough for their families to let them be at school and not put them to work.

So, this is how the first cohort of girls from the school started assisting in the Sangharsh Sahyog Centre. Each girl would be assigned two children. The girls formed a very strong bond. For those two children, this girl would become almost like a sibling. The girls would also do a lot of outreach work. They would talk to the parents, talk to the family, and bring the child to the school if the child did not turn up, and so on.

As Chehak expanded its community services, its work in the space of disability also started getting strengthened with the involvement of new groups of people. When the CSO started consciously developing its connect with the mothers of the children who were enrolled



Chehak Trust

in Sahyog School, it realized that there were social restrictions on women's movements.

So, it introduced programs that attended to their needs, and began with vocational training classes from 2017 onward. When the women came in, many of them were also found to be mothers of the children with disabilities enrolled at the CSO's centre.

As Chehak started engaging with these women, they also began getting interested in the CSO's disability and library programs. The library program is an initiative that came from the team, from the young girls themselves. They felt that this was a need in their community and that is how the library program began in 2015 as a pilot.

As Ruvina from the team says, "Because of our community engagement, all our programs are interconnected with each other. All our team members working in different programs are aware about what is happening in each other's program. They are involved, and they are participating. One of the strengths of our team is definitely that most of them are from the community. This has helped us build a relationship of trust with the community.

"The team members, who are from the community, are now working in a more professional setup. They are also enrolling in professional courses, as they feel the need to have some theoretical background."

This brings us back to Anita's story. By now, it should be clear that her trajectory is not

unique. Of the eleven of Chehak's team members, eight are from the community itself. Additionally, the organization has around 30 volunteers who have been with it for a longer time and come in on a regular basis for events and programs.

All the students at the school have also volunteered in some way or the other in Sangharsh. This is especially true of the hundred students, who are part of the scholarship program, who are from the community and have worked with the children at Sangharsh as volunteers in a structured process. The organization has also been doing work with youth members of the community and youth groups. They help Chehak out in community social events that happen during festivals.

Chehak is perhaps a textbook example how catering to the community's needs and keeping it at the centre of the organization's work can help in both strengthening the interventions and in making them more sustainable. This strategy also helps in making the people practices more community oriented and inclusive.

We can find evidence for this process, and the related outcomes, in the experiences of Avaniti as well. Avaniti Education and Training Foundation is a not-for-profit organization operational in the tribal belts of Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh. As an organization, it advocates for localized and child-centric education, and works with underprivileged children from communities classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG).

Turning challenges into opportunities: learnings by Avaniti while working in a remote geography

Compared to Chehak Trust, which has been working in the field for the last couple of decades, Avaniti is a new organization that has been active on the ground for the last four years, although it was registered in 2018.



Library session conducted by an Umang alumna, who now works as a staff member



Avaniti

Team Avaniti's preparatory meeting for a summer camp

However, like Chehak, it also sees the local community, especially local, underprivileged social groups like the Kamar, at the centre of its interventions. And like the older organization, working in a very different geography, this community orientation in work is leading to a very similar orientation to how the CSO sees its emergent people practices as a young organization.

Avaniti started working in June-July 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CSO started organizing camps and activities with children in villages devoid of access to early childhood education since generations, especially those of the PVTG. The Avaniti team began interacting with the children and community members to understand the challenges, needs, local culture, practices and language.

Community members started to get involved actively, and began collaborating with the Avaniti team after building a relationship of trust. They also realized that the team members do not judge them on the basis of their food habits, culture and practices,

unlike others. Rather, the Avaniti team embraces these. Thus, incrementally, the organization has become close to the community and built trust by sharing each other's points of view and fostering collaborations at every level. Avaniti tries to take all decisions along with the community members, children and teachers, right from opening the community-owned learning centers to running them effectively.

The CSO aims to resolve the issue of access to early childhood education (ECE) for children from PVTG communities through community-owned learning centres. It supports the process of shaping the centres into spaces that promote context-based and child-led learning using a project-based pedagogy based on the psychosocial needs of each child. Avaniti also simultaneously works with the government anganwadis to improve the quality of ECE. Its strategy involves the development of perspectives and pedagogical processes in ECE, through capacity building of anganwadi teachers, existing functionaries, and associated stakeholders.

To be able to do this work, the Avaniti team realized early enough that it is important for community members to be involved. Toward this, it has evolved the role of a community leader. The goal is to capacitate community members to emerge as leaders of their local communities, beyond the confines of Avaniti's own programmatic interventions.

Avaniti's community leaders are working in two different kinds of roles in the CSO's programs. One set of community leaders manage Avaniti's learning centres for children from the the PVTG. These centres are located in villages that do not have anganwadis.

Another set of community leaders are working with the government anganwadis. They support the teachers to develop the classroom environment and contextualize early learning, through changes in their perspectives and practices.

Thus, there are four community leaders who are looking after learning centres in four different villages. Of these, three leaders are from the Kamar community, which are a PVTG, and the fourth belongs to an OBC social group. There are two other community leaders who work with the government anganwadis, one of whom is from a Scheduled Tribe (Gond) community, and the other is from an OBC background.

Krishna from Avaniti feels that "The four community leaders who work with the community-owned learning centres have more understanding about the community, the nearby forests, and nature, which help in effective engagements with the children.

The people who come with more educational background and exposure are a little less open to unlearning in the beginning. However, the organizational culture at Avaniti helps them understand the significance of this process. We have found that people with less exposure and coming from vulnerable communities are more empathetic toward



Avaniti

Parents exploring colors in Lattidera Centre on Women's Day

children. They are also willing to learn new things and are more flexible."

The Avaniti team initially found it challenging to get educationally qualified candidates in their remote field location in Dhamtari district in central India. The community they work with has a 92-93% dropout rate at the primary level itself. As a team, Avaniti chose to relax criteria such as educational qualifications, etc., and insisted on taking on community leaders from the intervention villages themselves, or from a locality close by. Thus, from the very beginning, the CSO has had diversity and inclusion as a key part of its recruitment process, as it sees collaboration as a key component of its mission, starting with giving preference to women and candidates coming from the weaker sections of the community.

Team members, especially community leaders, who have joined from the local area have themselves faced the same set of issues – lack of pre-schools in the villages,

the distance between the habitations and schools, poor quality of education, etc., – which the children are facing now. They speak the local languages and have a better understanding about cultural practices in the villages. All these have helped them connect better with the children and contribute to their learning processes meaningfully.

The Avaniti team is now drafting its people's policy on paper. They have been documenting their practices and having discussions with the core team and the Board members about documenting, formalizing and enhancing their people practices through this process. Central to this has been the community's role.

Given the background from which most team members from the local community come from, building a certain flexibility into the intervention process has been a key part of how Avaniti sees both its work in the community and its own people practices. This is an important part of translating the organization's vision of respecting voices of every individual into practice.

A good example of this is how Avaniti has managed to capture processes from the centres and classrooms it intervenes in. The initial program design envisaged the community leaders creating a short report summary on the activities undertaken with the children on a particular day. This was supposed to be done on a digital, app-based platform. However, when the team members found this difficult, they were encouraged just to write the report on paper, take a snapshot of the relevant page of the notebook and send it across.

The founding team of Avaniti has been trying to ensure that community members who work at the CSO also become aware about social values, constitutional rights, and positively change their perspective and practices. It sees this as a critical part of its organizational mandate of engaging with the local community. In team meetings, the community's challenges and the need of

working on these challenges with dedication is emphasized. For the community leaders, to feel a true sense of attunement with their role, they must not look at their work as only a part of some organizational task that they are doing, but as a way of serving their community as well.

As Krishna shares, "There are some signs that this has started happening. There are instances where the community leader has not opened their centre for two days and come and told us that they could not do so because someone in their neighbourhood had died. Since we don't visit the centres every day and some villages don't have proper mobile networks, they have had the honesty and ownership to share it with us."

As a young organization, Avaniti has got many things right with respect to its people practices. However, the team sees some areas where it feels that it needs to work a lot harder at. According to Krishna, "We should have explored local networks, especially existing groups of youth and working professionals, who probably would have helped us get people on board for some roles. We also need to encourage a volunteering process and build connections at the local level with colleges and universities."

The community orientation of work and the concomitant community-centredness of people practices in both Avaniti and Chehak seem deeply embedded, despite the different ages and geographies of the organizations.



Children during scribing time in Piparahibharri village

Building communities for serving communities: the case of Apni Shala

Apni Shala is a 11-year-old social impact organization that works at the intersection of education and mental health to build social and emotional competencies among individuals. It also tries to increase access to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) for the larger community. Its initiatives target students in educational institutions, with a focus on the public education system. The primary community it works with, government school students, their families and teachers, often come from systemically marginalized backgrounds. Apni Shala works with these communities with the understanding that access to opportunities for nurturing psychosocial well-being is critical for young people's development, particularly for children coming from low-income homes.

In around 2015-16, a year or so after the organization was started, Apni Shala started to actively and openly discuss issues related to community, participation, representation

and equity. The CSO began to look at diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging as their lenses for much of the work. Now, almost 65-70% of its team comes from backgrounds similar to that of the students the organization works with. So, for example, in an Apni Shala school, one of the helper *didis* is a parent too. Similarly, many of the youth project alumni (a youth SEL program the CSO used to run earlier) have now joined the organization as communications executives, teachers and SEL facilitators.

To an extent, this has happened by design, by targeting the application procedure, and by setting up the recruitment system to support people from diverse backgrounds go through the process with ease. This has also involved fostering a culture of belonging at the organization. "Diversity Shala," an internal training program for all staff members, has been an important part of this process. When new team members join in, they are invited to engage with themes such as gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion and disability.



Apni Shala

One way in which the principle of equity is sought to be applied in the organization is by instituting a 1:5 ratio of salary difference between the lowest and the highest salaries at any point of time. The organization has also been actively pursuing de-credentialization by giving more importance to experience, demonstrable skills and motivation for the work, rather than degrees, to fill many of the roles. Therefore, a significant part of the organization's work also involves supporting the team members hired from the community to develop skills that were not made available to them in their past learning journeys. Apni Shala also gives salience to the strengths and skills emerging from their lived experiences, also called self-knowledge or lived expertise, in designing organizational roles. Likewise, there are mindsets and skills that some folks, being from backgrounds and contexts of economic and social privilege, may not have, and must learn to be able to serve the communities that the CSO works with.

When Apni Shala begins a new school year, an all-staff orientation process marks the starting point. Throughout the year, apart from departmental training programs that people go through, there are individualized training opportunities as well. Another practice of the CSO that is relevant to the discussion here is called the "Apni Shala Supervision Framework."

This framework is designed with three different areas in mind. One is restoration, which is about dealing with feelings emerging at work. The second one is more formal and relates to meeting developmental needs. The third area is normative supervision, where the supervisor works with team members to help them achieve their goals.

Apni Shala also follows some additional practices to both build community and respond to the community's needs. These include a protocol called serial testimony during meetings. It means that everyone in the room, whether a helper, or the CEO, or



Apni Shala

a leader, or a teacher, get their chance and time, to share what they think about the topic under discussion.

As an organization, Apni Shala sees this openness to learning as an iterative process. It is becoming aware that organizational aspirations got coded in value definitions. As Rohit from the team shares, "When we started thinking about leadership transition, we reached out to Suchetha, CEO of Dream a Dream, who is also an organization development mentor. We told her that we don't have a second-line leadership."

She asked us, "Why do you think you don't have a second-line of leadership?" Then she said, "You have people who have stayed with you for five, six years and you're saying you don't have a second-line leadership, which means that something is not right within the system. It's not a problem of you not having second-line leadership. It's something else."

"And then we reflected and arrived at a place, where we realized that the values that we have coded for ourselves, are the problem. We had borrowed the value of "excellence" from



Apni Shala

the larger ecosystem. It was exclusionary for a large part of our team. Our team members, especially those from community backgrounds similar to our students, were doing really good work. However, this capitalistic idea of excellence was very central in many of the leaders' minds. For team members who are from the community, it didn't make sense. Because we know that community work is nuanced and slow.

“So, our team members were questioning the leaders' idea of excellence, and we were perhaps not listening in. And then when Suchetha posed this question, we were led to realize that the problem was with our values and not in the absence of a second-line leadership. So, to redefine our values we started a process. It took almost eight months. We used a lot of theatre and the arts, to come up with what we really aspire for, what we want to be on a day-to-day basis. Our central values got redefined as compassion, equity and trust. These are the three values that we want and aspire to live by on a day-to-day basis.”

These values, coming out of a community-oriented, deliberative process, are now driving the strategic plan of the organization. Apni Shala is using the values as the grounding for thinking about its strategic planning. And this process has involved not only the organizational leadership, but the whole organization, a large part of whose members come from the community itself.

Conclusions

As must be evident from the experiences of the three organizations shared above, organizational and operational processes on one hand, and people's processes on the other, are interrelated. Consciously thinking about this and making the community a part of building interlinkages between the two can lead to many interesting and useful results.

Community involvement that results in adequate representation of community members in the staff can go a long way in meeting the problem of staffing the frontline. Often, it is difficult to get professionals to work in community-based settings. Nurturing talent within the community in these contexts is important.

This process creates a very strong and solid base for work, and brings a very different texture and flavor to programs. This is because community members bring in their own sensibilities, histories and experiences. Large organizations who can put aside some funds for scholarships to fund mentorship programs should do so, as in the process, may be in a few years down the line, they would be able to create professionals who are from the community itself.

It is also important to work with community-based institutions and build strong relationships with these. These could be self-help groups, banks, or local clubs or women's groups. These are part of the social network and social support system of the children and their families that the CSOs work with. Working with these social institutions helps in building community connect and creates support systems and an environment of inclusion.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in this story at: sahyogchehak@gmail.com (Chehak Trust); krishna.avaniti@gmail.com (Avaniti); and rohit@apnishala.org (Apni Shala).



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