


Keep up the spirit among those who work in India's social sector

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Over the past 45 years, I have had a fair bit of opportunity to observe the work and life of people in civil society or what's also called the social sector. 'Reasonably close but not completely in' has been my place in this world. Which presents an interesting view—neither a vision of outlines from great distances nor the magnification from lenses of deep personal involvement. All this needs some explanation.

Even while my father was as Indian Administrative Service officer, he was deeply immersed in the social sector from the mid-1970s—when I was a child. So, growing up, I saw this world quite closely, from average workers to leaders. Children are often ignored in conversations among adults, permitting them to know much more than adults would have wanted.

After finishing school, there was a 15-year period during which I lost touch with these people. However, they remained a distant presence in my life. In 2002, I got into a role which put me not inside but on the periphery of this very world. And then I moved into my current role in 2010, and so very much within. Despite being within that world, I am still outside in one important sense—I am not required to tackle many realities of the social sector, which are everyday challenges for most others.

Why this long preamble? Because after reading the series of three columns that I wrote about what donors should be careful with, someone who knows this personal history of mine asked me to write a series about people in the social sector. About what they should be careful with. But in their lives, not their work—because “you have been close enough, yet not caught up.” So, this is the first in a series on this matter.

Two disclaimers. Those in the fray fully will have much greater insight than me, while those at a distance may see a broader sweep. And anything that sounds negative or critical may be equally or more valid for me.

Broadly, three kinds of people work in the social sector; this is an over-simplification, but a useful one. The first are those who choose to work in the social sector and be a part of civil society. The second are those who find themselves there, without choosing so. For them, a social sector job was merely another livelihood option, but the better one among the available. The third group comprises those who have been victims of injustice or deprivation, which has energized them to fight back for themselves and their people. Fighting instead of accepting injustice is an admirable choice. But they did not choose to be victims. So, in effect being in the social sector is not a choice they have made, but what their circumstances have led to. Dedicated and competent people are there across the three categories. We will return to the latter categories in another column, let's focus on the first.

Many have chosen and choose to be in the social sector. They could have done many other things, taken the stereotypical trajectories of a successful professional life—engineer, doctor, corporate executive, government service, university faculty, or something of the sort, or left for the US. These are usually people with some combination of social and economic capital, and academic achievement, which are often correlated.

When they choose to work in the social sector, they know well that they will not earn as much as they could or as much as most in their social circles do. None is oblivious to this. What many don't anticipate is the pressure that builds up, once they have children who are of school-going age. In most places where such people live—because that is where their work is—the best of schools are hardly a patch on what they themselves would have studied in. And they certainly don't have the money to send the children to expensive boarding schools. When their children are ready to go to college, matters often become worse. Healthcare also doesn't bite in the first few years. But over time, both its cost and relative non-availability become looming mountains. For those few who have the advantage of family wealth, this is taken care of. But others, they need to be careful.

Preparation may help tackle these practical problems. But there is also an existential problem that many confront.

They chose what they did to help change the world. The world remains much unchanged in their mid or late life. So, what was the point of it all? This is not merely the social sector version of a mid-life crisis. It's different and deeper because, without doubt, they and their families gave up much in that quest to change the world for the better.

Such a complex human phenomenon defies easy description without losing essential nuance. I have seen some form of this spectre haunt many—often the most honest and the best. I have also seen it exorcized by wisdom.

Embracing the reality that the world changes only bit by bit is part of that wisdom. Equally is joy in the memory of the energy of their youth—when ambitions to change the world burn brightest. Else, why would they be in the social sector? Who wants to choose a life of bits and pieces? Then, there's the satisfaction of the solidarity of their comrades-in-arms. And finally, the knowledge that the path they chose may not have changed the world, but it has changed them, like perhaps nothing else would have. More in the next column.

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