


Three pitfalls that social sector workers need to guard against

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In my last column I wrote about the existential and practical problems that people in the social sector face. Majority of them tackle the problems and continue to contribute. Some very effectively, some less so. This series is about the challenges that people in the social sector are likely to encounter, and this piece about three “seductions” that prey on even some of the best of them.

These are seductions because they creep upon you unknowing, while you think that you are sharply alert, totally steadfast, and will never stray.

Seduction of money is more prevalent than one would imagine. Rarely is it a crude siphoning of money or corruption in the guise of social work. Securing funding is a struggle for NGOs and therefore the lure of money in the social sector works more subtly, influencing individuals and organisational priorities. Some leaders of NGOs, if they are not watchful, slip into accepting the language of profit and markets, losing sight of the complex social realities of their contexts—while their purpose is to serve what markets can't. A few convert their organizations into for-profit enterprises, and some do so all but in name. Social purpose remains a mere thin veil.

More prevalent is the twisting of organisational priorities because of money. The donor-NGO relationship is always asymmetric even when both sides have genuine intentions to do good. NGOs, in their quest for financial security, take on more work, projects or initiatives merely because donors are willing to back them. Sometimes these expanding projects have very little connection with what the organisation set out to do. And if the donor is unfocused or given to fads, the whole relationship leads to NGOs veering off-course in unrecognizable directions. These changes get rationalised and justified internally and to the external world.

There is another subtler fall to this seduction. Some NGO leaders embrace the conference and seminar circuit and donor meetings in posh hotels in big cities and sometimes abroad. This is not money in your control. But it helps manoeuvre into a lifestyle that only big money can buy. Participating in such meetings is usually an essential part of their role, and they must. But only genuine self-reflection can tell if they start doing these things because they just like it as also the life associated—though the amount and intensity of these activities disconnects them from their true work and the reality on the ground.

Seduction of power is another natural and common professional hazard. If someone does good work on the ground, people in power will often listen to them, particularly if they have the capacity to communicate. Equally, to enable the work on the ground, they must

get the people in power to listen—administrators, legislators, media, institutions, and more. Their success with all this fills them with confidence and sometimes a tinge of power. Influencing policy, driving legislative action, guiding administrative initiatives, and being the voice of the vulnerable in public, are important things to do. Undoubtedly, much of this is useful and necessary. But the creeping nature of these things is such that realization may dawn too late, sometimes not at all, that their life has been taken over by these roles of influence-wielding. And they have marginalized their real work, which has no power to offer but only struggle.

Seduction of sainthood is perhaps the most insidious of all in the social sector. After someone has done good work for many years, people start admiring them. Those around them, those whom they work for, and many among the public. They are regarded as social sector leaders. It's a good feeling to be thought of well, being given credit for good work—of helping change lives for the better or save lives. And then unconsciously some start taking their own public image seriously, start believing in their own reputation, with a few even letting a feeling of approaching sainthood grow under the skin.

No one would admit this to themselves let alone anyone else, but it creeps in. Perceptive observers can feel it, perhaps even before the person can. A few like Mohandas Gandhi have been aware of their sainthood without that state of awareness diminishing them. But for most of us, this sense of sainthood gnaws at our work and our very selves, loading us with self-righteousness, self-importance and infallibility. All of which pave the path to perdition of sorts. This is why the seduction of sainthood is the most insidious.

Surrendering to money, power or sainthood weakens organisations, makes the work ineffective, and hollow out people. But succumbing to these seductions is not black and white; it's a continuum of grey. Just because you attend conferences, or work on policy, or feel good about yourself, doesn't mean that you have fallen to these seductions. There is a zone which when crossed habitually tells of your seduction. We cannot and must not judge others but know ourselves.

No one is immune—I am not. Most (if not all) of us live and struggle with some or all of these seductions. Many have the wisdom and do the hard work to not yield to a level of dysfunctionality. Eternal vigilance and struggle are two guard rails that all of us potentially have, but we must use them. In the end, it is about our mettle.

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