

Activist Intervention Strategy – Bringing about Social Change through a Cadre-Based Movement

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Abstract

The article summarizes the origin of volunteerism and its shortcomings. It delves into Atmashakti's concept of the Activist Intervention Strategy with paid activism at its core and how it came up to bridge the volunteerism gap. Furthermore, it explores how the Activist Intervention Strategy has successfully built people's collectives, mobilized people, and demonstrated the effectiveness of collective action and community mobilization. Lastly, it highlights the process of cadre building and how cadre-based movements can bring social change.

Background

Though officially organized volunteerism is reported to have started only in the 19th century, the origin of volunteerism can be traced back to 12th-century Britain. To this day, organizations like YMCA, Rotary Club, and many others arrange activities, provide classes, collect donations, and create a network of individuals from all walks of life to work on global issues. Recent mentions can be made of the volunteer groups that sprung up to support the people affected by the Russia-Ukraine War or the long-sustained struggle against climate change.

In India, volunteer groups supported mass movements mobilizing people and making the movements a nationwide call for action. These include Narmada Bachao Andolan (1985), Jan Lokpal Bill – Anti Corruption Movement (2011), Nirbhaya Movement (2012), and Anti-CAA Agitation (2020). Volunteers have contributed their time and energy to build and sustain activities worldwide. Still, challenges arise when a movement/project becomes time driven with no financial support for volunteers. This impacts the long-term sustainability of volunteerism and becomes a gap that most movements/organizations struggle with. Thus, a need arises to look at the engagement of volunteers from a different perspective to ensure sustainability.

One core strategy Atmashakti adopted is the 'Activist Intervention Strategy.' It facilitates building a strong network of sangathans (people's collectives) at the village, panchayat, district, and state levels. The community takes leadership of the collective, strategies for development, and their actions. This network of people's collectives is promoted and supported by a network of activists who work as guides, trainers, and mentors for the people's institutions. Another crucial element is the concept of 'Carpet Coverage,' where all the community members of the areas of operation are mobilized to collectivize. With Carpet

Coverage, there is more extensive outreach, increased leverage strength with governments, and more significant outcomes, such as policy-level changes.

At the core of the strategy is the role of the ‘Jansathi’ (People’s Friend), a community-level resource person who interfaces between the people and the movement. A Jansathi is selected from within the community and mentored based on specific criteria. This includes but is not limited to their interest in resolving people’s issues, being from the same area/locality, being able to read and write, and being willing to travel. Since the Jansathi is from within the community, a greater connection leads to communities sharing actual/real issues faster. Atmashakti Trust pays the Jansathi and can thus be called a ‘Paid Activist.’ Their responsibilities include coordinating village-level activities, finding out about community issues, providing initial leadership, and developing resources at the community level.

Once a Jansathi is selected for an area, they visit the villages and hold meetings to create awareness. The meeting agenda includes sharing information about government schemes, identifying issues, and highlighting the importance of forming collectives to drive collective action for faster results.

Adults of each household in the village constitute the members of the collectives. Out of these members, five to eight individuals are selected as Executive Committee (EC) members. The EC, in turn, appoints the President and the Secretary. There is a Treasurer post, which is optional. One or two young members are selected as Volunteers for the EC. This forms the leadership group of the collectives. Once the collective is formed at the village level, it becomes the face of the community. Through their collectives, people start acting on local issues, big and small. These issues are based on two parameters, relevance to the local community and relevance to the present context. Once the more prominent community issues are addressed, the collectives can take up individual matters – access to a pension, health, land rights, rations, etc.

Capacity building and training are essential parts of Atmashakti’s work. It provides a critical understanding of social-political-economic challenges, information on government schemes, entitlements, and the process of availing them. Side by side with the collectives, a cadre of paid activists is selected, mentored, and trained to support the collectives. Through Atmashakti’s Centre for Learning and Development (CLD) department, training is imparted on various aspects – writing applications, resolutions, memorandums, engaging with government functionaries, leadership skills and techniques, ways and processes of staging protests, holding rallies, and other events. This is the stage where the collective and the collective leadership of the collectives can slowly emerge from the community.

When the People's Collective was initiated, the Indian Government’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act (MGNREGA) was used as a tool to start work with the community. MGNREGA is an Indian labour law and social security measure that aims to guarantee the ‘Right to Work.’ The act was passed in 2005 and aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas. It was universal and gave monetary gains to people in a short duration, making them believe in the benefits of collectivizing. MGNREGA also led to local area resource development and systematic development of village infrastructure. Today, there are 23 District level collectives with two state-level collectives in Odisha; Odisha Shramajeebee Manch (OSM) and the Mahila Shramajeebee Manch Odisha (MSMO).

Both these collectives have their badges. A badge symbolizes solidarity and gives people a feeling of belonging. It is a symbol of collective strength. The concept of membership fees was introduced to give the collectives financial stability and ensure community ownership of the collectives. Each household is encouraged to contribute a token amount to the common fund of the collectives.

Both these collectives have been instrumental in organizing state-level campaigns leading to policy-level changes. Today, we have an outreach to over five million people, with paid activists covering various community issues. The issues include health, education, water and sanitation, livelihoods, social security, and mobilizing the collectives/communities to action. Communities bear all supporting expenses for meetings, visits to government offices, and mass actions.

Below are some state-level campaigns organized by the two state-level collectives through collective actions and their impacts.

- In **2012**, a campaign addressed malnutrition and equitable food grain provision. The Odisha Government adopted an ‘Exclusion Criterion’ for identifying and covering beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act. This resulted in the inclusion of around 90% of deserving households under the Act.
- In **2014**, the Postcard campaign on Food Security demanded a special Food Security Act for Odisha, in which the communities sent 10 lakh postcards to the Chief Minister. As a result, the state government launched the State Food Security Scheme.
- In **2016**, the Safe Drinking Water campaign resulted in a two-year sustained action, which led the Odisha government to launch Vasudha schemes in November 2018.
- In **2018**, the Kam Dia Abhiyan on MGNREGA campaign created awareness of work under MGNREGA. People from all 15 districts were mobilized to share their work demands. A total of 6,754 households could work under MGNREGA due to the campaign.
- In **2021**, Gunjaran Story on Wheel Education campaign helped share rural communities’ learning challenges during school lockdowns because of COVID-19. The Odisha Government implemented the Learning Recovery Plan (LRP) in September 2022.

Our goal in the next 10 years is to reach 35 million people in India, covering 10% of the poor rural population in India. The Activist Intervention Strategy, with paid activism as its core, has successfully built people’s collectives and has been instrumental in bringing community benefits. Building collectives, mentoring people for leadership roles, and getting the community together is time-consuming and slow, but its bottom-up approach makes it work. What makes it sustainable is that when people know their rights and are empowered with the necessary skills and capacity, the collectives become self-driven. Needless to say, social discrimination has been reduced, narratives include more marginalized communities, and people have a high level of awareness and participation in the political process.

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