Peace Initiatives- Hyderabad

The Old City of Hyderabad was amongst the worst affected of the urban agglomerations in India to face massive urban decay. There was acute lack of proper civic and municipal amenities such as regular water and power supply, proper roads, hospitals, schools, recreational facilities, open spaces etc.

In conjunction with such urban decay, there existed high levels of illiteracy, unemployment, very low incomes, and lack of training and skill development facilities. Amongst the hardest hit sections were children, youth and women. Women, traditionally, were not permitted to mingle freely in society, and majority of them were entirely dependent. Literacy rate, health care and economic opportunities for women were very low.

Poverty, backwardness, lack of awareness of the social and economic issues were being utilised by vested interests to divide the people of the area for narrow political gains, which resulted in frequent communal tensions and conflicts, often leading to violence and loss of life and property.

Given such a situation, different communities residing in the area, who were all marginalized groups, were pre-occupied with mutual suspicion, distrust and antagonism, and could not focus on endeavouring for even the minimal civic, political, economic or social rights. Consequently, environment issues, gender justice and development, and rights of the children were the first and most serious casualties; and any effective participation of people of the area, in and for political, economic, social and cultural development became near impossible.

Communal Tension As Deterrent To Development

The constant undercurrents of tension between different communities residing in the area, which periodically broke out into conflicts and riots, kept the people diverted from the real issues and concerns of development, and entrapped them in totally unproductive and socially harmful mindsets of antagonism and insecurity.

Some of the consequences faced by the Old City because of its history and image of being conflict prone, and which affected all the communities residing in the area were:

1. With limited opportunities for education, and restricted prospects for employment and economic activities, women of all communities faced extreme deprivation, and exploitation at home, work place and in the society. Girls were deprived of education, were married off at early age, were harassed and exploited by the in-laws. Women

had little say in household matters and their status was so low that they had no control over their male child once he attained maturity. The general backwardness of women prevented them from ensuring proper growth and development of the children, jeopardising all prospects of future development and progress of the area.
2. Reputed schools of the city avoided giving admissions to children from the Old City, and most educational groups with promise preferred to establish institutions in the new city areas, apprehending frequent riots and their adverse effects on the functioning and standards of the schools. Hence children of the area were deprived of good and proper   educational   opportunities.
3. For the same reasons, extremely few institutions offering education after the secondary level were established in the Old City, compelling the youth from the area to either dropout or commute long distances to continue their education. As a result, the number of graduates and post-graduates from the area remained very low, and almost   negligible   in   the   case   of   women
4. The segregation and alienation of the communities prevented children from different communities to interact with one another, and they grew up in an atmosphere of misunderstanding and mistrust, developing unhealthy attitudes of antagonism and aggression – which were undesirable and detrimental to their own selves, society and the   Nation   at   large.
5. Frequent riots resulted in decline in economic opportunities for the people of the old city. Investment in industries and commercial ventures in the area was not forthcoming and financial institutions were also wary of providing support for enterprises proposed in the Old City. Employment opportunities for the people of the old city in other parts of the city also declined due to the negative image of the area and the people living there.

Formation of COVA

The Old City of Hyderabad was rocked by riots of unprecedented scale and brutality from September 1990 to January 1991. Around 50 NGO's and Voluntary Associations came together to provide relief and rehabilitation for the victims of this long drawn and ghastly conflict, under the aegis of Forum for Voluntary Action and Relief.

It was felt that participation in relief and rehabilitation measures in response to riots cannot be an adequate strategy to combat the plague of communalism, and it was planned to launch a Communal Harmony Project, aimed at promoting communal harmony and prevent the recurrence of riots in the Old City of Hyderabad.

While implementing the Communal Harmony Project, intimate knowledge was gained of the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the area, an understanding of the background situation, and the nature and characteristics of the target groups.

Some findings and observations obtained from an active involvement in the Old City for three years, helped in formulating a specific strategy for intervention. Some of the important findings and observations obtained during this period were:

1. The occurrence of conflicts and riots, or conversely, of peace and harmony in a locality primarily depends on the local people. If the local people are not vulnerable and do not become tools and agents for spreading and sustaining disaffection and conflicts, no amount of instigation from any vested interest can generate antagonism and   riots.

2. While the orientation of the local people to the issues of development is scarce and inadequate, outside interventions for development are suspected and resisted by the people, especially the Muslim Community, who constitute 75% of the population of the area.

3. There are some friendship groups, voluntary organizations etc. in different localities, mostly engaged in organising occasional functions and celebrations in connection with Independence Day, Children's Day, religions festivals etc., but do not and cannot undertake sustained initiatives for development due to organizational and resource limitations.

4. Due to the segregation of communities, most organizations are formed along community lines, and given the situation in the Old City, become aligned with either some religious organization or political party, and remain unaware of the possibility of social activism that is free from religious and political affiliations and motives.

5. The non-availability of a platform for social activism, and the consequent alignment of the local initiatives with political or religious bodies, make the local initiatives and organizations, instruments for enhancing the alienation and conflicts between communities, and prevent them from becoming agents for development. Hence the few local initiatives that are available, also become counter productive, because of the absence   of   the   alternative   of   social   activism.

6. Finally, there are severe limitations on the extent and scope of work which single organizations can do in the area, especially when it is, and is perceived as an outside intervention. Mobilisation and conscription of local initiatives is imperative to gain access, implement programmes and cover all the different localities and areas where intervention is necessary.

In the light of these observations and findings, Confederation of local groups and organizations under the banner of COVA (Confederation of Voluntary Associations) was formed.

Thus, COVA was initiated to address the issue of communal violence in the old city of Hyderabad. Till COVA started working, there had been only a few NGOs actively working in this part of the city. Even these few were more into activities like running a tailoring centre etc. The major contribution of COVA was to introduce the concept of an NGO to the population here. Subsequently, with COVA's initiative and invitations many NGOs made forays into the old city.

COVA, which was to federate hundreds of NGOs and CBOs under its umbrella in the years to come, initially started as a network of 8 CBOs, and was registered formally under the Societies Registration Act in July 1995. By providing organizational and financial resources to these CBOs, COVA initiated play schools, Summer Camps, Adult Literacy Centres, and self-help groups of women in the old city of Hyderabad. It provided fun to youth and children, succor to women and brought cheer to the heart of darkness.

For its programme focus, COVA targeted the most vulnerable sections in the old city of Hyderabad: women, youth and children. Interspersed with and at the heart of the developmental activities that COVA took up gradually were peace initiatives at the local, national and international levels. Also, the strategy of networking helped COVA to increase its outreach initially to other districts of Andhra Pradesh and later to other States of India as well. The journey of COVA has begun basically with a rights based and perspective building approach, picked up development mode on the way and now is consolidating again in a rights based and perspective building approach. The journey has taken a spiral mode rather than a circular one, the present consolidation being at a much higher and broader level within the same approach than that of the initial stage.

From 1994 to 1997 COVA was working in collaboration with and with resource support from Deccan Development Society (DDS). From 1997-1998 onwards, COVA started receiving foreign funding directly, initially through prior permission, and later – since 2000 – under proper FCRA registration.

It is during 1996-2000 that COVA made a breakthrough in many ways. From the beginning COVA worked with a vision of forming Specific Area Networks and making them eventually independent of COVA. It is during this period that COVA catalysed Mahila Sanatkar MACS and Roshan Vikas MACTS, two cooperatives for women. It is also during this period that the COVA Welfare and Charitable Trust, Youth TRAC (Youth Training Resource and Activity Centre) and District Network Programme (which later acquired an independent identity called 'Bandhan') took shape.